

100 YEARS OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY IN THE CZECH LANDS: A COMPARISON OF THE INTER-WAR AND POST-TRANSITION SITUATION

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During inter-war Czechoslovakia, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) profiled itself as an anti-system revolutionary political party, which after 1935 managed to strengthen its relatively stable position in society via antifascist rhetoric. With the support of the Soviet leadership, it unconstitutionally seized power and established a totalitarian regime after 1948. The events of 1989 meant a fall of the undemocratic regime, though surprisingly they did not mark the end of the Communist Party. This status did not change even after the breakup of Czechoslovakia, and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) still figures in the Czech political scene as a relevant actor. A hundred years of existence brings the opportunity to look back at the party development. The logical question presents itself about whether, and how, KSČM is comparable to KSČ and what differentiates them. Our analysis focuses on the ideological basis, the membership base development, voter support and the international anchorage. Specifically, we focus on the nostalgic character of KSČM and its reform rejection, which was, after 1989, a significant factor in securing the support of nostalgic voters. However, as the decline of the membership base and support during elections show, this unwillingness towards reforms can lead to its marginalisation. This was confirmed in the 2021 elections, when the KSČM did not reach the electoral threshold and abandoned the parliament.

Key words: KSČ; KSČM; Bolshevism; The Comintern; anti-system party; Czechoslovakia; Czech Republic.

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1 INTRODUCTION²

Only a handful of Czech political parties have figured in the political scene for a hundred years. At the time of writing, these are two left-wing and typically mutually antagonistic left-wing parties – the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which share common historical roots and in the last decade also a relatively intense drop in voter support. Surveys of public opinion during 2021 indicated that in the parliament elections to be held at the latest in early October 2021, one or both parties should obtain less than 5% of votes, therefore not achieving the minimal threshold for obtaining a mandate). This was really confirmed by the electoral results and the centenary of the formal establishment of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia became also the year of the departure of KSČM, which has survived all turbulence including its loss of hegemonic position after 1989, into political marginality.

Since its institutional establishment in 1921, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) has represented a specific constituent of the First Czechoslovak Republic.³ In the inter-war period, it was an integral and devoted national section of the Communist International (Comintern, Third International), which was established in Moscow at the beginning of March 1919. The goal of this organisation was to coordinate individual Communist parties perceived as national sections subordinate to Soviet leadership. The Comintern was one of the cornerstones of Soviet foreign policy and significantly influenced the events in individual countries and, in the first place, the character of the individual parties including KSČ.

The extinction of Czechoslovakia and the beginning and course of the Second World War in many ways deepened the ties of KSČ to the Soviet Union. The end of the war not only resulted in a change in the geopolitical situation in Central Europe, it also impacted the perception of the Communist Party by post-war Czechoslovak society, which tried to cope with traumatising war experiences as well as with the feeling of certain betrayal by its pre-war allies (Tesař 2000). The Soviet Union in many ways seemed not only like a liberator, but also a guarantor of independent Czechoslovakia. For the Czechoslovak Communists, a unique opportunity arose to take power in the state and establish a dictatorship. Indeed, we agree here with Wiatr (2018, 8) that “in none of the Central European states communists came to power on their own” and “their victory resulted from the Soviet political and military hegemony”. The four decades after February 1948 brought about a number of changes and intra-party struggles along with an attempt at liberalisation, which was terminated in August 1968 by the Soviet occupation. During this entire period, the regime established by KSČ was subordinate to the interests and directives of Soviet leadership, but also utilised its power support. This was evident until November 1989, when, among other things, the passivity of Gorbachev’s leadership opened space for a transition to democracy even in Czechoslovakia.

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³ In the study we use common designations for three different political systems in Czechoslovakia before the onset of the communist dictatorship: the First Republic denotes the period 1918-1938, the Second Republic 1938-1939 and the Third Republic 1945-1948.

However, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, compared to most other post-communist countries, did not also mean a (gradual) demise of the Communist Party. Czech Communists continued to be a part of the political system and their electoral profit did not fall below 10% until 2017. Rather surprisingly, not only the continuity, but also the name 'Communist', was preserved in the Czech Republic. This indicates that KSČ/M represents in many ways a unique political party stemming from a specific social cohort and adeptly reacting to often dramatic changes in the political system and other societal subsystems.

2 ARTICLE RATIONALE

The main objective of the presented study is a comparative analysis of the main dispositions and performance of the Communist Party (CP) in Czechoslovakia, or later the Czech Republic, in two fully democratic periods of modern state history, i.e., during the First Republic and after 1989.⁴ These periods are considered for a differential comparison in combination with a diachronic comparison. The subject of the comparison is the Communist Party, where the aim is to ascertain whether and how KSČ/M changed during the selected periods. In the comparison we focus mainly on the party structure and party leadership selection, party ideology and its political and electoral agenda together with anti-system displays. The study utilises the content analysis of individual party and period documents, as well as secondary political science analyses of the party profile, position in the party system, ideological profile and agenda, as well as the development of party-voter nexus. From the field of quantitative methods, statistical methods associated with the analysis of the election results or the development of the membership base and a number of other relevant areas are used. Our goal is to describe and explain the changes in the attitudes of KSČ/M towards key topics, which, for the purposes of our analysis, are democratic values represented by the right to life, property, personal freedom, a fair trial, as well as the right to vote. As the main research question, we ask what the main objectives and factors are that make the CP a stable part of the party system. Furthermore, we search for the main characteristics that were shifted through the century of the party's existence. Specifically, we search for the response to the question of which factors enabled the CP's survival after the democratic transition, as well as what the limits are of such survival.

The first part of the article is devoted to the institutional formation of KSČ and its profiling and activities within the First Republic. The development of the party was influenced by an intra-party struggle for power, the domestic and international political situation and especially the interventions of the Comintern leadership together with several contradictory directives. The result was a mixture of unpredictable and often opposing steps by the leaders of KSČ. Their objective was, on the one hand, to satisfy the demands of the Moscow leadership, and on the other hand, to attempt to respond to actual political and social developments in Czechoslovakia in a pragmatic way. From the moment of its

⁴ The democratic character was clearly unfulfilled during the totalitarian war regimes of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, resp. the quasi-independent Slovak Republic (1939–1945), and also during the communist dictatorship (1948–1989). There were also a number of undemocratic restrictions during the Second Republic (e.g., the transfer of legislative activity to the government and thus suspension of the principle of separation of powers), and the system during the post-war period of 1945–1948 was not a fully democratic one either. In all mentioned cases, there was a significant limitation of civil rights and the competitiveness of the elections, or within the party system.

formation, KSČ displayed anti-system signs including a distinctive attitude towards the state system and societal events of the time. However, democratic Czechoslovakia was one of the few countries that accepted the legal existence of the Communist Party. Regardless of the minimum coalition potential, KSČ interacted with other political parties and significantly influenced events on the left side of the political spectrum. The goal of the analysis in this part is, among other things, to find a possible correlation between the varying intensity of anti-system attitudes and confrontational rhetoric and the development in the number of party members, possibly also the electoral results. After its establishment in 1921, KSČ saw a gradual decline in its membership base throughout the 1920s, but the 1930s brought change. In this period, the onset of fascism and Nazism noticeably changed the rhetoric of Czechoslovak Communists. The policy of popular fronts, adopted by the Comintern, seemingly enabled the Communists to reconsider their attitude towards the existence of the First Republic and towards September 1938 (the Munich Agreement and secession of border areas), and the subsequent end of independent Czechoslovakia put the Communists in position as leading protectors of the republic. However, this did not signify a change in their ideology and commitment to the Comintern, as well as to Moscow leadership.

The second part of the article focuses on the transformation of KSČ after the fall of the undemocratic regime, during which it was the (post)totalitarian hegemonic party. The Czechoslovak Communists were inevitably confronted with questions to which not only they, but the whole society, sought answers, such as 'Should the Communist Party cease to exist?'; 'Do the Communists have a place in the party and political system of the emerging democracy?'; 'What agenda and ideology can the communists offer to the voters?'; 'Will they be an anti-system party as in the First Republic?'

The post-November development associated with social, economic and legislative changes had an additional national dimension, which culminated in the disintegration of the joint state of Czechs and Slovaks in 1993. National issues did not evade even the Communists, in fact it was an important topic in the period of their absolute dominance – the most apparent preserved result of the Prague Spring was the federalisation of the state, next to which there had been a noticeably unbalanced situation in the existence of the nationwide party (KSČ) and the Communist Party of Slovakia (KSS) since the 1940s. In December 1989, the extraordinary congress of KSČ adopted a decision on the establishment of organisations in Bohemia and Moravia, on the basis of which KSČM was established in the spring of 1990; subsequently, KSČ transformed into a federation of two national parties. In Slovakia, the Communists underwent a transformation and, in the autumn of 1990, KSS changed to the Party of the Democratic Left (SDL'), a typical successor party of the social-democratic orientation. The Federation of the KSČ and SDL' parties ceased to exist on 7 April 1992, i.e. before the last elections within the Czechoslovak federation. Our analysis thus focuses primarily on KSČM as the direct successor of KSČ.

3 KSČ IN THE INTER-WAR PERIOD

The result of the global war that ended in the autumn of 1918 fundamentally transformed the map of Europe. The disintegration of the defeated empires gave rise to new state formations, including multinational Czechoslovakia. The hardships of war, the difficult economic and social situation of the population and the questioning of Christian and Enlightenment values all contributed to the

revolutionary frame of mind. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia at the end of 1917 also had in many aspects a fatal impact on the formation of a 'new' Europe. Communist ideology promised the masses not only social justice based on fundamental changes of ownership, but also a trivialising yet relatively appealing explanation of the reasons for the war frenzy of the past years.

In the Czech lands, which underwent significant modernisation and industrialisation during the second half of the 19th century, there had been a very strong leftist movement represented primarily by the Social Democrats, next to whom were also left-wing national socialists rejecting the idea of revolution (Cabada 2010, 7–27). However, the integrity of the social democratic movement was significantly affected by the success of the Russian Bolsheviks in 1917; the result was a split in most developed democracies and a disintegration of national parties. The results of the parliamentary election in Czechoslovakia in 1920 meant a significant victory for social democracy (in the Czech lands the Czech Social Democrats won 22.2% of votes, in Slovakia 38.1%, more than 10% of the votes were recorded by the German Social Democrats in Czechoslovakia), but they also revealed more inner ambivalence. There were a number of Marxism-oriented party members within the Social Democrats who actively adopted and promoted the Leninist model of communism closely connected with Soviet Russia (Galandauer 1986, 1701; Cabada and Šanc 2005, 34). We cannot omit the fact that the idea of communism found a positive response across society and several intellectuals saw it as an opportunity to actively take a stance against the former monarchies and especially the conservative values they represented (Kolenovská 2007, 15–20). The positive attitude of a large part of society to the unifying idea of Slavism and the still present Russophilia with which Soviet Russia was initially associated (Beneš 1988, 264–277; Hejret 1944, 50–52, 66–78; Šimová 2017, 51) also had an evident influence. In this environment, it was only a matter of time before the institutional establishment of a Communist party in Czechoslovakia took place.

Despite the strong position of the left and the communist stream within it, the institutional establishment of the Communist Party occurred with a certain time delay.⁵ The reasons can be seen in the general enthusiasm for the establishment of an independent republic, which also showed relatively strong tendencies towards a welfare state. It was also important that the leading representatives of social democracy, albeit supporters of the communist stream, preferred a gradual transformation in an effort to gain as many social democratic members as possible. These justifications were also mentioned by the key representative Bohumír Šmeral at the founding congress of the Communist Party in 1921 (KSČ 1958, 106–110). Last but not least, the nationality factor also came into play, which was reflected in the individual founding congresses⁶ and was also the topic of the merging congress held in Prague between 30 October and 11 November 1921, which gave rise to a united Communist Party (Slučovací sjezd 1922, 14–21).

⁵ In neighbouring countries, the communist parties were formed primarily in 1918, namely in Germany, Austria, Poland and Hungary.

⁶ The congress for Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia took place in Lubochňa on 16–17 January 1921, the founding congress of KSČ (the German section) met in Liberec on 12–15 March 1921 and the congress of the Czech section took place on 14–16 May 1921 in Prague in parallel with the founding congress of the Jewish Communist Party in the Czechoslovak Republic (Štverák 2010, 21).

From the beginning, the Communist Party profiled itself into the image of a party whose structure and organisation were unique within the First Republic party system. The determining factor was the fact that it had already accepted the terms of the Comintern⁷ when it was established and became a part of it with all the obligations arising from it. Let us recall that the Comintern was built as a centralised organisation, but also a movement aiming to unite a wide range of radical left-wing groups and to influence their direction. In practice, it operated as a Federation of Communist parties and as the only integrating political party seeking to determine a unified strategy for the global communist movement. Strengthening ties between member parties and the Comintern, in particular its executive body (EKI), was a very important issue. Evidence of this is the fact that at the III. Congress of the Comintern in 1921, in order to ensure a smooth and efficient course, EKI was expanded and the institute of authorised representatives in the individual parties was established. These and other steps strengthened the close ideological and political ties to the Moscow leadership, supported by the economic dependence of the individual national sections of the Comintern (Adibekov, Šachnazarova and Širiña 2002, 11–14).

When analysing the development and profiling of KSČ, its congresses have an undeniable place, as they reflected not only what was happening within the party, but also the reactions to domestic and international political events. The I. Congress in 1923 already indicated a problem that was present within KSČ throughout the war, namely the social democratic past of many members and the resulting reluctance to accept Bolshevik methods. The transformation to a Bolshevik party was thus repeatedly declared a key item on the KSČ agenda (Reimann 1931, 126–139). A similar challenge was overcoming inter-ethnic tensions and organisational problems connected with plurilingualism (the absence of internal documents and guidelines of some languages). Data collected for the purposes of preparing a report for the II. Congress of KSČ showed that the Czechs made up 65.45% of the membership base, followed by the Germans with 23.33% and the Slovaks with 6.06%. The rest consisted of Hungarians, Poles, Ruthenians and other nationalities. The report also showed that the goal of controlling the trade union movement was not being achieved. Forty five percent of KSČ members were registered in the Red Unions, 16.9% in the non-communist ones and as many as 38.1% were not registered anywhere. Efforts for active ideological activity also suffered from the reality that 31.3% of party members did not subscribe to any party press, which was to be the main communication channel and link with the membership base. The membership base included only 31.6% of members under the age of 20 – thus KSČ was far from a revolutionary party for young people. A full 73.2% of the membership was made up of former members of the Social Democrats (KSČ 1924, 5–16).

The II. Congress of KSČ in 1924 brought about a number of changes that had an impact on the party structure. The congress resolutions stated that the party's highest level is the congress, which is convened by the Central Committee in agreement with EKI once a year (however, this rule was later not abided by). The fundamental organisational unit became a cell whose establishment was conditioned by the participation of at least three members of the party, which in turn allowed the creation of a whole network of factory and street cells. Equally important was the element of democratic centralism, which was mandatory for all national sections of the Comintern. The strictest discipline was required and for the MPs it was supposed to be even stricter. Among other things, MPs could

⁷ The founding congress accepted the terms of the Comintern and applied for admission. Of the 569 delegates with votes only 7 of them were against. (KSČ 1958, 169)

be removed at any time and each member of the party was obliged to sign a statement allowing these steps (KSČ 1983, 313–320).

KSČ entered its further development stage even more closely connected with the Comintern, and its directives as well as its structure deepened the undemocratic intra-party system. In practice, however, many directives did not work. The III. Congress of KSČ held in September 1925 thus stated that the party was still lagging in Bolshevisation and that no specific corrective measures were being set. The party cell still did not become an essential element of the organisational structure. Furthermore, the Communists failed to effectively address the young population and workers in agriculture (KSČ 1925, 84–89). Another topic that resonated at the congress was the issue of elections, when the congress stated that 'membership in self-governing bodies is not the goal or purpose of the Communist party and its members, only a means of communist agitation and propaganda' (KSČ 1983, 321). The Communists perceived the elections as an opportunity to destabilise the system and induce a crisis. Therefore, it was the duty of each member to make every effort for the electoral success of KSČ (KSČ 1925, 75). The election campaign thus became only one of several instruments leading to the takeover of power and the establishment of a dictatorship. Therefore, for KSČ, democratic elections did not have that much value in comparison with other political parties, for which elections were an opportunity to participate in the government (Duverger 2016, 35–36). The parliamentary elections on 15 November 1925, however, were a significant success for the still non-bolshevised KSČ, which became the most successful left-wing political party with 13.7% of votes. However, it had a coalition potential of next to none and it continued to occupy a completely anti-system position.

At the same time, after 1925, the limits of the notions about rapid Bolshevisation of the party and the monopolisation of the left under the leadership of KSČ began to show. The declared principle of regular annual congresses was soon violated and the IV. Congress of KSČ did not take place until 1927. Among the main topics of the IV. Congress in 1927 was the trade union issue. The trade union movement undoubtedly had the potential to be a fundamental instrument of KSČ policy, but the Communists' ideas about its control ran into a number of problems. The unions were not united and consisted of several organisational streams. Some of them were tied to a political party, such as in the case of the communist *Red Unions*, but the overwhelming part required political neutrality (KSČ 1927, 54–55). Most unions, not only in Czechoslovakia, preferred rapid and effective reforms to a vision of changing social order (Duverger 2016, 50). The union activity required by the Comintern also encountered the persistent non-involvement of 26.1% of party members in this movement. Therefore, the congress stipulated that every member of the party must be obligatorily registered in the unions (KSČ 1927, 62). The importance of controlling the unions is documented by the fact that at the end of the congress, the possibility of liquidating the Red Unions if individual organisations unified came up (Zápotocký 1927, 93). However, this appeal came across more as frustration with the developments so far.

For the further development of the party, it was crucial to adopt a new organisational code, confirming the main principles accepted by EKI, which remained in effect without major changes until the VIII. Congress in 1946 (Bieliková 1984, 215). However, this did not mean that there was no continuous development in the interpretation of this document. Also, the concept of the cell and its possible variants (factory, street) was no exception and after this congress its factory form was no longer to be preferred, due to, among other things, the high proportion of unemployed workers among party members (Beuer 1928,

124–128). For the supporters of a strictly Bolshevik lineage, the congress was mostly proof of the inconsistent and slow Bolshevisation and opportunistic attitude of former Social Democratic members (Reimann 1931, 181–188).

The development and direction of KSČ continued to be significantly influenced by the events in the Comintern. The third development period in 1928–1933 is associated with the radicalisation of the working masses, increasing attacks on the non-communist left and, last but not least, the beginning of the uncompromising Stalinisation of the communist movement (McDermott and Agnew 2011, 14; 94–130). In the evaluation by the Comintern, KSČ found itself among the sections in crisis, which needed to be resolved. The EKI leadership feared growing differences in opinion between the key bodies of KSČ – the Central Committee and the Central Inspection Committee – which could lead to a duality of power (Degras 1971a, 449, 453). However, as can be seen from Protocol VI. of the Congress of the Comintern from 1 September 1928, the Czechoslovak Communists in a written statement expressed their agreement with the line of the Soviet Communist Party and the decision of EKI (Degras 1971a, 548). It is apparent that with these steps KSČ voluntarily accepted a vassal position within the multinational organisation of the Comintern.

The dissatisfaction with the development of KSČ, which was voiced at the VI. Congress of the Comintern, concluded in the form of an open critical letter to Czechoslovak Communists. The congress also approved the establishment of an investigating committee to resolve the crisis in KSČ, on the grounds of which the devoted Bolshevik Klement Gottwald called for strong Bolshevisation. It was no coincidence that he was elected by the congress as a member of EKI (Bielková 1984, 224). The required intra-party discussion stemming from the open letter had only one goal and that was to complete the Bolshevisation of the party and decidedly remove opponents of this direction (Zápotocký 1928a, 792–795). The Bolshevik self-criticism was to have an irreplaceable position within the whole party, including its leadership. The new party leadership appropriated the right to take directive decisions regardless of the proclaimed intra-party democracy and the right to criticise (ibid., 855–858). The required changes in KSČ were meant to be confirmed at the V. Congress in early 1929. The results of the congress confirmed the victory of the uncompromising Bolshevik stream led by K. Gottwald. In reality, the congress marked the beginning of the fight against opportunism and all members of the party who were and should have been labelled as destructive elements (Fried 1971, 421). The required party cleansing is best documented in the material on the KSČ agenda which states: ‘Seven years have passed since the establishment of KSČ. These 7 years of the development of communism in the Czechoslovak Republic proved that our party can mature into a Communist party only by overcoming the greatest difficulties, only by ruthlessly fighting and exterminating strong social democratic traditions’ (Reiman 1971, 657). The purges in KSČ must be seen as a part of a complex process within the Comintern as a whole. Meanwhile, such party expulsions took place not only in Czechoslovakia, but also, for example, in Italy, Switzerland and, of course, among the Soviet Communists. The campaign against social democracy and ‘opportunism’ intensified and the Bolshevik course set in place was supposed to guarantee that no communist movement would be possible outside the Comintern (Degras 1971b, 27–36).

The tough Bolshevik course together with aggressive rhetoric had a devastating effect not only on the numbers of KSČ members – from 139,000 in 1925 to 81,500 in 1929 (Degras 1971b, 38) – but also on the sympathisers among workers, officials and intellectuals. The loss of support of a number of intellectuals and artists significantly weakened the reputation and ability to present the ideas of

communism to the general public. All of this was reflected in the results in the elections of 1929, when the support of KSČ fell by a third, i.e. to 10%. However, the new KSČ leadership attributed the loss of support to the previous leadership, which pursued an inconsistent Bolshevik policy (Reimann 1931, 265). Let us stress that despite the partial loss of voters the CP evinced geographically stable electoral support in Central Bohemia, Czech Silesia as well as urban parts of South Moravia (Král 2013, 58–62), all these regions being not only industrialised, but also densely populated.⁸

The further development of the communist movement, including KSČ, was fundamentally affected by the global economic crisis. The key task was to mobilise and gain the support of a wide range of the society; KSČ prospered among the unemployed but attempts to control the unions were still deemed unsuccessful (KSČ 1931, 29–36). The group of small merchants, craftsmen, small businessmen and farmers was perceived almost at the level of laborers under the pressure of the economic crisis. A paradoxical initiative emerged to address this hitherto forbidden class, often referred to as a representative of a petit bourgeois way of life and values. The Proletariat, led by KSČ, was to actively gain the support and alliance not only of these groups of the population, but also of officials and the intelligence in order to combat exploitation by large companies (Konrad 1931, 143–154). However, anti-system and aggressive policies continued in accordance with the directives of the Comintern, complemented by the fight against the so-called social fascists (other left-wing parties) and constant attacks on the foundations of democratic Czechoslovakia. The result was a situation in which a part of the society and the state administration began to perceive KSČ as a danger equal to, or bigger than, fascism. The Communists gradually found themselves in a completely schizophrenic situation. The changing domestic political situation, the onset of heightened nationalism⁹ and the events in neighbouring countries all revealed fundamental contradictions between the demands of the Comintern and reality.

These circumstances led some members of KSČ to reconsider their tactics, especially to reduce aggressive rhetoric and attacks on social democracy and non-communist unions. The changes brought apparent success in organising the strike held in Most in the spring of 1932. Both the Communists and the Social Democrats joined the strike movement. For the Communists, this was an unprecedented step, as not only did they abandon the principle of social fascism, but for the first time since 1929 they did not condition their participation by leading the strike and the need to form a united front (McDermott and Agnew 2011, 119). The reasons for these steps had their simple justification when it was not possible to create enough factory cells. From 15,000 new members (only 588 of them were women, most in the household), only 1,557 related to the factory

⁸ After WWII, we can observe important changes in the spatial character of the CP's support. In the parliamentary elections in 1946, KSČ had already extended its support to the borderlands. The new residents that replaced the expelled and transferred Czech (Sudeten) Germans reflected the CP as the main positive element of their economic and societal upswing. As far as the post-November KSČM presents itself as a mainly nostalgic party (below), it is not surprising that also after 1989 the CP still maintained the main support in the borderlands (Král 2013).

⁹ During this period, KSČ was also confronted with a dangerous outflow of workers to the extreme right. The economic crisis and political developments occurring since the early 1930s bolstered radical streams in the German minority. Deutsche nationalsozialistische Arbeiterpartei (DNSAP) and subsequently Sudetendeutsche Partei (SdP) had a significant share of workers in their ranks. We cannot forget the fact that the membership base of the Czech National Fascist Community (NOF) also consisted of workers and the so-called 'lumpenproletariat' (Pasák and Pasáková 1999, 105–114). Also in Slovakia, the dominant Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSĽS) was able to address many workers with growing nationalism.

cells. The KSČ membership base was 65% made up of workers, but only 16% of them were organised in factory cells (Bruno 1932, 91–96).

Partial success stemming from the weakening of the social fascist narrative led to criticism of this approach. The main representative Josef Guttman criticised the policy of social fascism at the XII. plenary of EKI held from August to September 1932. A realistic and daring evaluation of this nonsensical guideline found a cautious positive response even from some of his fellow party members (McDermott and Agnew 2011, 119). Guttman was initially supported by the KSČ leader Gottwald, who, together with the leader of the French Communist Party Maurice Thorez, in a joint telegram from 4 April 1933, appealed to EKI to negotiate with the II. International. However, Stalin's decision was completely different, to begin the fight against the II. International instead (ibid., 132), which evidently shaped the positions of the EKI leadership, according to which the process of fasciation of social democracies took place (Manuilskij 1932, 245–262). Gottwald quickly re-evaluated his position and, in accordance with the Comintern and EKI, stated: '...to anticipate the temper and prejudice of the socially democratic working class, when we approach them, does not mean a weakening of the fundamental fight against social democracy. On the contrary, close contact with the social democratic workers and the mutual struggle with them just makes the task of breaking social democracy easier for us' (Gottwald 1933, 333).

The commitment to the Bolshevik paradigm and subordination to the Moscow leadership persisted with the Czechoslovak Communists even in 1934, even though some party members had growing doubts about whether the party guideline was reasonable and feasible. The Guttman case (he was expelled from KSČ in January 1934) was an active reminder of the party's handling of the differing opinions and criticism. A united front was to continue to be an instrument for indoctrinating the social democratic masses, and the united front was to be purged of social democratic functionaries, workers and sympathisers whose attitudes contradicted the ideas and practices of communist ideology (Nedvěd 1934, 28–29). However, the tension between the member sections and the Comintern persisted. While the KSČ leadership waited, the developments in other Communist parties were aimed at cooperating with the socialist parties in the fight against the danger of fascism. The difference in the development and attitudes of other European Communist parties in comparison with KSČ is evidenced by the agreement of the French Communists with the Socialists from 27 July 1934, followed by the Italian Communists on 17 August of the same year (Bieliková 1984, 282–283).

The period of 1935–1938 was full of events on which KSČ built its political positions and reputation in the following decades. In the second half of the 1930s, foreign policy issues became domestic policy, and the very existence of Czechoslovakia was threatened. The Nazi threat led Czechoslovak representatives to recognise the Soviet Union *de iure* (July 1934) and subsequently to sign a treaty on the Czechoslovak-Soviet alliance on the evening of the May 1935 parliamentary elections. In the elections, KSČ got 10% of votes, i.e. about the same percentage as six years prior.

In this period, also under the influence of a worsening internal political situation and an increasing fascist and Nazi threat, there was a shift in the reception of the Soviet Union by the non-communist part of society. The fundamental impetus was the VII. Congress of the Comintern in autumn, where Georgi Dimitrov presented the concept of the Popular Front and incited a crucial change. The cooperation of Communists with Social Democrats that had been forbidden until

this time was no longer to be as strict under certain conditions. The condition of the partnership with non-communist left-wing parties was conditional to the prevention of the onset of fascism and the consequent threat for Communist parties and the Soviet Union. The goal of the Communists – i.e. installation of a dictatorship of the proletariat – remained, however, unchanged and the possible co-operation within the Popular Front had to be only an intermediate step in this course (Dimitrov 1935, 79–80). Besides, one of the key instruments to gaining dominance for Communists was the infiltration of other left-wing parties, which the VII. Congress of KSČ in 1936 approved. In addition, it was just during this period that Stalin's purges also focused on some national sections of the Comintern.

Even in his opening speech of the congress, Antonín Zápotocký (1936, 14–15) emphasised the subordination of KSČ to the Comintern and the position of the most powerful man of the communist movement: 'We are proud that we are a part of the only global party. The Communist International that is led by the heroic anti-fascist fighter, comrade Stalin's closest collaborator, comrade Dimitrov'. KSČ still perceived Czechoslovakia as a capitalist and imperialist state that is a part of the anti-Soviet opposition. In his speech, Gottwald justified the change in attitude of the party leadership with a new approach of Czechoslovakia to the Soviet Union together with the need for a common fight against the fascist threat. An important argument for the cooperation with the non-communist left was also the threat of a war conflict of Nazi Germany with the Soviet Union (Gottwald 1936, 31).

KSČ was a loyal section of the Comintern but its representatives were aware of the fact that there was only a very fine and often changing line, beyond which they could be accused of betraying Bolshevism. The already schizophrenic situation was further complicated by the circumstances in the Soviet Union – the political trials and Stalin's Terror associated with them had even been gradually transferred into the structures of the Comintern (Hedeler 2004, 39). The impact of the trials was devastating even outside of the communist movement and the extent and atrocity of repressions evoked a legitimate resistance from a large part of socialists and liberals. The credibility of Communists and the willingness of other political parties to closely cooperate was considerably limited by these events, if not totally thwarted.

The implementation of the Popular Front's strategies was a crucial topic of the ÚV KSČ session in May 1937. The priority was the defence of the republic and the attempt to address large masses. All party print was to join the campaign as actively as possible. Their rhetoric was completely different in comparison to former years, and it appealed to new target groups.¹⁰ The rapid course of activities in KSČ was surprisingly affected by Gottwald's absence from party leadership as he stayed in Moscow from the May session all the way until autumn. One of the possible reasons was Stalin's ongoing purges in the ranks of the Comintern, which took absolute priority over the happenings in the individual sections. A special committee headed by Dimitrov was to carry out a thorough purge within EKI and to prevent subversive activity and anti-Soviet espionage. The result was the elimination of sixty-five representatives of national sections from the Comintern (Firsov 2004, 75) and another wave of fear. The Soviet Union

¹⁰ E.g. *Haló noviny* – a reportage and information newspaper for all was published as a version with the subtitle 'Special edition for the self-employed.' Among the many slogans, the phrase: 'When the self-employed, workers, farmers shake hands, they will unite in the Popular Front, the times will be different, the times will be better!' (*Haló noviny* 1937, 1–2).

was no longer a safe haven for foreign Communists in case of prosecution in their home countries.

The last year of the First Republic was characterised by a number of crises events whose development and direction was difficult and almost unrealistic to significantly influence by the government, authorities or political parties including Communists. The relations with neighbouring states (except for Romania) were quite problematic or even hostile in this period. In Moscow, Stalin's purges continued and hitherto privileged members of the party were suddenly convicted within the framework of exemplary trials. Some Czechoslovak Communists had ties to many Communists convicted during Stalin's purges (Nedvěd 1938, 5). Relations between KSČ and a portion of society developed in this period particularly based on common activities and expressions of mutual sympathy, regardless of the directives connected with the concept of popular fronts and the efforts of the KSČ leadership to manage them, though under the Comintern's supervision. In the last months before the Munich Agreement was adopted, the Communists became, in several areas, rhetorically the most active defenders of independence and their attitude brought them sympathies from a part of society. A definite end to the activities of KSČ in the First Republic brought about the events connected with the Munich Agreement and the following ban of the Communist Party, which meant a dive into illegality.

After 1921 KSČ became an integral part of the party and political life of the First Republic. A key step for its development was the voluntary entry into the Comintern, to which KSČ became a subordinate national section. The consequence of this step was a unique situation in which KSČ acted like a sovereign subject on the domestic political scene, including elections, but perceived itself as well as functioned organisationally, as a part of a single 'global' Communist party. It transformed its organisation structure in accordance with the demand of the Comintern and its cornerstone became the party cells. Also, another specificity was based on its membership in the Comintern that demanded the existence of only one Communist party in any given country; therefore, KSČ merged the different nationalities of Czechoslovakia and was in fact the only such party in the country. The attitude of the society towards KSČ copied to some extent its development and gradual Bolshevisation. The party was supported by many intellectuals who were enchanted with the chance of making a new just society, although many of them left their sympathies towards the idea of communism when the party adopted the Bolshevik-Stalin course. KSČ finished its legal existence as a party defending the existence of the independent state, rights of workmen, as a fighter against fascism and Nazism and last but not least as a supporter of Slavic mutuality whose fundamental ally was the Soviet Union.

4 THE COMMUNIST PARTY AFTER 1989

The rise of reformists led by M. Gorbachev to the leadership of the Soviet Union and the international political development in the late 1980s resulted in the fall of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe including Czechoslovakia. The fall of the communist regime meant not only the end of a leading role for KSČ guaranteed by the constitution but the return to a democratic system. The immediate post-November changes found the Communists in deep isolation and misunderstanding that the political developments in the country were completely beyond their influence. To react to a rapidly increasing resistance of

the society after the brutal repression of the demonstration on 17 November¹¹ the Central Committee convened a session on 24 November at which, surprisingly, it dealt primarily with the party's personnel policy and not with what was really going on in society. The session of the Central Committee of KSS at the end of November had a similar course (KSČS 1990, 24–27). The misunderstanding of the significance of the escalating Velvet Revolution was an essential contribution to the fact that KSČ as a party almost did not participate in the negotiation of the transition. Only some pragmatic individuals were negotiating with the representatives of the Civic Forum (OF) and civic society who then distanced themselves from KSČ in a short time. Just one month after the start of the transition, on 20 and 21 December 1989, the extraordinary congress was convened. The delegates stated that if the existence of the party was to be preserved it was not only necessary to adopt personnel changes in the leadership of the party but also to outwardly declare a change. The Communists apologised to the entire society for the conditions that KSČ had caused (KSČS 1990, 29–30).

The first democratic elections in June 1990 also had its own symbolic expression in the form of a plebiscite about the existence of the Communist Party as such. The victory of OF (in Slovakia Public Against Violence – VPN) with almost 50% of votes confirmed the public's support for democratic changes. As a surprise to many, the Communists – though well behind – were the second most successful political party with 13% of votes. On the other hand, the election ended with a considerable flop for Social Democrats (ČSSD) who with 4% of votes did not step over the electoral threshold. We can see the reasons not only in the support for OF from many Social Democrats but also in the internal disunity caused by different lines of opinion when the party was being restored (Profant 2010, 19–20).

The Communists in a surprising role of the strongest left-wing party organised their regular XVIII. Congress on 3–4 November 1990. The question of continuity of the party bearing the acronym KSČS with the former KSČ was solved within the framework of its conversion into a democratic party. The party documents adopted from 1948 till 17 November 1989, were to be considered only as historical and thus irrelevant from then on. The congress refused the relicts of Bolshevisation and Stalinisation, though some principles of democratic centralism were approved. In the future, the position of the Communists was to be based on the humanistic principles of Marx's theory including his dialectical-materialist methodology of perception of the world. As for the organisation, the federalisation of the Communist Party was introduced – the federal level was represented by KSČS and the national one by KSČM and KSS-SDL (KSŠ 1990, 47–50).

If we evaluate the first year of the Communists' activities within the new regime, they succeeded in defending their existence and despite their sharp drop in membership base (if KSČ had 1.7 million members in January 1989, in mid-1990 there were fewer than half of this – about 750 thousand members, KSČS 1990), they were not a marginal political power at all. The attitude of society expressed by the poll of the first half of 1990 found that 59% of respondents did not ask for the ban of the Communist Party and 79% of them were convinced that this entity should have identical rights and duties as other political parties. The Communists were, however, perceived as a non-reformed anti-system element (Fiala and Mareš 1999, 184–186). As for the prospects of Czech-Slovak cohabitation, KSČM

¹¹ That symbolically reflected the 50th anniversary of the beginning of Nazi reprisals against Czech universities.

firmly rejected a division of the federation while the situation on the Slovak side was rather different. Most of the MPs for SDĽ in autumn 1992 voted for the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of the Slovak Nation (Hirtlová and Srb 2010, 51–52). The end of the common state of Czechs and Slovaks was the end of KSČS, which was a direct successor of KSČ. Of the two national parties, only the party in the Czech lands retained the name 'Communist' and it has officially and repeatedly embraced its roots and heritage in the form of KSČ (KSČM 2000, 50–54).

The reason for why the Czech Communist Party did not undergo any fundamental reform is usually reflected by the limited presence and strength of the reformists in the party before the transition (Ishiyama 1995, 154–155; Wiatr 2000, 44). If we consider the fact that when the Prague Spring was suppressed, one third of members were excommunicated from the party and that the rigid leadership virtually did not allow for the creation of a pro-reform ideological fraction, it is obvious that from the very beginning, KSČ(M) congenitally struggled to generate strong reformers from within the party. Moreover, the position of the party was naturally complicated because of the establishment of an authentic Social Democratic Party (Cabada 2015, 19). After autumn 1990, the attempt to liberalise the party and domesticate it in the new democratic system was personalised by the new party chairman Jiří Svoboda. Indeed, the effort to change the party's name, to distance the party from its past more clearly and to accept the new system as better than the one before 1989 failed (Mareš 2005, 131; Kopeček and Pšeja 2007, 42). 'After this non-success, Svoboda and the leaders close to him left the party and made space for a soft version of standpatters, led by a nostalgic chairman Miroslav Grebeníček' (Cabada 2015, 20).

The rise of ČSSD and its real coalition potential supported by the election results¹² of the second half of the 1990s pushed KSČM more and more to the background within the left-wing political spectrum. On the contrary, the leaders of KSČM still officially insisted on a mixture of Marxism-Leninism, former regime nostalgia and efforts to build socialism (Grebeníček 2000, 5–14). At the V. Congress in 1999 the guidelines, with which the Communists entered the 21st century, were officially confirmed. The character of KSČM was communist and this was to be kept in the future.¹³ The Communists considered this ground crucial for securing the unity of KSČM and preventing the party's social democratisation and dogmatic voluntarism (KSČM 2000, 16). The Communists saw themselves as protectors of national sovereignty, which is, according to them, threatened by foreign capital as well as by membership in NATO and other organisations. The goal of the opposition policy was to step up against neo-conservative and neo-liberal theories and against the compromise attitude of the Social Democracy. The policy of KSČM was based on the Marxist and socialist ideal and was inspired by Lenin's theory and strategy. The Communists professed their revolutionary character, which was not supposed to mean a violent take over; the party 'intended to be present when people took to the streets and squares. It did not want to passively follow or wait until the right-wing coalition and later Social Democracy compromises themselves and thus is defeated in democratic elections' (KSČM 2000, 24–25).

¹² In the Parliament election held in 1996, ČSSD won 26.4% of votes, while KSČM got 10.3%. In 1998 the difference was even more noticeable, when there were 32.3% of votes for ČSSD, while 11% were for KSČM (ČSU 2008, 111–118).

¹³ In its report, ÚV KSČM, referring to the opinions of the members, opposed the insufficiently justified proposals connected – among other things – with the change of the party's name (III. Congress of KSČM in 1993 confirmed 'Communist' in the name) and its policy (KSČM 2000, 54). The V. Congress confirmed the conservative orientation of the party, which began with the defeat of reform representatives in 1993.

The position of KSČM within the system of political parties has been and still is limited from the point of view of anti-communism (Cabada 2015; Koubek, Buben, and Polášek 2012, 53) and the perception of this party as an anti-system element from the point of view of left-wing subjects including ČSSD (KSČM) 2000, 26).¹⁴ Similarly, KSČM is perceived by a huge part of the society as the polarizing actor. Good evidence represents the absence of the party in the second parliamentary chamber, Senate, elected based on two-round majoritarian system.

The party in 1999 presumed that 'in ten years we will have the predominance of members of working age with a strong participation of young people' (KSČM 2000, 52–54). This was a very ambitious goal as in this period the average age of the party members was 63.6 years, only 3,700 were younger than 35 years and 2/3 had been party members for 40 years or more (ibid., 52–54). It is evident that a large number of the members have historical ties to KSČ.¹⁵ This situation can be perceived as one of the crucial factors for the rigidity of the Communist Party and its unwillingness to carry out real changes (Perottino and Polášek 2012, 116). It is no surprise that the reality of 2020 is totally different from the plans and wishes of KSČM.¹⁶ A considerable problem is also the gradual weakening of the membership base as from 1992 to 1999 the number of members decreased from 354,549 to 136,516 (KSČM 2000, 52) and at the end of 2020 in an interview Chairman Vojtěch Filip mentioned 30,000 as the number of members (Dubničková 2020). The next objective was to gain the influence over the trade union movement and to address the factory workers and workers in agriculture. The workers, however, only made up 14.2% of the party members in 1999, while the workers in agriculture made up only 1.9% (KSČM 2000, 54). The effort of KSČM did not find a response from the trade union centres that insist on them being apolitical (KSČM 2012, 96).

The question of the KSČM electorate is quite complicated. If our analysis is based on opinion polls and voting preferences, the voters of the Communist Party are not different from others, but they are very reluctant to express their voting preferences at these polls. As for the age, they are mainly older voters, very often retired (Fiala et al 1999, 184–188) who perceive KSČM as a bearer of the socialist system values often substantially idealised and connected with nostalgia (Bureš 2010, 55; Matejová 2018). As for their education, they are voters particularly with a basic education (38.4%) or apprenticeships (35.5%) with low income (Fiala et al 1999, 188–189). These voters belong to a non-privileged group of the population in contrast with the party leadership, which have successfully established themselves in local and regional councils as well as in the Parliament. The position of these party members of course influences their social and economic status (Bureš 2010, 56). The electorate core is made up not only of party members and ideological supporters (Fiala et al 1999, 189) but also of citizens who respond to the tribune role of KSČM that lies in its criticism of the current society (Perottino and Polášek 2012, 113).

¹⁴ The situation on a regional level is a little different as KSČM cooperates with independent candidates. A coalition with other political parties in local councils is not exceptional (KSČM 2000, 42), though on the national level they forbid it.

¹⁵ The official data dealing with age structure and number of members are not published by KSČM but the estimated age is over 70 years.

¹⁶ See, for example, this intra-party information: 'Dear comrades, for several last years, most of basic organisations of the party in our region have not been able to organize – in accordance with the articles of the party – a member let alone an annual session. Not to mention other activities. There are many reasons. The main reason is the old age and health condition of our members' (Duník and Havlíček 2020).

5 CONCLUSION

Despite the anti-communist rhetoric of several political parties and a part of society, KSČM was one of the stable political entities within the Czech Republic 30 years after the transition. However, since the end of the 1990s, when the party underwent stabilisation, its development has stagnated not only in ideology, but also in membership and electoral base. At the national level, it remains largely isolated. Sporadic support of other parties in the legislative process or the selective support of the government does not enable its ideological and factual demands to be applied. Its stagnation, the constant loss of membership base and the absence of internal reform have an inherent impact on electoral success. Although it was the only political party that has always won mandates in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic starting with the 1990 elections (Perottino and Polášek 2012, 110–112). Nevertheless, as shown by the Senate elections in 2020, and above all by the 2020 regional election results when the party reached the 5% threshold in only 4 of 13 Czech self-administrative regions, this situation may not be permanent. Paradoxically, for a long time the unreformed KSČM attracted its supporters with ideological rigidity and references to the advantages of the regime before 1990 (Bureš 2010, 60). But it is this encapsulation which brought success, and which also led to the marginalisation of this party in 2021 parliamentary elections, when KSČM won only 3.6% of votes and did not overcome the threshold.

In many aspects KSČ and KSČM are identical entities. They represent communist ideology, although it is sometimes purposefully partially obscured. The fundamental ideological grounds are the same, although the rigid Bolshevik and Stalinist variants were officially renounced by KSČM. However, the aim of KSČM, which was expressed in the Declaration of the IV. Congress in 1995, continues to be the formation of a socialist society built on communist grounds. Problems with the membership base have accompanied the Communists in both democratic periods. In both cases, but for different reasons,¹⁷ there has been a decline in the membership base and its already low activity, and an insufficient representation of working people who are to form the core of the party. In relation to the workers in both democratic systems, the Communists failed to fulfil one of their primary goals, namely, to control the trade union movement.

Till 2017, the electoral results – within elections of primal importance – were similar, i.e. about a 10% success rate regardless of the minimal coalition potential. However, the reasons for the election into the Parliament are somewhat different. In the case of KSČ, people who were interested in the idea of a better and just society voted alongside the party members. KSČM also assembles its electorate from party members, but a large group is made up of people with nostalgic memories of the previous regime, paradoxically regardless of the fact that it did not represent the desired justice and humanity.

The existence of the Comintern and participation in this organisation, together with close ties with the Moscow leadership, is one of the fundamental differences when comparing the Communist Party of the First Republic and KSČM. The membership in the Comintern had a major influence on KSČ, which became its national section and logically limited its autonomy. However, in the event of

¹⁷ In the case of KSČ, it is mainly the departure of the original Social Democratic members. After 1990, there was a massive outflow of KSČ members who were in the Communist Party often for economic and social reasons. In the case of KSČM, the main reason can be seen in the aging of the membership base and the young generation's lack of interest to join.

problems (prosecution, etc.), the Moscow leadership allowed the Czechoslovak Communists to find exile and was also a welcome source of funding. However, KSČ had to unconditionally support the line and interests of the Soviet Union. KSČM is not a member of the multinational organisation, and the mentoring position of the Soviet Union has to some extent been replaced by Russia and China (in addition, KSČM has repeatedly presented itself as an advocate of the regimes in North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam). If we rid ourselves of possible personal and economic ties, today's situation is partly comparable to a certain mixture of Slavic mutuality and Russophilia as forms of protection of the nation and national interests.

The Communist Party in the Czech lands has undergone several dramatic changes and historical events; it unconstitutionally took over power after World War II and established a dictatorship lasting over 40 years. Though surprising to many, it even survived its downfall and integrated into the newly emerging democratic system. Its reluctance to implement fundamental reforms, including ideological ones, brought the party certain popularity. However, as the development of the last decade shows, its reluctance to reform is the reason for the drop in its membership base and public support. After a hundred years, the Communist Party became a marginal party at the central level and with unclear prospects.

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100 LET KOMUNISTIČNE PARTIJE NA ČEŠKEM: PRIMERJAVA MEDVOJNEGA IN POTRAZICIJSKEGA STANJA

V času medvojne Češkoslovaške se je Komunistična partija Češkoslovaške (KSČ) profilirala kot protisistemska revolucionarna politična stranka, ki ji je po letu 1935 z antifašistično retoriko uspelo okrepiti svoj relativno stabilen položaj v družbi. S podporo sovjetskega vodstva je protiustavno prevzela oblast in po letu 1948 vzpostavila totalitarni režim. Dogodki leta 1989 so pomenili padec nedemokratskega režima, a presenetljivo niso pomenili konca komunistične partije. Ta status se ni spremenil niti po razpadu Češkoslovaške; Komunistična partija Češke in Moravske (KSČM) pa še vedno nastopa na češkem političnem prizorišču kot pomemben akter. Sto let obstoja prinaša priložnost, da se ozremo na razvoj stranke. Pri tem se postavlja logično vprašanje, ali in kako je KSČM primerljiva s KSČ in kaj ju razlikuje. Naša analiza se osredotoča na ideološko osnovo, razvoj baze članstva, podporo volivcev in mednarodni položaj. Posebej se osredotočamo na nostalgичnost KSČM in njeno zavrnitev reforme, kar je bilo po letu 1989 pomemben dejavnik pri zagotavljanju podpore nostalgичnih volivcev. Vendar, kot kaže upad članske baze in podpore med volitvami, lahko ta nepripravljenost na reforme vodi v njeno marginalizacijo. To se je potrdilo na volitvah leta 2021, ko KSČM ni dosegla volilnega praga in je zapustila parlament

Ključne besede: KSČ; KSČM; boljševizem; Kominterni; protisistemska stranka; Češkoslovaška; Češka.