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The Czech left needs to rebuild

32 years after the Velvet Revolution, Czechs are angry — and voting accordingly. Only rebuilding the decimated left can bring hope for the future

At first glance, October's Czech parliamentary elections have given us hope. The electorate showed former prime minister, media mogul, and oligarch Andrej Babiš the door, after he seemed to spend most of his time in office expanding his corporate empire.

But when taking a look at the results in more detail, the picture doesn't look so rosy. The election result wasn't ground-breaking. Babiš didn't actually lose much support from his voter base; he was only voted out because of the comparatively few additional votes for the opposition. If you tally up the votes for the five parties that defeated Babiš against the number of votes for him, the right-wing populist SPD, and several other nationalist protest parties that failed to meet the 5 per cent threshold, then Babiš still has a clear majority. They only lost because their vote was split.

A tale of winners and losers

The elections once again demonstrated that Czech society is divided into two camps. On the surface, they may look like a *pro-Babiš* and *anti-Babiš* camp; the election was widely understood as a referendum on his popularity. However, the division runs much deeper than that. Andrej Babiš is just one symptom, but not the cause, as the study *One society – different worlds* lays out in great detail. Instead, the election result may only lead to these fronts hardening. And if the rifts cannot be healed, the now defeated forces could soon come back stronger and more united.

Where did this conflict in Czech society come from? It depends whether you view the country as having done better or worse since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. Optimists say there have been gains in personal and civil liberties, often neglecting to mention the country's numerous social problems. Critics say that the significant social upheavals since 1989 have made all those freedoms less tangible and pushed them into the

background. This is also because many of the achievements, such as freedom of travel and business, haven't benefitted these social groups, as their economic situation didn't allow them to enjoy these successes.

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It's bad enough that politicians have allowed such inequality to emerge at all. But worse still, this conflict has a massive impact on politics, because the split in the country, as revealed in the election results, essentially boils down to those who won and those who lost out when the Iron Curtain fell – it's just that this hasn't been that clear until now, let alone addressed.

And so the two camps keep talking past each other: The now victorious forces represent the optimists, promising a return to normality, meaning the time just after the Cold War had ended. At that time, their social image – a sinister combination of economic neoliberalism and to some extent cultural liberalism of Western influence – was not yet met with such loud protest.

Now, they don't understand where the protest is coming from. What's significant is that those who took part in the study and belong to this camp place great importance on the role of awareness in countering the polarisation of society. This shows an impressive misunderstanding of those who lost out after the fall of the wall and their very different experience of the transition; it is not simply a matter of laying out the benefits of EU membership – one of the most debated topics between the camps.

Critics, on the other hand, see the past 30 years as a single loss of control – by breaking away from the achievements of a social state that was strong until 1989, but also in a deeper sense as a massive change in the demands on their mentality and identity, as acceleration and dissolution. Their statements show that the freedom celebrated by some isn't a cause of celebration for others. Many of the critics' arguments are unfounded, yet they do contain some justified social criticism. However, since these are largely ignored by politicians and adequate solutions aren't presented, they draw their own conclusions and put their faith in false prophets such as Babiš and his absurd anti-establishment rhetoric, or the nationalists who rally against the refugees.

Giving hope

It still doesn't look like the victorious political forces are prepared to settle this fundamental conflict. On the contrary, it seems that they've

learned nothing. Even during the campaign against Babiš, there was little evidence that they knew how to really change his voters' minds; the fact that he still did well in the election is a testament to this. Nationalist forces are not being taken seriously at all; their voters have been completely abandoned. And now, the election winners are starting to govern with the same agenda that fuelled Babiš and the other protest parties in the first place – a policy of austerity that is likely to hit the already socially and economically disadvantaged hardest, just as it did in the aftermath of the Cold War.

We would rather not imagine the frustration and radicalisation that this might cause in this spectrum in the coming years. After the election, many were relieved believing that the fears that the Czech Republic would go down the same path as Poland and Hungary, which have seen similar political conflict along these lines, had turned out to be unfounded. In fact, the opposite is true. They are perhaps only becoming more and more firmly established in the new political line-up: the neoliberal winners on one side and the increasingly defiant opposition on the other. And there's no compromise in sight because the camps lack any basis for understanding each other.

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There's no doubt about it: the left needs to rebuild its foundation in the months and years to come. It has been decimated, as it has in many other post-communist countries, and has now been completely wiped out – with no representation in the Czech Parliament anymore. It's no coincidence that the left doesn't even play a role in this conflict. It itself was pushed too much in a neoliberal direction. This is the case across Western Europe, but even more so in the post-communist countries, because pre-1989 communism had severely limited the scope for more radical left-wing policy. Moreover, the vast majority of influential elites, including the media, are right-wing liberals. They sense a return to state-socialist totality, even when just proposing the most benign social measures.

What needs to change now?

The left must explicitly become the voice of the those who haven't been able to capitalise on their new freedoms and dare to challenge the neoliberals. The first step is trivial, but at the same time extremely

difficult in reality, because those who've done well throughout the Czech Republic's transition to democracy have not been willing to enter into a differentiated debate on the post-communist period.

People need to talk openly about the fact that not everyone is pleased with the alleged progress, and that they are rightly angry. Not only have they suffered from the upheavals, but they have long been ignored, misunderstood, or even despised. The left must become a champion of repairing the tangible and perceived injustices and develop a positive narrative for the future, which in today' difficult time eases legitimate concerns of further upheavals.

Otherwise, the authoritarian, populist, and nationalist forces will continue to win votes that have so far satisfied the need for sanctuary and respect. This will be anything but simple, but the recent successes of the SPD in East Germany show that, ultimately, this is the only promising way forward. After all, we've seen this before.



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