



From Paris to Prague: what lessons for socialists?

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The historically low score of Česká strana sociálně demokratická (hereafter ČSSD), the Czech social-democratic party, in the recent general elections, was welcomed with shock not only in the Czech Republic, but also abroad: how can a government presiding over one of the EU's most prosperous economies be treated so defiantly in the polls? With a mere 7,27% of votes and 15 MPs, ČSSD has lost, since the last elections in 2013, more than 13% of votes (approximately 648 000 voters), 35MPs and about 4.6M€ of financing. This electoral debacle is comparable in proportion of the loss suffered by the French Socialist Party (hereafter PS), and the future of both parties is now equally in jeopardy, up to the necessity of selling real estate holdings and restructuring the party's organization and human resources.

ČSSD has fallen prey to some of the same dynamics – some structural, some circumstantial – that dearly cost the PS in the spring of 2017.

First and foremost, ČSSD, during its four years in power, was seemingly never able to find a balance between following the more traditional tenets of its social policies, fostering increased solidarity domestically and the European level, a field represented by Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and Foreign Minister (and campaign leader) Lubomir Zaoralek, and a more protectionist, and sometimes anti-EU, tendency embodied by Minister of Interior Milan Chovanec. The prevalence of the protectionist and Eurosceptical discourse in the campaign put ČSSD at a disadvantage over other candidates carrying this message: first and foremost Andrej Babiš, the winner, towards whom more than a quarter of ČSSD voters flocked, a tendency prevalent especially in voters with lower incomes and those above 60. On the reverse side, the younger, intellectual class protested this loss of progressive positioning by choosing en masse the Pirate Party, which ended in a surprising third position with 10,79%.

This lack of clarity and direction inside the party was driven largely by the weakness of the mandate of PM Sobotka and therefore his lack of power to imprint a clear direction to the party, which led to intra- ČSSD infighting for almost the whole course of his mandate. Parallels with France are here painfully obvious: the beginning of François Hollande's mandate showcased the quasi-incompatibility of the various factions of the PS to work together, while the management of his transition away from power was all but botched, leading to a party primary that mobilized only the most leftist electorate, the one that felt that Manuel Valls' three-year tenure as PM was a renunciation of traditional socialist tenets. While ČSSD has vowed to be in "hard opposition" to a Babiš-led government, it has not fully outruled participation in a governmental coalition, which could further delay the necessary internal debate on the ideological line of the party. With multiple sociologists and ex-party

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leaders pointing to this lack of clarity, the choice seems to be an urgent one to make for ČSSD if it wants to fare well at the senatorial elections in 2019 and maintain a weight in the country's political process. The PS is not any closer to laying out an opposition plan, mired in financial trouble and in the absence of party leadership, and uncomfortably squeezed on the one side by Emmanuel Macron's En Marche movement and the extreme-left France Insoumise.

Both parties' downfall was also accentuated by the fact that the electoral field was stacked with charismatic, one-man-party candidates, who carried a strong anti-system message with varied approaches towards the necessity of protectionism in today's globalized economy. It seems clear that both ČSSD and the PS were not able to furbish arguments to respond to these challenges, on top of lacking a candidate that could personally embody a forward-looking vision. It seems that both parties were unable to dictate topics towards the lower income voters, those who are more vulnerable in today's labor market and less socially and economically resilient. Even had they done so, it would perhaps have been at the detriment of some historical core values of progressivism that someone like Macron is able to do due to his almost non-existent partisan past.

Looking forward, it is now clear that ČSSD and the PS are facing an uphill battle in reconquering the electorate, or at least certain segments of it. While certain blocks of voters remain staunchly socialist in the Czech Republic and France alike (public servants, teachers, mid-level earners), there is a demonstrated need to find the themes that will foster the creation of new audiences for the progressive policies of the future. In France, Macron has captured an audience around the themes of the environment, culture, or digital economy, issues that were traditionally devoted to the PS. It is from maintaining the historical strength of the party, the local implantation in regions, that the two parties will be able to regain their footing and their connection with citizens, and beat the challenge of anti-system appeals while laying the basis for 21st century progressive thinking. The future of labour, especially, should inspire rich exchanges between the PS and ČSSD, or more generally with Central European progressive forces.