

Two Cheers for Czech Democracy*

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Abstract

The paper discusses the state of Czech democracy and current research agendas on democracy in the Czech Republic, focusing in particular on the role of political parties. It considers Czech democracy both in relation to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and in the light of the evolving relationship between CEE and Western Europe. It suggests that current CEE states such as the Czech Republic gradually approximating to models of West European-style party politics may need rethinking. It then examines democracy in the Czech Republic in relation to debates on democratic “backsliding”, arguing that in the Czech cases the principal “backsliding” risks lie less in the rise of authoritarian populists than a potential crisis of democratic representation driven by perceptions of corruption. The paper concludes with some suggestions about future avenues for research on Czech and CEE democracy.

Keywords: Czech Republic; Central and Eastern Europe; democracy; political parties

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“So two cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it admits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give three.”

E.M. Forster, “What I Believe”

1. Introduction

Some years ago I attended a conference on democracy in Europe and ended up talking to a very prominent specialist on Russian politics. We had an interesting conversation, but at one point in the evening he turned to me and asked in a slightly worried tone if I realized that the Czech Republic didn’t really matter very much. I appreciated the advice – and I understood it: small, slightly peripheral countries are often considered marginal in comparative politics. They lack inherent geo-political importance and, as Barrington Moore (1966: xxiii) argued, their politics tend to be driven by – or copied from – stronger powers beyond their own borders.

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But the politics of the Czech Republic and Czech democracy do matter. They matter, of course, to citizens and residents of the Czech Republic, whose lives and life chances are directly affected by how the country is governed. However, Barrington Moore notwithstanding, they also matter in other ways, comparatively and theoretically. In this presentation I discuss the state of Czech democracy in relation both to the CEE region and the wider relationship between CEE and Western Europe, focusing in particular on the role of political parties which are central to the process of democratic representation. I will suggest that the model of CEE state “transiting” towards an approximate, if imperfect, model of West European-style party politics may need rethinking but that the dangers of democratic “backsliding” in CEE are real, if potentially overstated. For the Czech Republic this is so less in the rise of authoritarian populists than a potential crisis of democratic representation driven by rising perceptions of corruption and the breakdown of the model of “standard” party and party competition established in 1990s. I conclude with some suggestions about directions that future research on Czech democracy might take.

2. Who Is Catching Up with Whom?

The current malaise or, if we want to use the word, crisis of Czech democracy is part of a bigger picture, both within Central and Eastern Europe and in Europe more widely. Democracies in the reunited Europe, including that of the Czech Republic, are converging but not in ways we might once have imaged. Western European party politics has been presented, implicitly or explicitly, as a model for emulation by the newer democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). A great deal of political science writing about the Czech Republic and the CEE region has been preoccupied with the question of whether – and to what extent – these newer democracies fit models formulated on the basis of the Western European historical experience. There is thus a rich comparative literature asking if CEE institutions as diverse as welfare regimes (Aidukaite 2009), varieties of capitalism (Holscher et al. 2006; Adam et al. 2009) and political parties fit models defined by older, more established democracies (Roberts 2006; Fortin 2008; Hloušek and Kopeček 2010).

Similar assumptions permeate wider discussions about democracy and democratic representation in CEE itself. It is still – to me strikingly – not uncommon for Czech politicians and commentators, for example, to refer the “standard” party (*standardní strana*). This term, coined in the 1990s, which is almost impossible meaningfully to translate into English seems to refer to the ideal of a programmatic party with a national membership structure whose ideology and identity match one or other of the big party families of Western Europe.

But this was always a hard model (or set of models) for CEE to follow. Western Europe’s social and political institutions were shaped by distinct historical legacies of state- and civil society (re-)building, modernization, democratization and booming post-war welfare capitalism, which CEE states did not share. It was also a model which, at least as far as political parties and party-based democracy are concerned, has been gradually unwinding and eroding. As Whitefield and Rohrschneider (2012) have noted, the continuing ability of Western Europe’s established parties to hold together diverse and fluid electorates is largely due to the fact that they are still able to anchor themselves in a declining core of

loyal voters and in the remnants of grassroots mass organization and bases in organized civil society.

If, as parties' slow retreat from civil society to the state suggests, traditional party politics in its Western European heartland is in inexorable decline, there are, as Peter Mair (2013) pointed out, sharp questions to be asked about the future shape of representative democracy in Western Europe. The logic – starkly outlined by Colin Crouch (2005) – is for the emergence of fragmented “post-democratic” societies of apathetic but angry political consumers and indistinguishable elite-based parties dependent on big money and big media.

Paradoxically, in many ways this may mean Western Europe may slowly come to resemble the post-communist East. If, to borrow the conceit of Adam Przeworski (1991: 191), we forget history and geographical location for a moment and put Ireland in the place of Slovakia or Italy in the place of Bulgaria, we see: political parties that are ineffectual at representing and mobilizing a resentful anti-political public; economies in need of reform; welfare services struggling to cope with ageing populations; billionaire populists and oligarchs muscling their way into politics; and politicians struggling to fix a European project whose long-term consequences were not fully understood.

It may be that Western Europe is moving towards a Central and Eastern model rather than vice versa. In years to come the “standard party” for all European democracies may look more like ANO or *Věci veřejné* than German Christian Democracy or the British Labour Party. Indeed a party such as ANO and a politician such as Andrej Babiš already seem to approximate the classic Downsian model of democracy based on the free competition of ideologically pragmatic parties which “might formulate policies in order to win elections rather than win elections in order to formulate policies” (Downs 1957: 28).

So democracy in the Czech Republic and other Central European states matters because – despite differences of context – in important ways it does not fundamentally differ from democracy elsewhere and may, moreover, offer Western Europeans a glimpse of own their future.

3. Backsliding in CEE?

Questions of Czech democracy are also part of a wider debate about the fate of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. There were fears after 1989 that Central and Eastern Europe would quickly lapse into Latin-American style instability and authoritarianism (Greskovits 1998). Adam Przeworski (1991: 191) famously wrote that the “East has become the South” while Vladimir Tismaneanu (1996) believed the region was “waiting for Peron”.

However, contrary to initial expectations Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) emerged globally as one of the most successful democratizing regions. Many states in the region, including the Czech Republic, appeared to achieve rapid domestically-driven consolidation within a few years of the fall of communism. Others did so more slowly and painfully but – seemingly under the influence of prospective European Union membership – made steady progress (Linz and Stepan 1996; Vachudová 2005; Møller 2009).

However, following the 2004–2007 enlargement of the European Union – and particularly since the global economic downturn of 2008–2009 and the onset of the Eurozone crisis –

observers have increasingly started to speak in terms of democratic backsliding or “democratic rollback” in CEE (Rupnik 2007; Merkel 2010; Mungiu-Pippidi 2007; Plattner and Diamond 2007; Ágh 2010): a reversal of earlier democratic gains and the emergence of problems which severely interfere with democratic processes in ways going beyond earlier concerns about low levels of civic disengagement or anaemic civil societies (Rupnik and Zielonka 2013; Mueller 2014). The symptoms of apparent backsliding have varied from country to country – and from commentator to commentator. However, commonly mentioned indicators include:

- Sharp electoral swings empowering some governing parties with absolute parliamentary majorities despite the relatively power-dispersing nature of CEE democratic institutions (Hungary, Slovakia, Romania);
- The willingness of incumbent elites to pursue illiberal projects of constitutional change (conservative-nationalist parties in Hungary, Poland) or to flout constitutional norms to entrench their own power (Romania, Czech Republic);
- The worsening of (perceived) problems of corruption and state capture to the point that levels of distrust lead to a breakdown in public faith in the very notion of democratic representation (Bulgaria) (Ganev 2014);
- The collapse of established mainstream parties and electoral breakthrough of short-lived populist outsider parties leading to cycles of weak and ineffective government (Pop-Eleches 2010; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2014; Hanley and Sikk forthcoming).

4. What Ails Czech Democracy?

How does the Czech Republic measure up in these terms? Czech democracy has not so far suffered from dangerous concentrations of power and does not have strong players with illiberal political visions. There is no Czech Viktor Orbán or Victor Ponta. At the national level there is no party as politically dominant as *Smer* currently is in Slovakia or Fidesz in Hungary – and, tellingly, there never has been. Indeed, Czech political scientists have been more concerned about the failure of the country’s electoral politics and electoral system to generate clear and sustainable parliamentary majorities (Havlík and Kopeček 2008; Balík 2013) than the risks of power concentration.

As in much of Europe, there are of course wells of illiberal sentiments and racism in Czech public opinion and there is certainly electoral potential for radical right populism, although on a comparatively limited scale: research by the Czech Ministry of the Interior and Hungary’s Political Capital think-tank (Ministerstvo vnitra ČR 2010; Political Capital 2014), using somewhat different measures and methodologies, both concluded that the potential for such a party was around 8 per cent. Czech far right parties, however, continue to be singularly politically unsuccessful and electorally marginal (Mareš 2011).

The Czech Republic does, however, have CEE’s most electorally successful radical left party: the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). The KSČM can be (and has been) interpreted as an extremist or anti-system radical party, although this view is disputed. However, even if we accept this characterization, the Czech Communists are extremists of an old fashioned and undynamic sort. While the party’s vote will be resistant to demographic

pressures for some years to come (Linek 2008) – and despite a modest increase in support in the 2013 parliamentary elections – KSČM has limited potential for electoral growth. Even if a favourable constellation emerged, the Czech Communists seem unlikely to ever act as more than a junior coalition partner at the national level, as they currently are in many regional governments.

As developments in recent years in Hungary and Romania underline, it is erstwhile mainstream politicians in government “breaking bad” rather than the rise of radical outsider parties that poses the more serious threat to democracy in CEE. Some commentators have cast Miloš Zeman, the Czech Republic’s first directly elected president, as “one of a new breed of democratically elected populist strongmen (...) deploying the power of the state and a battery of instruments of intimidation to crush dissent, demonize opposition, tame the media and tailor the system to their ends” (Traynor 2013). Domestic critics accused Zeman of initiating the “Putinization” of politics (Müller 2013) already detected elsewhere in CEE (Economist 2010; New York Times 2010).

However, if Zeman’s appointment over the heads of the country’s political parties of the (supposedly) technocratic caretaker government of Jiří Rusnok in July 2013 was an attempt to bend the Czech constitution into a semi-presidential system, it was a notably unsuccessful one. In the end, the experiment in “Zemanocracy” as *Lidové noviny* (26 July 2013) acerbically termed it, once again underlined the weakness of the Czech presidency, even a directly elected Czech presidency, as a vehicle for consolidating political power. If this was “Putinization” it was Putinization-lite.

Both the Czech Republic’s formal institutions – a parliamentary system; a proportional electoral system; a bi-cameral legislature – and its de facto configuration of social and political actors are relatively dispersed and power-dispersing. Indeed, even the country’s clientelistic networks that structure informal politics seem decentralized compared to other CEE states (Klíma 2013). The relatively dispersed spread of power and relative robustness of formal institutions, especially political parties, thus thwarted whatever ambition Zeman may have harboured to become a “Czech Putin” (as well as his more modest – and more democratic – ambitions to unite the Czech left under his personal leadership – Koutník 2012).

5. Corruption, Anti-Politics and Party Government

But Czech democracy appears more troubled in terms of its ability to provide representation, good governance and high quality public goods. Its most deeply rooted problems centre on corruption and more underlying sentiments of injustice viewing political elites as self-serving, untrustworthy and unrepresentative (Smith 2008). According to Gallup polling in 2013, 94 % of Czechs perceived corruption as widespread – higher than in Ghana or South Africa – while 71 % of companies considered corruption to be the main hurdle to doing business in the Czech Republic (Gallup 2013). The country performs less poorly on other indices such Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index (CPI) or the World Bank Control of Corruption Index (CCI), but is still generally mid-low-ranking among CEE EU members.¹ As Innes (2013) notes, such underperformance sits uneasily with the Czech Republic’s high levels of human development and bureaucratic capacity.

As elsewhere in Europe, public perceptions of corruption may outstrip measurable realities. According to Eurobarometer polling, while 95 % of Czech respondents view corruption as widespread, only 28 % claim to be affected by it in daily life (European Commission 2014). However, what matters politically is the social fact of corruption – what people understand to be true regarding the institutions and elites – rather than the difficult-to-grasp and complex reality. Moreover, in some respects the Czech public's sweeping negative judgement seems well grounded. In the field of public procurement – where business and politics intersect most directly and where huge resources are available for capture – levels of corruption in the Czech Republic appear alarmingly high. In 2012–2013 the World Competitiveness Index measure for the corrupt diversion of public funds ranked the Czech Republic 117th of 148 states – below Albania, Romania and Russia – marking a drastic deterioration since 2006–2007 (Schwab 2013: 412).²

High and growing levels of public distrust in the effectiveness and honesty of the political system have had a corrosive effect on established representative institutions and, in particular, on the party system. This is unsurprising. Parties are pivotal institutions for interest aggregation, representation, state-society linkage and accountability in most democracies. This is particularly the case in the Czech Republic, which has (re-)built its post-1989 democracy around the notion of “standard” party politics. The Czech Constitution even goes so far as to state that political parties are the basis of democratic competition and the Czech Constitutional Court has elaborated in some detail the (intended) role of parties as a channel for representation and participation (Ústavní soud 2011).

Indeed the role and status of political parties is central not just legally and constitutionally but has always been at the heart of wider Czech debates about democracy: revealingly all first four democratically elected presidents of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic – Masaryk, Beneš, Havel and Klaus – made well developed contributions to debates about the role of parties. In both elite discourse and at the mass level (see Linek 2004), frustrations with the workings of democracy therefore quickly tend to translate into debates about the (mal)functioning of parties and the party system.

6. An Unravelling Party System

Until quite recently the Czech Republic was one of a number of CEE democracies which appeared to have succeeded in building working approximations of Western European-style party systems: a stable set of core parties with recognisable and consistent ideologies (conservatives, Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, Communists) which, to varying degrees, had laid down organizational roots in society (Deegan-Krause 2006; Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2010; Linek and Lyons 2013). It was even possible to speak of some degree of institutionalization (Casal Bertoa 2011) and (certainly in the Czech context) a fully formed cleavage which “closed” the party system making it a structured, stable and predictable environment (Deegan-Krause 2006) allowing voters to make clear choices and to hold incumbent parties accountable from election to election.

There had been criticisms since at least mid-1990s of the hollow, formal character of Czech democracy and particularly the narrow, closed and overly ideological character of its politi-

cal parties and cultivated weakness of its civil society (see, for example, Pehe 2002). These intensified from the time of collapse of the first Klaus government in December 1997 and the subsequent signing of the 1998 “Opposition Agreement” between the two main parties to allow a minority centre-left administration to assume office. Indeed, the Opposition Agreement is seen by some writers (Tabery 2008; Klíma 2001), as a decisive turning point in the history of Czech post-communist democracy, setting the country on a path towards increasingly corrupt and collusive forms of governance.³

However, events of the last five years have not only underlined the “fragile stability” (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2014) of the Czech party system, but led to more far-reaching claims that a *qualitative transformation* in the character of Czech party democracy has taken place. Parties, it was argued, were no longer to be regarded as programmatic actors or vehicles for political participation but as brokers of clientelistic exchanges between elites. Grassroots membership was largely a façade sustained by non-existent “dead souls” or paid foot soldiers, while ideological differences were feigned or secondary. Innes (2013), for example, regards the Czech party system as a prime example of a “brokerage party system” where “new public policies are largely the by-products of identified opportunities for rent-seeking by allied party and business elites” and in which “brokerage parties (...) instrumentalize the effective mainstream space of ideological competition to *primarily* private ends” (2013: 13, 15; my emphasis). Similarly, Klíma argues (2013: 215) that the post-communist political and social environment has gradually engendered the “emergence of a qualitatively different type of party” which he terms the “clientelistic party”.⁴ Both major post-1989 Czech parties (ODS and ČSSD), he suggests, degenerated into formations of this kind such that the “the *dominant* cleavage that polarized Czech politics in the May 2010 election was the split between civil society and the official political leadership, represented by clientelistically adapted parties” (2013: 223; my emphasis).

Such a drastically changed and corrupted party system is, however, seen as having a self-destructive quality: the rise of corruption as a salient issue leads established parties to haemorrhage voters and members, opening up space for ill-defined, new anti-establishment parties with vague platforms of anti-corruption and reform (*Věci veřejné* in 2010, ANO in 2013) (Hanley and Sikk forthcoming; Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2014). There are obvious consequences for democracy and democratic quality in such a pattern. Repeated breakthroughs by (usually short-lived) anti-establishment parties not only weaken their establishment competitors, but leave coalition governments weaker and less effective, stoking up public discontent, preparing the next wave of anti-establishment protest voting. When, as in the Czech case, new parties are backed by business interests seeking to capture or co-opt the anti-corruption and reform agenda – whose credibility as outsiders is short-lived – this cycle may be still sharper. Such an accelerating spiral of protest, instability and weak governance inevitably makes democratic choices less clear or reduces them to a simplified (and sometime bogus) distinction between old and new parties, or establishment and outsiders. The instability of loosely defined, anti-establishment “project parties” also makes them hard to hold to account if, as is often the case, when they do enter government they simply may not last from one election to the next (Hanley and Sikk forthcoming).

In short, it appears that the Czech Republic’s 20 year-long experiment in Western European style party politics and party government is being cracked apart by a toxic mix of corruption,

socioeconomic frustration and anti-political protest voting. The model we have to fear for the Czech Republic is thus not a Hungarian-style concentration of power in the hands of a dominant ruling party or charismatic populist leader, but a Bulgaria-style breakdown of trust and a rejection of *any and all* parties. If Bulgaria is a harbinger, then cycles of protest voting may, in the end, give way to waves of anti-political civic mobilization disconnected from electoral institutions and processes (Ganev 2014). Indeed, the Czech Republic has already experienced short-lived episodes of similar protest: the “Thank You, Now Go” movement of 1999, the “Television Crisis” protests of 2000–2001 (Dvořáková 2003; Stroehlein 2001) and more recently – and on a smaller scale – the unexpected grassroots resonance in 2012 of the Holešov Appeal (*Holešovská výzva*) launched by an alliance of fringe groupings (Cunningham 2012).

7. Two Cheers for Czech Democracy

The titles of papers at this symposium, many of which include terms such as “crisis”, “failure” and “threat” reflect a concern with what has gone wrong with Czech democracy and, in doing so, tie in with wider debates about backsliding and democratic malaise in Central and Eastern Europe and across Europe generally. It makes obvious sense to ask what has gone wrong and needs fixing, rather than to ask what has gone right. But I would add a small word of caution. As Stephen Runciman (2014) points out in his recently published book *The Confidence Trap*, debates on democracy historically have veered between exaggerated pessimism about irreversible looming decline and exaggerated optimism that democracy is consolidated and triumphant. Debates on the modernization of democracy, he also notes, are almost always framed in terms of “crisis”.

Having understood that Czech and Central European democracy is more troubled, more corrupt and more prone to elite misbehaviour than we might once have hoped, it would be very easy to fall into a darkly populist view of democracy in the region; to take the view that formal institutional structures don’t matter; that ideological and programmatic differences no longer exist; that corrupt elites and interest groups manipulate the democratic process to such an extent that competitive institutions are a mere façade; and that political and economic power are totally fused and lie exclusively in the hands of shadowy economic elites.

Some well-informed journalistic commentators on Czech business and politics sometimes come close to this. Erik Best (2012) writes of the “Five Families” – political/business groups whom he sees as the main holders of power in the Czech Republic. Others write in a similar way of an informal power “cartel” (de Candole 2012). This is excellent and provocative journalism but it is striking that the underlying argument of these commentaries – that a corrupt economic and political elite is conspiring against society behind a facade of democratic competition – are archetypically populist. Although the language is less florid, the basic argumentation strongly reminds me of articles I once read in the extreme right-wing weekly *Republika* in the 1990s when studying Miroslav Sládek and his Republican Party (see Hanley 2012).

This does not necessarily make such analysis wrong. Sládek and his fellow Republicans may have been better – or more prophetic – political analysts than I thought at the time. But it may be leaving out and overlooking the functional and “normal” parts of Czech democracy: that programmatic/ideological divisions have not entirely disappeared; that power is

fragmented and dispersed; institutions are sometimes resistant to politicians; that judges and prosecutors act autonomously; society can mobilise against political elites; that voters are tempted by anti-politics but not by ideological radicalism; that the electorate is rational and seeks democratic reform (see Roberts 2014). The key to understanding a democracy such as that of the Czech Republic is thus perhaps to understand how different and contradictory logics of representation coincide and co-exist.⁵ Indeed, as Morgan (2012) notes in her work on Latin America, such complexity is common in many democratic polities where politicians and parties conventionally rely on a hybrid “linkage portfolio” *combining* programmatic, corporate (interest-based) and programmatic components, shifting between them over time as circumstances dictate.

The English novelist E. M. Forster, in an essay written in 1938, argued that even in times of crisis and uncertainty we should give two (but not three) cheers for democracy. Democratic politics he thought might be corrupt and corrupting – at least for politicians – but it kept its worst excesses in check through criticism and competition and allowed the freedom and diversity needed for a civilized society to develop of its own accord (Forster 1976: 83–90). On this these grounds Czech democracy certainly still deserves two cheers. Czech politics is still a story of democracy, even it is not quite the democratic success story once imagined or is not successful in quite the ways once assumed.

8. How the Czech Republic Really Works

How then should we approach the study of democracy in the Czech Republic and Central Europe more generally in such changed times? It is clearly not enough to say that the glass of water could be seen as half full, as well as half empty. For me there are perhaps two directions political scientists interested in the functioning of political parties and representative institutions in CEE should take, both of which imply developing a stronger sociological sensibility and moving towards what Kubik (2013) terms “contextual holism”.

The first is to focus still more systematically on the relationship between formal and informal structures and particularly on the interplay between these in the democratic process. My colleague at University College London, Professor Alena Ledeneva, is the author of a book called *How Russia Really Works*. The answer to her implied question is, at one level simple: Russia, like other post-communist societies, “really works” through networks and structures of informal governance. Its formal political institutions, while they do matter, are somewhat hollow and subject to manipulation, instrumentalization and evasion (Ledeneva 2006; 2011). The Czech Republic is clearly not Russia: its institutions are more open and democratic; and its formal institutions stronger and more cohesive. Political and elite continuities with the communist era are weaker and traditions of democracy and bureaucratic autonomy stronger (Kitschelt 1999). However, arguably, we need to pose the same question of Central European democracies and ask How the Czech Republic Really Works.

For a long time there has been a yawning gap between the coverage of Czech politics in the media and its coverage by political scientists. For journalists it is an unending story of scandals, corruption and personalized faction-fighting, while for political scientists, until recently, it is largely a matter of formal institutional structures, processes and models. The rich

new vocabulary of politics that started to appear in the Czech media in recent years – *kmotr*, *velrybář*, *černé duše*, *trafika*, *kompro*, *válcování* – has thus proved challenging only to translate not only into English, but also into the language of political science.⁶

In hindsight it is clear that political science research on the Czech Republic has struggled to understand the paradoxical co-existence of formal and informal structures for some time. To take one example, despite using very similar methodologies, Grzymała-Busse (2002) and O'Dwyer (2006) came to quite different conclusions about the Czech political system in their work on parties and the state in CEE. Grzymała-Busse argued that the Czech Republic lacked “robust party competition” – alternation in government between programmatic parties of left and right – resulting in corrupt, party-political exploitation of the state. O'Dwyer, by contrast, concluded that the Czech Republic could be described as a “responsible party system” and that the Czech state administration was developing an ethos of professionalism and bureaucratic independence. Read in parallel, these conclusions at first seem problematic and contradictory. Taken together the two works implied that increasingly professionalized public administration and genuinely programmatic parties existed *in symbiosis* with corrupt political abuse of the state (Hanley 2008).⁷

The erosion of established Czech parties and the rise of new parties since 2010 has moved the debate on somewhat. However, the underlying challenge arguably remains the same: to understand the mix of formal representative politics and less formal (often, corrupt or clientelistic) institutions that characterize Czech democracy. Researchers on informal practices have typologized and framed this relationship in theoretical terms (Lauth 2000; 2004; Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Grzymała-Busse 2010) and, to an extent, illustrated it through elite surveys (Grødeland 2007) and case studies often focusing on police, the judiciary and regulatory agencies (on the Czech Republic see especially Gallina 2011a; 2011b; 2013). Other authors have also identified, often in quite general terms, the mismatch between formally democratic institutions and illiberal or self-seeking political elites in CEE, often presenting elite culture as a master variable explaining the distortion of democracy in the region (Gallina 2007; Innes 2013).⁸ However, in contrast to Latin America (see for example, Levitsky 2001; 2003; Scherlis 2008), there are few in-depth studies of CEE party-based democracy which offer an integrated, holistic view of the operation of formal and informal structures.⁹

This leaves open some central questions including, crucially, that of “who controls whom” – whether parties are clients of informal interest groups or vice versa – and where mass publics and bona fide party members fit in.¹⁰ A further unresolved issue is the extent to which parties in a democracy such as the Czech Republic, where parties are on first examination dominant players benefitting from constitutionally entrenched “power monopoly” as gatekeepers to government office (Kopecký 2006) can, in fact, be regarded as strong collective actors. As Scherlis (2009: 1) suggests (of Argentina) “party organizations can nowadays be understood as webs of networks of office-holding politicians recruited by elected leaders to run the government under their leadership” and there is some evidence that Czech parties are better viewed as semi-coherent elite networks than well concerted exploiters of the state (Kopecký 2012).

The second move that political scientists interested in a democracy such as the Czech Republic might wish to make is to drill down more effectively into party and political organization. There is clearly a range of methods that could be deployed in trying to open the

“black box” of parties’ internal organizational lives and power structures, all of which faces formidable challenges. However, one under-used strategy that might be better and more systematically employed is the well-focused case study capable of drilling into the sub-soil of locality, institution or organization in a theoretically informed way. One of the best studies written in English about Czech politics in the last ten years is Martin Horák’s (2007) book on Prague politics in 1990s *Governing the Post-Communist City*. The book undoubtedly does not capture all the Byzantine intrigues of politics in the Czech capital. However, as a detailed local case study, carefully framed in terms of new institutionalist theory, it does succeed in providing an analytical account of Czech (sub-national) democracy which integrates the working of bureaucracies, politicians and business and teases out the uneven “hybrid” quality of Czech politics and political institutions.¹¹ However, even those more narrowly concerned with the “normal” functioning of specific formal institutions such as a political party can arguably gain from a more ethnographical approach (see, for example Faucher-King 2005). The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, for example, seems to cry out for such an approach given its size and importance and apparent status as distinct, relatively closed, subculture within Czech society (Hanley 2001; see also Enyedi 1996).

9. Roads to Reform?

A realistic and nuanced understanding of how Czech democracy works should not stop efforts to improve it. However, unlike a valence issue such as anti-corruption where the basic goals are widely agreed (cleaner government, less corruption) – the direction of democratic reform is inevitably contested. There are the normative and empirical questions, trade-offs between representation, participation and efficient majority decision-making (Kitschelt 1993), most recently played out in the Czech context in debates over electoral reform and presidentialism (Baliik 2013, Sedo 2013). There is also the related question of which institutions best fit Czech society. This is usually framed in terms of the Czech Republic’s smallness and relative social and ethnic homogeneity, but can also be linked to debates about which types of democratic structure are most susceptible to corruption and state capture.¹²

Most pressing – and tied to both sets of issues – is the question of if (and how) “standard” party competition and party government, which have hitherto been building blocks of Czech democracy, can be rescued and rehabilitated, if indeed they are worth rehabilitating. As the experience of Petr Nečas and the Civic Democrats shows, would-be reformers of established parties can quickly falter in the face of powerful internal interests and irredeemably battered party reputations. New parties offer an obvious alternative route to renewal. Newly formed protest groupings are, however, often ephemeral; easily captured by vested interests; and pose problems for democratic quality. However, research suggests, there are organizational and political routes to their consolidation (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2009; Bolleyer 2013). Nevertheless, it is uncertain whether consolidated new parties, even if not the product of business interests, could overcome the same corrosive environmental factors that ate into the “standard” party democracy established in 1990s.

This leaves the possibility that legislatively and judicially enacted reforms – better regulation of party funding; more enforcement of internal party democracy by the courts; conflict of

interest legislation; electoral reform – might can chart a path to improvement. However, even if the necessary social and political consensus can be assembled, there is a dilemma about how reform might best be introduced. Given the unintended consequences that sweeping institutional changes can bring (well-illustrated by the Czech experience of mass voucher privatization in the 1990s) and the lack of an obvious mismatch between institutions and society in the Czech Republic, an incremental reform strategy of small “easy wins” may be advisable.¹³ At the same time, given the systematic, interrelated nature of many of the problems afflicting parties, the option of a constitutional “big bang” – an approach increasingly recommended by transparency advocates to fight corruption (see, for example, Rothstein 2011) – may be attractive. Indeed, if the unravelling of the Czech party system were to escalate into a full blown party system breakdown on the Italian model (Morgan 2010), such a “big bang” may simply be enacted by events.

Notes:

1. The 2013 CPI ranked the Czech Republic globally as joint 57th (equal with Croatia) with a score of 48 in 2013 CPI, putting it ahead of Slovakia (47) Bulgaria (41) and Romania (43) – and outperforming Italy (43) and Greece (40) but well behind Estonia (68), Poland (60), Lithuania (57), Slovenia (57) and Latvia (53). TI regards scores below 50 as indicating a “serious” problem of corruption. The 2012 CCI produces a very similar ranking with the Czech Republic placed between the same two groups of states.
2. Measure 1.03 Diversion of Public Funds. Of EU member states only Slovakia (138) was worse ranked in 2012–3. A similar sharp deterioration is evident for Hungary, Bulgaria and (from a much higher base) Slovenia. The WCI measure is based on a survey of business executives.
3. As Roberts (2003) suggests such claims may exaggerate the cartel-like character and consequences of the Agreement.
4. He also writes of “(...) a kind of Copernican revolution” taking place in which parties “have set aside their role as intermediaries between a pluralistic society and the state to attach themselves still further firstly to opaque business interests and secondly to the state” (Klíma 2013: 226).
5. Klíma (2013: 231) notes realistically that the “clientelistic party” model he outlines is a theoretical ideal type and that most real life cases will be “(...) transitional states or hybrids”. It is unclear to what extent he regards the Czech case as a paradigmatic illustration of the clientelistic party’ model, however.
6. For example, as Kopecký (2012) notes, the local meaning of the term *klientelismus* which features widely in Czech language writing on Czech politics is not the same as that of clientelism as the term is used in much social science literature in English. As elsewhere in contemporary CEE, the pattern of classical mass clientelism and patronage to “buy” votes is absent in the Czech Republic. As Kopecký’s work shows politicians’ use of patronage to allocate top level administrative posts in the region today is more concerned with securing control than rewarding supporters.
7. The difference is also explained by the fact that O’Dwyer was concerned with vertical accountability – between voters and parties – and Grzymała-Busse with horizontal accountability (parties keeping each other in check; monitoring and auditing institutions).
8. This work echoes the writing on “post-communism” of the early 1990s when expectations regarding the prospects of democracy in CEE were pessimistic (Schöpflin 1994; Tismaneanu 1996). Its stress is, however, more strongly on elite subversion or distortion of democracy, rather than the risk of post-communist societies generating populism and nationalism engendering a Latin American-style breakdown of democracy (for a discussion see Greskovits 1998).
9. In the Czech context, Klíma’s (2013) pioneering study perhaps comes closest.

10. As Katz (2014) notes, issues of accountability and principal-agent relationships in party democracy are already complex without the incorporation of clientelistic informal actors alongside formally constituted players.
11. Horák found that some policy sectors (such as transport planning) in the city government retained a degree of bureaucratic autonomy, while others (zoning in historic centre of Prague) quickly succumbed to the influence of corrupt vested interests embedded in local party politics.
12. Carsten Q. Schneider (2003) argues that the key to democratic success in post-communist societies is to have centralized rather than power-dispersing institutions, cutting down the space open to exploitation by informal actors in the absence of well-developed civil society.
13. I take this point from Andrew Roberts's contribution to a roundtable on political reform at the 10th Czech Political Science Symposium, Brno 3 April 2014.

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