



Revolution revisited

Why Czechia urgently needs to complete unfinished business

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A small country like the Czech Republic is generally given little attention in foreign media. This situation changed in 2019, when the protest on Sunday of June 23 with more than a quarter of a million people gathering on the Letná Plain in Prague was observed by many foreign journalists from the roof-tops of neighbouring buildings. Exactly thirty years after the fall of the communist regime, the Czech Republic was once again experiencing massive demonstrations. What are the reasons behind and what must be done so that people do not have to fill the streets and squares all over the country again?

In recent years, liberal democracy has been challenged in many European Union member states. In some cases their internal affairs have been even addressed at the European level, partly on the initiative of the local opposition. As a matter of fact, increasingly frequent anti-governmental protests have obviously become a characteristic of internal political developments in Central Eastern Europe. The contested independence of the judiciary in Poland and media freedom in Hungary, clientelism in Slovakia and corruption in Romania are just some of the problematic, illiberal elements that make up the current political mosaic of the region. The Czech Republic fits well into this family of “imperfect” democracies, where all of the above-mentioned, democracy damaging aspects come together to form the everyday reality of Czech politics. Therefore, the following question arises: How could it happen, that after the peaceful transition of 1989 and thirty years of building a state and society based on freedom and the rule of law, Czechia chose a path of democratic regression?

Thirty Years of Political Transformation – A Success Story?

Everyone in Czechoslovakia, similar to other post-soviet countries, had high expectations in the early 1990s. At that time, Czechoslovak politicians – many of them former dissidents – were devising strategies to best transform the country from a state socialist to a democratic system. With the new freedom gained, unlimited opportunities were given to both the citizens and the politicians, the latter using the turbulent time to consolidate their power. The tumultuous circumstances of the formation of new democratic institutions as well as new political and economic structures created favourable conditions for many current politicians and/or entrepreneurs to create their widespread political influence and to lay the foundations for their business empires. Especially those with already existing contacts from the previous regime had considerably facilitated their path to prosperity and wealth. It is no coincidence that transnational conglomerates of today’s richest Czech businesspersons were founded in this period, including Agrofert, the company of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš.

The Czech Republic’s integration into Western structures soon became a foreign policy priority. Joining the North Atlantic Organization in 1999 and then becoming a member of the European Union in 2004 embodied the culmination of this young state’s successful pro-Western orientation. At the same time, this “higher purpose” overlapped all internal political excesses, when almost every year since 1990 a more or less serious political scandal came to the surface. As a result, corruption, clientelism and power machinations

had already become the colour of Prague's political circles and beyond. Fortunately, the living standards of the Czech population remained comparatively untouched by the collapse of world markets since the 2007–2008 financial and economic crisis. However, people became much more sensitive to corruption affairs and clientelistic practices of the political parties and their representatives, as they were afraid of losing their savings and financial security. This political climate has been a fertile ground for new, differently profiled parties, who have made the fight against corruption a focal point of their electoral agenda.

By far the most successful of this new political group, currently with the largest representation in the government, is the political movement ANO – Akce nespokojených občanů (“Action of Dissatisfied Citizens”) – founded in 2011 by Andrej Babiš, who was until recently considered as the second richest businessman in Czechia. This political movement is probably the most interesting example of the genesis of anti-systemic parties. Already the choice of the name, shaping its own profiling as a “movement” rather than a “party”, is a clear effort to set itself apart from the existing political establishment. Surprisingly, the extraordinary success of Babiš’ Party in the 2013 parliamentary elections, when it finished in second place, clearly testified the recognition of the ANO movement by the public as a new political hope. The overwhelming victory of ANO in the parliamentary elections two years ago by winning almost 30% of the votes only confirmed the current political trend: the traditional parties of the 1990s are nowadays truly out of the political game.

Million moments... for democracy, against Babiš, against the system?

Entering politics as a businessman with no desire for enrichment but to fight against corruption, Andrej Babiš was recognized by many as a long-awaited political salvation for Czech citizens. His political strategy of managing the state like a company (a reference to his successful business activities – Babiš owns a corporate group consisting of more than 250 companies with almost 34,000 employees) does not seem to be exaggerated today. Indeed, after becoming the Czech Prime Minister in 2017, he appointed “his own people” to the government. Whether they are employees of his company, his past or present business colleagues or just friends, it is logical that each and every one is loyal to him. It is understandable that Babiš chose only his policy supporting, non-opposing persons to ministries. At the same time, however, such a situation creates a non-diversity of the cabinet ministers and a possible conflict of interest. This conflict of interest manifested itself in April 2019, when the former prosecutor, who was involved in corruption affairs, was appointed as Minister of Justice by Babiš. The Prime Minister himself was investigated for four years for fraud with EU subsidies, however, this prosecution was terminated under questionable circumstances.

The resignation of both the prosecuted Prime Minister and the new Minister of Justice were the key demands of the protests in June 2019. The Million Moments Association which has led all the major anti-government demonstrations of the past two years, was established to “promote and cultivate democratic culture, civic engagement and public debate in the Czech Republic”. The movement definitely succeeded with its mission, when Czech flags and anti-Babiš protest banners appeared even in the most remote Czech villages in June 2019. In addition to casting a vote into the ballot box, expressing an opinion in the form of protest is completely legitimate in a democracy and fulfils the role of watchdog during the term of the office. This is exactly what the Million Moments Association does. What began as “A Moment for Andrej” (a request for a more democratic political course of the government) evolved into a “Moment for Resignation”, when the Association demanded the Prime Minister’s resignation, actually under the weight of emerging worrying facts such as suspected fraud with EU’s subsidies, prosecution or

Babiš' entry in the register of the State Security (former communist secret police). The whole affair has gained a European dimension when two audits were carried out by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) that revealed the collusive use of EU subsidies by Babiš' Agrofert. Both documents clearly confirmed the Prime Minister's conflict of interest. Babiš' reaction in taking the victimized position and lamenting a general conspiracy and targeted (media) campaign against himself, organized by the so-called *Mafia*, rather demonstrated his inability to open a constructive dialogue with the opposition.

Young people as the driving force

In the case of the Czech Republic, oligarchs and media tycoons embodied in one person, in addition to their commercial activities, are also concentrating political power in their hands and therefore undoubtedly representing a threat to democracy. The rule of law was entirely crushed by the Czech President Miloš Zeman, who intended to grant pardon to Babiš in the event of his conviction of a crime. While the power cartel created by Babiš and Zeman with their mutual support may survive for some time, massive demonstrations – mostly of young people – show that not everyone agrees with this anti-liberal development. Through the mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people, the Million Moments Association revived civic engagement. Simultaneously, the movement created a counterpart to the post-communist part of society – to understand mostly the silent, older generation – on which Babiš and Zeman rely. Taken together, this is the most significant contribution of the Million Moments Association.

From this perspective, the 2019 protests are the result of a poorly executed, however previously expected transition over the past thirty years. The control of the political and economic field or media by businesspersons whose origins date back to the 1990s and who have turned into politicians, is a fatal blow for today's democracy. It is rather the dissatisfaction with the political developments after 1989 and the current environment arising from it that has driven people into the streets. However, it must be seen positively that older, to democratic principles "apathetic" generations affected by the legacy of (post-)communism, cease to be the main characteristic in Czech society, while younger generations, born into the "new world" have become more active and are starting to influence both society and politics. The 2019 protests have shown the Czech society moving from one historical phase to the next one, from a post-communist past to a modern and more democratically sensitive, civil society-based future. The changing political-societal environment is manifested by the continuation of protests; at the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Communist regime in autumn 2019, people gathered again not only in the capital. Symbolically speaking, in October 2019, after the death of the most famous Czech singer Karel Gott, who had become popular many years before 1989, and with the very last concert of the Czech singer Marta Kubišová on 16th November 2019, who had been a signatory of the Charter 77 and the symbol of resistance to communist repression in the 1970s and 1980s, the era of post-communist legacy seems to be about to end. Therefore, after thirty years, it is time for self-reflection in order to prevent the continuation of illiberal political developments and to preserve the freedom and democracy already gained.

PS: Recommendations for a strong, healthy democracy

1. **Politician as a role model for the society is crucial**

Politicians should at least try to act as role models for their society. In a functioning democracy, politicians as elected representatives of the people are a fundamental element of the democratic system and must therefore meet certain moral and professional characteristics. A strong democracy on the basis of stable institutions can only be sustained by the responsible conduct of each politician, as well as by any individual, concretely citizen in society. The investigation against the Prime Minister due to conflict of interest or financial fraud, which has even been confirmed by the European institutions, is no appropriate sign for a functioning democracy.

2. **General transparency has to be prioritized**

Only by eliminating the defects of democracy such as corruption, clientelism and shady practices in politics, the proper functioning of the government and the politicians' role model can be achieved and granted. This goal should be a priority after thirty years of democratic transformation. Openness in governance means to be as transparent as possible. Information and communication technologies need to be used to enable citizens to obtain information about all public spending.

3. **Open dialogue should be cultivated**

Democratic dialogue must be open, constructive and mutual. One-way communication leads only to misunderstanding and one-sided framing. After all, election victory means receiving support from a limited part of the electorate. Therefore, the evidence-based criticisms of opponents must be always taken into account. Open dialogue also means taking all protests seriously and considering them as legitimate civic engagement. For instance, the return to the consensus culture of the Round Table Talks of 1989 might be a suitable common starting point for open dialogue.

4. **Civic engagement is fundamental**

While the first three recommendations are rather addressed to politicians and decision-makers, the last one is directed more towards the public and the media. The continuation of activism and political-societal engagement, of participation in local, national and European politics and elections is essential. Monitoring, controlling and analysing the results of the politicians must be reinforced in order to prevent the politicians' wilful shady practices. Only then we will not lose the values of 1989, for which not only the Czech citizens but also many others in the Danube Region have fought for.

PPS:

If politicians do not anchor fundamental moral values and ethics among their personal principles, if they do not change their attitude to politics and society, thirty years' efforts to transform the Czech state into a liberal-democratic one will be thwarted. If the 2019 protests do not become the driving force for sustainable democratization in the Czech Republic, the accumulation of power among several individuals, the limited influence of the opposition, the increase of support and consequently of representation of populist parties in the government will continue to shape the future. In that case, democracy will remain, although it will severely lose its principles. In the foreseeable future then, the Czech citizens will certainly have a democracy, yet imperfect, illiberal one.

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