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## Democratic Failure In The Czech Republic Authors A Communist Party Revival

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The Czech Republic is one of the most successful members of the former Soviet Empire. Dominated by the U.S.S.R. after the Red Army overran the country in the closing days of World War II, Prague was a freedom domino in 1989, joining its neighbors in overthrowing Communist rule. Yet Czechs with whom I recently spoke fear liberty is in retreat. Indeed, the former Communist Party might reenter government after elections later this month.

Czechoslovakia was one of several countries created in 1918 out of the remains of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Cynics called the new entities “states for a season,” doomed to extinction.

Czechoslovakia became geopolitical prey for Nazi Germany. The new nation retained a large population of Germans in the Sudetenland who longed to join their ethnic brethren. Citing self-determination, Berlin won British and French support for Czechoslovakia’s dismemberment in 1938 and went on to swallow the entire country.

Seven years later the Red Army “liberated” Czechoslovakia, substituting one tyranny for another. Communist reformers eventually attempted to inaugurate “socialism with a human face,” but that triggered Soviet military intervention in August 1968. Only after Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power in the U.S.S.R. did the Iron Curtain open, allowing Eastern Europeans to escape their national prisons.

Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989 the so-called Velvet Revolution ousted the Czech Communist Party. On December 29 human rights activist Vaclav Havel became president. Soon joining him at the top of Czech politics was Vaclav Klaus, who successively served as finance minister and prime minister and orchestrated wide-ranging free market economic reforms. Klaus also oversaw Czechoslovakia’s peaceful split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Klaus eventually replaced Havel as president, an office then possessing greater prestige than authority.

President Milos Zeman took over from Klaus in March as the country’s first popularly elected president. Since then the former Social Democratic prime minister has roiled Czech politics by claiming ever more expansive authority. For instance, he insisted that Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg appoint one of Zeman’s supporters as ambassador. President Zeman also attempted to deny a university professorship to an activist gay academic.

More dramatically, the new head of state took advantage of the prime minister's summer resignation to appoint a leftist government against the wishes of the parliamentary majority. The new cabinet lost a parliamentary vote of confidence, but remains as caretaker until the upcoming election.

Moreover, President Zeman stated that he would not accept a new coalition between the Schwarzenberg's Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 party (TOP 09) and the Social Democrats (CSSD). In the past Czech presidents did not so blatantly interfere with party negotiations to form new governments.

Analysts disagree over whether President Zeman is merely pushing the outer bounds of constitutional interpretation or actually breaking the rules. Schwarzenberg, who was defeated by Zeman in the presidential race, complained last month that the latter "would like to be president and prime minister at the same time" and hopes "to stealthily set up a presidential system." Indeed, complained Schwarzenberg, "President Zeman's main ambition is his own power." The president's opponents propose amending the constitution to limit his authority.

However, the public appears less concerned about President Zeman's political maneuvers. He defends his activism, noting that he was elected with the votes of "nearly three million people, more than any political party received."

Equally controversial are the president's policies. For instance, his friendly view of Russia—which he predicts will eventually join the European Union—and links to Russian business have generated concern. The Soviet Union is gone, but the scars of Soviet oppression remain.

Moreover, the president reversed course on the EU after appealing to supporters of the Euro-skeptic Klaus during the presidential campaign. Once in office President Zeman hoisted the EU flag over the Prague Castle, which hosts the presidential office, and signed the European Stability Mechanism, the EU bail-out fund. He describes himself as a "Euro-Federalist," advocates common European fiscal, tax, foreign, and defense policies, and supports adopting the Euro as the Czech currency.

Still, the greater worry for many Czechs is the revival of the Communist Party. Over the last two decades left and right have shared power in various coalitions, with the discredited Communists confined outside of government. However, that soon may change.

As memories of Communist repression fade, some Czechs long for the perceived stability of the past. One poll found that only one in four Czechs was satisfied with democracy. Another poll even claimed that a majority of Czechs preferred Communism to democracy. Long reviled and isolated, Communists apparently are back in vogue.

The party's revival is particularly incongruous because the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, or KCSM, remains largely unreconstructed. Throughout its rule the Party "interned more than 250,000 political prisoners," noted foreign correspondent James Kirchick, yet after the Velvet Revolution offered only a perfunctory apology for its discreditable role. In 1996 the

communists channeled George Orwell in calling their 40 year rule “one of the greatest periods of social and economic growth.”

In fact, the KCSM is the only Communist Party in Eastern Europe which still unashamedly calls itself Communist. Kirchick explained, “while Communist Parties in the other countries in the former Eastern bloc dissolved (Poland), transformed into social democratic parties (Hungary), or merged with pre-existing ones (Slovakia), the Czech Communists did no such thing,” instead digging in and maintaining their party’s “doctrinaire Marxist outlook.” The Party even offered its condolences to North Korea, which maintains a particularly virulent form of totalitarianism, after the death of dictator Kim Jong-il in 2011.

The Party has benefited from the collapse of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS)—the leading party on the right since it was founded by Klaus more than two decades ago—which is polling just six percent. TOP 09 is in better shape, but not much. Polls put the two parties at under 20 percent combined.

Scandal has taken its toll. Right-leaning Prime Minister Petr Necas was forced to resign after his chief of staff and mistress allegedly used military intelligence to spy on Necas’ wife. Moreover, the Czech Republic has only begun to recover from a recession stretching back to 2011. Last year seven of ten Czechs declared the economy to be bad or very bad. In July the finance ministry downgraded growth predictions for 2013 and 2014. While the last government’s austerity program has maintained the country’s fiscal strength—Prague’s debt to GDP ratio is just 40 percent, less than half the EU average—spending cuts angered pensioners and others.

The Communist Party hopes to ride these grievances back into power. Vice Chairman Jiri Dolejs said the idea of allowing the KCSM into government is “losing its taboo as a topic for conversation.” The Social Democrats long refused to cooperate with the KCSM in parliament, though they joined in municipal and regional coalitions. However, desire for power is causing the CSSD to rethink its policy. Social Democratic Senator Jiri Dienstbier, Jr., who ran unsuccessfully for president, told Kirchick: “If it is a democratic party, we should treat it as any other democratic party, including coalition potential.” In Dienstbier’s view, “it’s not like they pose a threat to the democratic system in the country.”

The KCSM holds 11 percent of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the highest share for former communists in any European parliament. In last year’s regional elections the Communists made major gains, winning two (of 13) regions and forming governing coalitions with the CSSD in ten regions. With the Social Democrats receiving close to a third and the Communists topping 20 percent in polls for the upcoming parliamentary election, the new government seems likely to involve either formal coalition or informal cooperation between these two parties.

However, President Zeman might help derail this simple outcome. Once a Social Democrat, he has established the Party of Citizens’ Rights Zemanovci (SPOZ), which appears likely to pass the five percent threshold and win seats in parliament for the first time. Other possible entrants include the Christian Democrats, the Greens, and a new party, Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011 (ANO 2011), established by billionaire entrepreneur Andrej Babis. Earlier this year he

purchased two of the Czech Republic's most important newspapers, triggering comparisons to Italy's Silvio Berlusconi, a billionaire businessman and press magnate who ended up prime minister. The more divided this month's vote, the more complex the coalition-building necessary to form a government.

Still, the mere possibility of a Communist revival generates concern. Complained Kirchick: "To those Czechs who still recite Havel's 1989 campaign slogan 'Love and truth conquer lies and hatred' without irony, this should be nothing short of a national crisis."

The Czech people long have played an outsize role in Europe. Independence-minded Czechs helped destroy the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A weak Czechoslovakia encouraged German aggression in World War II. In 1968 reformist Czechs staged an early challenge—heroic but forlorn—to Soviet power. Two decades later the next generation helped topple the Evil Empire. In the years since Czech President Vaclav Klaus resisted ever greater centralization of power in Brussels.

Again the Czech people are threatening dramatic action—but in the wrong direction, to hand the Communist Party a share of power. It's not what one would expect of the heirs of the Velvet Revolution. Warned Kirchick: "The return to government of communists in a former Soviet-bloc country would be a jolt for Europe, a blow to the project of improving democracy and free markets—and, in its way, a reflection of the cost of Europe's current turmoil."

The Czech Republic's future obviously is up to the Czech people. That includes choosing their next government. Nevertheless, a free people should ponder carefully before entrusting their future to the party which so badly failed them in the past. Whatever the question, it is hard to imagine the Communist Party to be the answer.