

ODS od Klausea do Nečasa: brytyjskie inspiracje tożsamości, ideologii i wizerunku

Abstract

Over last decades, and quite in line with an almost global trend, the Czech party system has been undergoing a shift towards more fragmentation, increasing voter volatility, decreasing party stability, erosion of party-society linkages and ever more personalised politics. As a part of this, ideologies have become vaguer and shallower. The Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) has probably been the most successful right wing political party in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. This paper attempts to identify the British inspirations over the various stages of the ODS's development and follow the changing interplay in the "triple i" triangle of ideology-identity-image.

Key words: right-wing political parties, ideology, identity, image, Czech Republic, United Kingdom

Streszczenie

W ciągu ostatnich dekad, zgodnie z ogólnościowymi trendami, system partyjny w Republice Czeskiej zmierzał ku większej fragmentacji, zmienności decyzji wyborców, mniejszej stabilności partii politycznych, erozji związków partii ze społeczeństwem i personalizacji polityki. Częścią tych zmian było spłylenie i rozmycie partyjnych ideologii. Wśród prawicowych partii w nowych demokracjach Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej, czeska Obywatelska Partia Demokratyczna (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) przez długi czas odnosiła największe sukcesy. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje brytyjskie inspiracje na różnych etapach rozwoju ODS i śledzi zmienne interakcje w partyjnym trójkącie ideologii, tożsamości i wizerunku.

Słowa kluczowe: prawicowe partie polityczne, ideologia, tożsamość, wizerunek, Republika Czeska, Wielka Brytania

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The ODS from Klaus to Nečas: British inspirations as a matter of identity, ideology and image

Introduction

The Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) has probably been the most successful right wing political party in the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It has been the only case in this region that a single political party has persisted, without changing its name and with full organisational continuity, as the main right wing party in its country for the whole post-communist history. The ODS has indeed played the role of the right wing leader since the concept of right–left competition was established in the country in the early 1990s.

This success is not coincidental. As several authors have noted (see below), right wing parties in CEE have been strongly ideological. This is particularly the case of the ODS. Founded in 1991 and lacking any historical tradition (unlike the other core parties of the Czech party system: Social democrats, Communists and Christian democrats), this party needed something substantially more than a strong leadership to survive its own foundational period. And it has been a distinct ideology which constantly provided this integrative power.

The role of the party's founder Václav Klaus was crucial in articulating and promoting this ideological mix. And, in doing so, some British inspirations (notably his ties to the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher) had an extremely important impact. The ideology was such a significant feature of the party that it has even become a matter of political identity, with its "British factor" quite indispensable.

Over last decades, and quite in line with an almost global trend, the Czech party system has been undergoing a shift towards more fragmentation, increasing voter

volatility, decreasing party stability, erosion of party-society linkages and ever more personalised politics. As a part of this, ideologies have obviously become vaguer and shallower. In the case of ODS, this is when the “image aspect” comes into forefront. Images and self-images become continuations and functional substitutes of weakening ideologies and identities (or at least their supplements). And again, the British colours in this ODS’s image-making are easily discernible.

What specifically are the British inspirations in the politics of the ODS? In addition to leaders’ examples and emulation (Klaus-Thatcher, Topolánek-Cameron) there is the European attempt to establish cooperation between the parties (the ODS and the Conservative Party). Moreover, since the party’s very foundation, the ODS has been strongly attracted by British political institutions, particularly the “first past the post” electoral system and the Westminster system tradition of single party cabinets. Britain has also become a highly symbolic visualisation for one of the ODS’s main foreign policy principles, i.e. its strong Atlanticism. In this, without much exaggeration, the UK has always played a role of a window to the USA for the ODS.

In this paper I am trying to identify the British inspirations over the various stages of the ODS’s development and follow the changing interplay in the “triple i” triangle of ideology-identity-image.

Period of Ideology. Early to mid-nineties

As Seán Hanley, Aleks Szczerbiak, Tim Haughton and Brigid Fowler have pointed out that the key factors in centre-right party success in post-Communist CEE have been “(a) the presence of cohesive elites able to act as the nucleus of new centre-right formations; and (b) the ability of such elites to craft broad integrative ideological narratives that can transcend diverse positions and unite broad swathes of centre-right activists and voters” (Hanley et al. 2008: p. 407).

I am going to focus on exploring the second half of their assertion. As for the first part, the case of the ODS founded in 1991 basically as a “one-man-party”, and dominated by strong Václav Klaus’s leadership at least until the first intra-party tensions in the mid-1990s, is a particularly good example of an extraordinarily cohesive nucleus (e.g. unlike fragmented and highly competitive Polish right wing post-Solidarity elites).

Coming back to ideology, Hanley et al. are emphasising the aspect of *breadth*, defined as “the ability to construct an inclusive electoral entity that encompasses a socially

and ideologically broad range of voters and subgroups” (Hanley et al. 2008: p. 409). In their account, the success of Hungary’s Fidesz (*high breadth, medium durability*) is ranked higher than Czech Republic’s ODS (*medium breadth, high durability*; Hanley et al. 2008: p. 429).

In my rather durability-centred approach, stressing the ODS’s *continuous* right wing hegemony in 1991–2012 (as compared to Fidesz’s “late takeover” only after 1998 election), I am going to focus on some aspects of surprisingly successful *narrowness* in the right wing parties’ ideological arsenal. Hanley, Szczerbiak, Haughton and Fowler are correct to point out that the ODS’s ideological message based on “imported Anglo-American New Right ideas” (Hanley et al. 2008: p. 427) and on clearly profiled neo-liberalism has been significantly narrower than Viktor Orbán’s mixture of citizenship (*polgár*) principles and national-conservative-populist ideas. Over the two decades, similarly to Fidesz, the ODS has undergone considerable development and shifts as far as its ideological profile is concerned. After all, it is exactly this ideological *flexibility* in time (which is not incompatible with *narrowness*) that will be explored in this paper.

On the other hand, even if we stick to the ODS’s ideological *narrowness* in the initial phase of the “Period of Ideology” there was some crucial overlap between (a) the very limited ideological base and (b) the time context and setting. By this context and setting I mean the prevalent Czech post-Communist mindset and (post-)transformational aspirations consisting of an almost total rejection of the legacy of Communism (and, together with this, also socialism, or broadly speaking, the left) and the call for a rapid and unconditioned “return to the West” and “return to Europe”.

As Czech social scientist and philosopher Pavel Barša put it, for Czechs during the late Communism, “West” was an imagined concept, a myth, a utopia, a “non-place” into which they were projecting their hopes (Barša 2009). My point is that for a newly established right wing political party, lacking any historical tradition or continuity, it was extremely promising to connect this highly abstract notion of West with a more specific representation of this ideal. And it is no coincidence that in the first place (at least in the European context) it was Great Britain which was most preferred and best available.

There was not only the well-known personal-ideological linkage of Václav Klaus’s admiration for Margaret Thatcher¹. Also some structural factors should be paid

¹ Which seemed to be reciprocal: “It is equally flattering to be asked to perform a kind of duet with Mr Vaclav Klaus. I suspect it will even be quite harmonious, since he is in a way one of my heroes. Mr Klaus will be remembered for many achievements during his immensely creative and

attention to. First, in searching for foreign (Western) examples to follow, very clearly profiled right wing parties were needed. Softer, more centrist, Christian Democratic options were not available for several reasons: the strong anti-third-way bias of that time (a political discourse constructed primarily by the ODS and Václav Klaus; thus the foreign example had to be compatible with this campaign), the secular character of the ODS and, related to this, the fact that the Christian Democratic option had already been taken by another Czech party (People's Party with its continental European linkages). "As some of you may know, the Civic Democratic Party was founded in 1991 as a first broad-based, not exclusive, not just a single, narrow constituency representing political party in the Czech Republic as well as in Central and Eastern Europe which **clearly, without hesitation and without any qualifications declared its position on the right of the political spectrum**, a party which admired Margaret Thatcher and British Conservative Party, a party which originally wanted to use the same name. Our intention was to demonstrate that we did not want to belong to the predominantly Christian Democratic Central Europe. We looked for inspiration to the Anglo-American political style and ideas and this is where we keep staying" (Klaus 2002, emphasis in original).

Second, Britain was also the only European country into which the ODS could project its strong Atlanticism. In this sense, the UK played a role of a symbolic bridge to the USA. It was a part of the then popular story about Reagan's and Thatcher's almost personal victory over Communism. "It is not an exaggeration to say that the melting down of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was initiated in Great Britain in the year 1979 by the election victory of the Conservative party and Margaret Thatcher" (Klaus 2006).

In a way, Great Britain was even "a more perfect mirror" of the US. The "concentrated" Westminster system (i.e. a parliamentary regime with executive power predominance) and its competitive democracy was much closer to the majoritarian style of Václav Klaus as the Czech Prime Minister than the American "checked and balanced" presidentialism with much more fragmented and multi-level pattern of power. Also, the fresh Czech memory of a failed federation was more compatible with British unitary (and at that time still centralised) government than the complex American federalism². To add one common feature of nearly all Anglo-Saxon democracies, the ODS has al-

successful term as Czech Prime Minister" (Thatcher 1998).

² In connection to this, it should be added that later in 2000, the ODS was strongly opposed to introducing the regional self-government and staunchly in favour of having the municipalities as the only level.

ways pushed and supported introducing a “British” single member plurality electoral system, dreaming of a two-party system and one-party cabinets.

Third, and more specifically, in the early 1990s Thatcherism was an ideal referential framework for the Czech(oslovak) neoliberal architects of a thorough and rapid economic transformation from central planning to the market economy “without adjectives” (as opposed to the social-liberal, social-democratic and Christian-democratic ideal of “social market” economy). Moreover, and luckily enough for Czech-British reference making, some quite similar issues and challenges were on agenda: large-scale privatisation, deregulation of economy, dealing with mining industry, railways, health care system, etc.

Nothing illustrates the significance of the British inspiration in constructing the Czech right wing political discourse in the early 90s better than the following quote: “Influenced by Margaret Thatcher, I succeeded in persuading the Czech people in the early nineties that we had to restore capitalism. I was proud to say that I was a Thatcherist. I founded a party which admired Margaret Thatcher and British Conservative Party, a party which originally wanted to use the same name” (Klaus 2006).

Period of Identity. From “Sarajevo” to the end of Klaus’s leadership

The previous, highly ideological phase coincided with the initial Czech transformational optimism and enthusiasm, amounting to a peculiar kind of Czech exceptionalism. These feelings of Central European primacy, at times even superiority and “not belonging” to the rest of post-Communist countries were underpinned by a self-image of a Central European tiger, which seems to have been acknowledged even by the “British teachers” themselves, who participated in crafting this image of a success story. “It is in keeping with that tradition of industrial prowess that the Czech Republic today is the outstanding economic success story of Central Europe: where others have flinched under the pressures of free enterprise reform, Vaclav Klaus — my other favourite Prime Minister — has kept going down the right track. And the results are internationally recognised and admired” (Thatcher 1996).

By mid-nineties, however, this optimism had faded in the Czech Republic and after 1997 it was entirely swept by a deep crisis, dramatic disillusionment, famously called by that time president Václav Havel as “depressed mood” (*blbánálda*). From the point of view of the ODS as then governing party, the crisis was

triple. First, there was economic slowdown which resulted in Prime Minister Klaus having to admit publicly the existence of some serious problems and respond to them by a series of austerity steps, “packages of economic measures”. This was an unpleasant shock right after the official doctrine of transformational success and optimism.

Second, there was the first serious intraparty crisis in the ODS, leading to a split after so called “Sarajevo Coup” when a group of challengers publicly called Václav Klaus to resign because of the party’s funding scandal at the time when he was on a state visit to Bosnia. The conflict had been preceded by increasing tensions within the ODS’s leadership concerning, among other issues, the European policy of the party. Klaus’s ever stronger euroscepticism clashed with more pro-European attitudes of his minister of foreign affairs - Josef Zieleniec whose ambitions had been to participate more actively on the formulation of foreign policy. Zieleniec’s views were also shared by the “Sarajevo group” who eventually left the party to found clearly eurooptimist Freedom Union.

Third, the less apparent, underlying crisis was caused by the gradual disintegration of the myth described above, the realisation that Europe is a real entity rather than imaginary utopia. This almost Weberian process of *Entzauberung* was accelerating during the intensive accession negotiations between the Czech Republic and the EU.

The change of mood was reflected in the unified, ever more centralised post-Sarajevo ODS in which the personal Klaus’s euroscepticism came fully into the forefront. Sean Hanley characterises this change as “a shift from a euroscepticism stressing neo-liberalism and Czech and Central European distinctness to one stressing the defence of “national interests” against German inspired Eurofederalism” (Hanley 2004: p 513).

British inspirations are obvious. Firstly and most significantly, it was the matter of re-framing the political discourse. The vocabulary of British euroscepticism was adopted and concepts almost never used before in the country, such as *superstate*, *national interest*, *national identity*, *state sovereignty*, were domesticated in the Czech political language.

In addition to this, one of the most representative and best profiled party documents of that time, “The Manifesto of Czech Eurorealism”, comes up with a weird and completely implausible construct of a linkage between “the main stream of modern Czech politics, embodied by the continuity of efforts of Palacký, Havlíček and Masaryk” and “the Anglo-Saxon traditions of liberal conservatism” (Zahradil et al. 2001: p. 4).

Period of Image. The ODS under Topolánek

The previously described period, in which the initial ideological input spilled over to another level and was socialised within the party as a matter of identity, was marked by hardening euroscepticism, rising nationalism and conservatism. The peak of this period was the failed 2002 parliamentary election in which this new ODS's ideological brand proved highly incompatible with its voter profile. The party's aggressive campaign demobilised its typical young urban well-off supporters. The unsuccessful leader, Václav Klaus, was successfully launched to Czech presidency in 2003 and replaced by Mirek Topolánek as the party leader.

The new chairman's repositioning of the ODS resembled to some degree the David Cameron's efforts in the leadership of the Conservative Party. Both leaders moderated their parties and moved them slightly to the centre (or, at least, highlighted their catch-all character). In consequence, they succeeded in leading them out of isolation (in *both* cases resulting in a coalition government). The ideological purity was replaced – or at least supplemented – by a pragmatic stress on change and reform. Flexibility and modernity, facing global challenges – these were the new mottos. In the Czech case, such a “newism” and “changeism” was, however, not incompatible with the older layer of reformist and transformational ethos from the early 1990s.

As a part of the above mentioned shifts, the parties entered some unorthodox domains. A quote from David Cameron's statement following the joint Cameron-Topolánek declaration proposing a new group in the European Parliament is telling: “the environment doesn't respect national boundaries and it is right that the EU should take a lead. Yet we are failing to meet that challenge. Europe's Kyoto target is to reduce carbon emissions by 8% by 2012. But with just six years to go, carbon emissions are down by less than 1%. Twelve member states have actually gone backwards and increased their emissions. The EU as a whole is set to miss its Kyoto target. That is not good enough and it's got to change” (*Cameron Euro* 2006). Whereas Cameron opened up the environmental issues, the Topolánek's ODS opened for an alliance with the Green Party and formed a three party governing coalition in 2006. For Klaus it was an anathema, and he let his position be publicly known, repeatedly and bitterly criticising this move.

The originally narrow Thatcherism-inspired the ODS's ideology, later solidified by the party's “eurorealist” identity, now gradually became much more eclectic, vaguer and shallower. Formerly so authentic and intensive ideological formulas eroded over time, deliberately neglected by the new leadership, until they became completely routinised.

And in an ever more media centred and personalised Czech politics, it was *images* that replaced and functionally substituted the ideological or identity-based messages.

This softening of ideology led to conflicts within the party (e.g. concerning the Lisbon Treaty) in which the honorary chairman of the party, Czech President Klaus, was increasingly involved. Eventually, his role was also crucial in overthrowing the Topolánek's cabinet in 2009.

Topolánek was aware of the risks of his new pragmatism. His British partnership, the frequency of showing publicly together with Cameron, the MER initiative, leading the ODS out of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats alliance, and the establishment of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group in the European Parliament, all can be interpreted as an image-making strategy aimed to pre-empt Klaus's (and his followers' in the ODS) attacks on Topolánek's "heretic" leadership. Another part of this pre-emption was a re-emphasis on neo-liberalism, leading, *inter alia*, to the introduction of the flat tax.

Subsequent Nečas's leadership can be understood as a kind of middle way: partial return to Klaus's heritage, but without completely abandoning Topolánek's achievements. However, it is primarily the weaknesses of both the party and its leader which best characterise this period.

Conclusions

Broadly speaking, the period of image continued under Nečas's leadership despite some half-hearted attempts at ideological revival. What definitely remains, however (and is a continuous link over all three periods of the ODS's short history), are the British inspirations and linkages. The most recent development, the British-Czech attitude to the European fiscal pact, is another example of this evergreen feature of the ODS's politics.

I have tried to interpret the success of the ODS in terms of a "triple i" sequence: (1) a strong British inspired **ideological** input in the initial phase, which (2) later spilled over onto a deeper level and was solidified/socialised as a matter of **identity** (accompanied with re-discovering the eurosceptic part of the Thatcherite ideological mix), and which (3) yet later eroded and mutated into a matter of political **image** serving partly as a cover for blunt pragmatism, partly as a shield of pre-emption against the ideologues' attacks.

It is probably the lack of the ODS's own historical traditions which motivated the party to search for Western political examples. And among those available, for several reasons explored above, the UK and its Conservative Party proved to be the most suitable choice.

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