

THE CZECH PARTY SYSTEM AFTER THE 2021 ELECTION – DEVELOPMENT CONTINUITY AND THE NOVELTY OF BLOC COALITIONS

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to make a typological determination of the Czech party system after the 2021 parliamentary elections. The change in election format, and the increase in the number of relevant actors in the previous elections in 2017 and the subsequent formation of two electoral coalitions for the 2021 elections confront analysts with the question of how to deal with these phenomena in the context of long-term trends in the Czech party system. Based on Leonardo Morlino's typology, we conclude that the Czech party system in the reviewed period exhibits characteristics of its neo-polarized pluralism type and, according to Steven Volinetz's typology, which works with the involvement of electoral coalitions alone, of the bipolar extended multipartism type.

Keywords: Czech Party System, Election, Typology, Competition, Multipartism, Morlino, Wolinetz

Introduction

The Czech party system underwent a fundamental transformation after the elections in 2010, 2013 and especially 2017, and witnessed a limited continuity after 2021 elections. The partial replacement of the existing systemic actors and the change of their configuration, combined with the gradual increase in the overall number of actors up to the highest number of nine achieved following the October 2017 parliamentary election, marked

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a crucial element of discontinuity in the systemic format. By contrast, at the mechanism level, partial but significant elements of continuity may be observed, especially in the form of a one-dimensional simplification of partisan competition, and the tendency towards bipolar power alternation. The emergence of new actors has also multiplied the relevant systemic cleavages, but it has not resulted in the multidimensionality of the political competition among parties or centripetal tendencies.

Following the latest parliamentary election in 2021 we observe continuity and deepening of these tendencies, but under the circumstances of a quite radical change, which manifested itself in the relevant system actors forming coalitions; this confronts us with the question as to whether it is the individual parties or their electoral coalitions who have become the new relevant system actors. However, in connection with a complete change of government after the election at the end of 2021, another possible and more permanent phenomenon of Czech politics is coming to the fore in the form of party actors forming blocs based on the principle of systemic bipolarity. While this tendency is new in terms of execution, favorable conditions for its emergence have been present in the system for a long time, since the 2006 parliamentary election at the latest, albeit in a completely different system format.

These facts may confuse us when trying to classify the Czech party system after the last two Chamber of Deputies elections, but they are not inexplicable from the point of view of political theory. We try to explain them using concepts proposed by renowned authors, building on the hegemonic approach of Giovanni Sartori, a classic of world political science, and his analysis of party systems. As far as typological determinations are concerned, the approaches of Peter Mair, Leonardo Morlino and Steven Wolinetz are applied for their ability to complement the Sartorian perspective, where it reaches its limits in terms of its explanatory power *vis-à-vis* empirical reality.

Evolution of the Actors and Functional Characteristics of the Czech Party System until 2021

For a long time, specifically since the initial stable format emerged during the 1996 elections, the Czech party system could be described as being on the borderline between Sartori's moderate and extreme multipartism types in terms of the number of relevant parties (five to seven) and, as for the mechanism, right between the logic of moderate and polarized pluralism as conceived by Sartori.² The smaller number of relevant actors, and the tendency towards right-left bipolarity had long implied moderate pluralism.³ By contrast, polarized pluralism is characterized by the great ideological distance between the two strongest parties and the existence of an isolated relational anti-system actor in the form of the Communist Party (KSČM).⁴

The changes in the party-system format that began with the 2010 Chamber of Deputies election and gained far greater traction after the early elections in October 2013 were prompted by a revision of these conclusions, especially in terms of the assessment of the relevant actors and their numbers.⁵ After the 2013 election and the subsequent formation of Bohuslav Sobotka's government that relied on a coalition of the ČSSD (*Česká suverenita sociální demokracie*, Czech Sovereignty of Social Democracy), ANO (Yes), and KDU-ČSL (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Československá strana lidová*, Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party), it was emphasized that even the presence of a seemingly centrist coalition and a hypothetical both-sided opposition in the form of the right-wing parties TOP 09 (*Tradice Odpovědnost Prosperita*, Tradition Responsibility Prosperity) and ODS (*Občanská demokratická strana*, Civic Democratic Party) on the one hand and the relatively isolated actors KSČM and Okamura's Úsvit (Dawn) with minimal coalition potential on the other hand did nothing to strengthen the logic of polarized pluralism; the connection between the parties consisted of

² Giovanni Sartori, *Strany a stranické systémy* [Parties and Party Systems] trans. Jiří Kohoutek, Petr Tomáš (Brno: CDK, 2005).

³ Pavel Pšeja, *Stranický systém ČR* [The Party System of the Czech Republic] (Brno: CDK, 2005).

⁴ Giovanni Capoccia, "Anti-System Parties: A Conceptual Reassessment," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 14, No. 1 (2002): 9-35.

⁵ Stanislav Balík and Vít Hloušek, "The Development and Transformation of the Czech Party System After 1989," *Acta Politologica* 8, No. 2 (2016).

their opposite position to the previous Nečas's government and its restrictive budget policy, which does not mean, however, that there were not significant ideological differences and personal differences between the parties involved.⁶ Firstly, until the 2017 election there was no massive voter outflow from the ruling parties to the opposition parties; on the contrary, we can talk about dominant voter shifts especially between the parties of the ruling coalition, especially from the ČSSD to ANO, but there was no massive strengthening and radicalization of the right-left opposition.⁷ By contrast, from the formal point of view, one actor was partially replaced (Úsvit was formally replaced by SPD, *Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, Freedom and Direct Democracy) in an highly similar ideological and systemic position, and the emergence of completely new formations with no ideological equivalent (especially the Czech Pirate Party) not only meant an outflow of votes from the ruling parties, but also from the opposition parties.⁸

At the same time, it should be noted that in terms of the characteristics of the actors, there was virtually no radicalization toward isolated anti-system positions on the account that the two most prominent candidates for such a position (SPD and KSČM) were involved in the formation of the government majority after the 2017 election.⁹ SPD was founded by Tomio Okamura, former leader of Úsvit, in 2015 and is based on the nationalist appeals and rhetoric and could be categorized as nationalist populist party. It is therefore necessary to pay more detailed attention to the evolution of the format and mechanism of the Czech party system after this election

⁶ Lubomír Kopeček, and Petra Svačinová, „Kdo rozhoduje v českých politických stranách? Vzestup nových politických podnikatelů ve srovnávací perspektivě“ [Who decides in Czech political parties? The rise of new political entrepreneurs in a comparative perspective] *Středoevropské politické studie* 17, no. 2, (2015): 178-211.

⁷ Michal Škop, „Babiš a Okamura vysáli levici, od TOP 09 se přebíhalo k ODS, míní analytik,“ [Babiš and Okamura swiped the left, from TOP 09 it switched to ODS, says the analyst] October 23 2017, *iDnes.cz* (online), accessed November 24, 2024, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/presuny-hlasu-volici-strany-volby-2017-ekologicka-inference.A171023_153934_domaci_ale.

⁸ Sartori, *Strany a stranické systémy*, 135-151.

⁹ Perna Singh, „Populism, Nationalism and Nationalist Populism,“ *Studies in Comparative International Development* 56 (2021): 250-269, DOI: 10.1007/s12116-021-09337-6.

taking into the account the two fundamental functional characteristics, namely the dimension and direction of inter-party competition (Table 1).

The Competition Dimension

Until 2013 many observers agreed that the right-left socio-economic axis was in essence the only crucial dimension of inter-party competition. The other party options amounted to specific cleavages, representing the *cul-de-sacs* of party competition.¹⁰

The first relevant actor of the Czech Party System based on the populist split (elite/anti-elite) was Věci Veřejné Party (Public Affairs Party) in 2010 with 10,88% but it did not become a dominant part of the system. In 2013, for the first time, the *establishment versus anti-establishment* protest axis made a significant impact in the form of the ANO movement establishing itself as the second strongest party in the system.¹¹ The subsequent entry into government of the ANO (which would be categorized as a business-firm or entrepreneurial party according to the concept of Jonathan Hopkin and Caterina Paolucci) movement alongside the victorious ČSSD, however, temporarily neutralized the ANO movement's position in terms of its ability to disrupt the dominance of the right-left socio-economic axis, as the dominant inter-party center continued to be situated between the parties of the ruling coalition, especially the ČSSD and ANO, and the right-wing opposition, which during 2014-2017 was already dominated by the TOP 09, led (*de facto* and later formally) by Miroslav Kalousek.¹² Nonetheless, the efforts of Kalousek's TOP 09, aimed in particular at the axis of the main inter-party conflict, against the then Finance Minister and ANO 2011 chairman Andrej Babiš, attempting to make him and his controversies the central theme determining the dominant dimension of the inter-party competition, were essentially to no avail in the 2017 election as the ANO movement had effectively assumed the position previously held by left-wing parties within the right-wing socio-economic spectrum and its competition with the right-wing opposition thus in

¹⁰ James Toole, "Government Formation and Party System Stabilization in East Central Europe," *Party Politics* 6, No. 4 (2000): 441-461.

¹¹ Andreas Schedler, "Anti-political-establishment Parties," *Party Politics* 2, No. 3 (1996): 291-312.

¹² Jonathan Hopkin, and Caterina Paolucci, "The Business-firm Model of Party Organisation: Cases from Spain and Italy," *European Journal of Political Research* 35 (1999): 307-339.

most part took place in the same dimension as the until then dominant conflict between the left and the right.¹³ The dominant electoral shifts between the existing relevant parties took place within the two notional blocs of the right-left socio-economic axis, *i.e.*, from the ČSSD and KSČM to ANO 2011 and from the TOP 09 to ODS. On the electoral shifts between parties in the 2017 election. It can be said that in 2017 the *establishment versus anti-establishment* axis in 2017 was mainly felt on the left side of the spectrum, while the right side was only partially affected. However, this did not change anything about the fact that the dominant electoral agenda of the victorious ANO movement meant such a significant shift to the left in 2017 that the dominance of Babiš' movement did not in any way disrupt the main dimension of the inter-party competition in the form of the right-left socio-economic axis.

The presence of other brand-new actors in the party system and the divides from which they sprang have not (as of yet) changed anything about the dominance of the right-left socio-economic axis. The *nationalism versus cosmopolitanism* line is essential for SPD's electoral gains, the *materialism versus post-materialism* line for the Pirates, *religion versus secularism* for the KDU-ČSL, and the ideological concept of *politics versus anti-ideological technocracy* (supplemented by regionalism) for the STAN (*Starostové a nezávislí*, Mayors and Independents). STAN has been represented in the parliament since 2010, for the first time STAN was a member of the TOP09 candidate group, the members of the STAN movement were nominated by TOP 09. However, neither of these dimensions fundamentally affected the competition between other political parties in other dimensions and therefore did not undermine the dominance of the right-left socio-economic axis.¹⁴

Direction of Competition

¹³ Cf., Skop.cz (online), "Electoral maps 2017", accessed November 24, 2024, www.skop.cz.

¹⁴ Otto Eibl, Miloš Gregor, Vlastimil Havlík, Petr Voda, Peter Spac, Jakub Šedo, Veronika Dostálová, Petr Dvořák, *Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny v roce 2017* [Elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2017] (Brno: CDK, 2019).

As conceived by Sartori, spatial competition is characterized by the configuration of actors and the ideological distances between them, or by the space of electoral expansion. In the case of the Czech party system, it has long been pointed out that there is a relatively high degree of polarization within the party system. The one-dimensional simplification, *i.e.*, the narrowing down of the dominant framework of inter-party competition to only one spatial determination, means that only competition in this spatial plane determines the evolution of the party system mechanism. Sartori also pointed to the fact that the scope of inter-party competition is a function of the length of the space; in other words, the competition takes place in a space as large as the ideological distance of the relevant actors forming the extreme poles of the party spectrum.¹⁵

In the Czech case, the conflict that dominated up until 2013 was the centripetal competition between the two pillars of the system, *i.e.*, the ČSSD on the left and the ODS (supplemented, after 2010, by the TOP 09) on the right. After the 2013 election, the metric center of the competition space was optically narrowed because of the ANO movement assuming control over this part of the continuum. Until about 2016, it can be said that the boundary between the position occupied by the ČSSD on the left of the spectrum, the electorate of the ANO movement was relatively strictly defined, and the interaction of these two parties did not disturb the dominantly right-left direction of the competition.¹⁶ Starting from early 2017, however, there was an extensive electoral expansion of the ANO movement to the left, coupled with a massive outflow of voters from the ČSSD (and also the KSČM) to the ANO movement, the ČSSD proving unable to defend itself against that outflow or to replace the electoral losses by expanding into other parts of the spectrum. As a result, the party's falling electoral support resulted in a single-digit gain (7.2%) in 2017, which accounted for the largest contribution to the increase in volatility across the party system brought about by that

¹⁵ Sartori, *Strany a stranické systémy*, 349.

¹⁶ Vladimír Hanáček, "Český stranický systém po roce 2013 v sartoriánské perspektive" [The Czech Party System After 2013 in a Sartorial Perspective] August 17, 2025, *E-polis.cz* (online), accessed August 20, 2024, http://www.e-polis.cz/clanek/cesky-stranicky-syst-emo-po-roce-2013-v-sartorianske-perspektive.html#_ftn34.

election.¹⁷ The electoral decline of the ČSSD, however, did not mean a shift in the main dimension of the competition space; rather, it can be said that this result meant the ČSSD vacated this spatial set, which removed any actual competition inside it. By contrast, the ANO movement took over a significant part of the space previously occupied by the ČSSD and began to opt for similar logic and tools of inter-party competition in a centripetal mode towards the competition on the right side of the spectrum. Notwithstanding, ANO's assumption of this position also meant that the right-left socio-economic axis as the main dimension of the competition effectively overlapped with the thematic fissure that was then significantly structuring the party spectrum, *i.e.*, the relationship to the ANO chair Andrej Babiš, his political style, and the controversies he stirred up.

At the same time it should be noted that the centripetal competition in the dominant dimension of the competition space was further strengthened by the fact that the traditional actors positioned from the center to the right of the spectrum, who represented the traditional self-declared right-wing opposition to Babiš and his allies (ODS, TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL), were joined by two new actors in the system after the 2017 election: the Pirates and the STAN. The presence of these actors meant further spatial gains by the centers of the right-left continuum, and the narrowing of the space for competition within it. In particular, the presence of the Pirates significantly limited the room for electoral expansion of all three traditional center-right parties. STAN's independent position, *i.e.*, as an actor that had not acted independently in the past but had been present in the system, first through its long-term electoral alliance with the TOP 09 and then through a short-term and unsuccessful but highly publicized and visible coalition project with the KDU-ČSL, primarily meant competition for these two traditional parties.

None of these factors changed the current direction of the inter-party competition, because the spatial expansion of any opposition actor into the center space primarily meant interaction with the ANO movement; in other words, the often discussed topic among the general public on how to take away part of Babiš' voters in favor of the opposition, was in

¹⁷ Eibl, *Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny v roce 2017*.

fact a question as to how to reduce the space for voter support for the ANO movement in the metric center of the continuum in favor of the opposition parties. The main centripetal direction of the competition therefore remained the same (Table 2).

Typology of the Czech Party System before the 2021 Election

The aforementioned typological determination of the Czech party system as standing between the Sartorian polarized and moderate pluralism types in terms of the evolution of the party-system format took a new direction towards the extreme multipartism format after the Chamber of Deputies election in 2013 and especially in 2017, due to the increase in the number of relevant actors from five to seven or even nine. At the same time, in June 2018, a so-called breakthrough option was exercised in the form of the involvement of the previously isolated Communist Party in the formation of a government majority in the Chamber of Deputies, when Andrej Babiš' second minority government, composed of representatives of the ANO movement and ČSSD, began to rely on the votes of the Communists in important Chamber votes.

From the point of view of the long-term development of the system, the new situation was paradoxical in two respects: on the one hand there was further fragmentation of the systemic format, but on the other hand the tendency toward a bipolar configuration of actors and the formation of two completely non-overlapping coalition blocs strengthened. Having said that, it should be noted that the internal situations inside the two notional blocs were quite different. While in the case of the governing bloc we see clear dominance of the ANO movement with the concurrent weakening of the two traditional left-wing parties, the ČSSD and KSČM, the opposition bloc was formed by a considerably fragmented spectrum of five political parties proposing a relatively wide range of ideas, with some parties enjoying a moderately strong position (gaining between 10 and 20% of the vote) and other oscillating around the 5% threshold required to enter the Chamber. It should be emphasized that voter shifts within the ruling bloc manifesting themselves by further ongoing outflows of voters from both left-wing parties towards the ANO movement affected both the second-order elections (EP election in May 2019, regional and

Senate elections in October 2020) and regular voter preference polls and published electoral models between 2018 and 2021. An exception to the bipolar configuration rule, one that may not be crucial for changing this systemic tendency, is the more or less isolated position of Okamura's SPD, which was formally an opposition party in 2017-2021, but with zero coalition potential *vis-à-vis* the other opposition parties.

The bipolar configuration and the tendency towards coalitions within the two blocs meant that the Czech party system was perhaps the closest in its history to Peter Mair's model of a closed party system in terms of the nature of party competition.¹⁸ However, in order to confirm such inclusion, the mechanism would have to continue in the same format for at least two more terms. From the mechanism perspective, however, the fundamental step towards complete power alternation and party-system bipolarization brings the Czech party system even closer to Sartori's moderate pluralism, without the condition of the limited multipartism defined in terms of the system format being met.¹⁹

From this perspective, when attempting to make a typological determination, we have to rely on the theories of other authors who follow Sartori but try to eliminate this analytical drawback by adding another type that could capture the combination of these characteristics. The most interesting and useful approach for the analysis of the Czech situation seems to be that of the Italian political scientist Leonardo Morlino, who in his treatise on the crisis of political partisanship and the changes in the Italian party system in connection with the fall of the First Republic in the early 1990s defined the so-called "neo-polarized pluralism" type.²⁰ The symptoms of the Italian crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s described by Morlino correlate in many ways with the phenomena brought about by the development of the Czech party system and Czech politics in general in the last ten years. The factor of the economic crisis and the associated social upheavals, as well as the multiplying corruption cases and criminal affairs of politicians belonging to the established parties, created

¹⁸ Peter Mair, *Party Systems Change, Approaches and Interpretations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 207-214.

¹⁹ Sartori, *Strany a stranické systémy*, 185-193.

²⁰ Leonardo Morlino, "Crisis of Parties and Change of Party System in Italy," *Party Politics* 2, no. 1 (1996): 5-30.

a breeding ground for the emergence of protest political formations and “party-firms.”²¹ Their presence led to an increase in the number of relevant actors and aggravation of the party spectrum fragmentation. At the same time, it also strengthened polarization, *i.e.*, the ideological distance between the actors, which tends to reformat the long-standing polarization along the right-left socio-economic axis and strengthens the dividing line between traditional parties and new protest actors.

Notwithstanding, this polarization already in its first phase of strengthening significantly overlapped with the previously dominant right-left socio-economic axis.²² In the era of Bohuslav Sobotka’s government from 2014 to 2017, the strongest ruling party, the left-wing ČSSD, which then held the seat of the Prime Minister, was not dominantly criticized by the right-wing opposition (especially the TOP 09, which was formally the strongest right-wing party at the time, and by its then-chair Miroslav Kalousek) but rather by Babiš’ anti-establishment ANO movement, whose presence in the government ultimately strengthened the conflict relationship between the government actors themselves (the ČSSD and the KDU-ČSL on the one hand and the ANO on the other). Babiš’ critical attitude toward his coalition partners, especially toward the ČSSD led by Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, gradually strengthened, and the divide between the established governing parties and the ANO movement widened.²³

The 2017 election brought an increase in the number of actors and thus significantly more fragmentation of the spectrum. A total of three new actors appeared in the system. Even if we took into account the similar sources of voter legitimacy for the SPD in 2017 and *Úsvit přímé demokracie* four years before that, thus seeing Okamura’s new party as the functional equivalent of the previous formation, and if we considered the STAN movement to be more or less present in the system as a *de facto* part of the TOP 09 before 2017, we would still be left with the emergence of one completely new actor, the Pirates. The strengthening of the systemic

²¹ Vít Hloušek, Lubomír Kopeček, and Petra Vodová, *The Rise of Entrepreneurial Parties in European Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

²² Alan I. Abramowitz, Kyle L. Saunders, “Is Polarization a Myth?” *The Journal of Politics* 70, no. 2 (2008): 542-555.

²³ Eibl, *Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny v roce 2017*.

semi-polarization elements is then, in the spirit of Morlino's interpretation, also facilitated by the high level of electoral volatility and the transformation of the system format in terms of the position of individual actors according to electoral gains.²⁴

Notwithstanding, from the standpoint of the subsequent post-election developments and further evolution of the systemic mechanism, it can be stated that on the contrary, the semi-polarization phenomenon weakened both through the formation of an almost complete bipolar configuration in the Chamber of Deputies and, above all, through the exercise of the aforementioned breakthrough option in the form of the KSČM's involvement in the formation of the government majority. This effectively vacated the space of the metric center of the party continuum, resulting in the absence of any (even hypothetical) pivot of the system and of the two-sided opposition. In this context it should be mentioned that the SPD's formally oppositional role was already significantly weakened at the beginning of the election period as a result of the party winning important parliamentary positions for some of its prominent representatives, particularly the Deputy Speaker position in the Chamber of Deputies for the SPD chairman Tomio Okamura. The SPD has repeatedly functioned in the lower house as a reserve party in case of a change in the government majority for the ANO movement. Its role can be described as "semi-oppositional," even taking into account the positions of its representatives on some important issues of government policy. In any case, the party was not getting any stronger in terms of the number of voters as a result of the outflow of voters from the ruling parties to the opposition.

Unlike in Morlino's Italian case, we did not see the phenomenon of territorial pluralism associated with significantly different voting in different parts of the country in the Czech parliamentary election in 2017, as the ANO movement won the strongest position in all regions.²⁵

However, the tendency towards a two-bloc bipolar configuration, the absence of isolated actors and two-sided opposition on the one hand

²⁴ Tim Haughton, Kevin Deegan-Krause, *The New Party Challenge: Changing Cycles of Party Birth and Death in Central Europe and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁵ The Czech Statistical Bureau, *Výsledky voleb a referend* [Results of elections and referendums], accessed August 20, 2024, *Volby.cz* (online), <https://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2017/ps311?xjazyk=CZ&xkraj=1>.

is added to by a high number of actors and mutual radicalization on the other hand. The widening ideological divide between the two notional blocs was then reinforced by such factors as the law governing the Chamber of Deputies elections, which gave an advantage to large political parties by applying the D'Hondt vote-to-mandate conversion mechanism, denying small actors sufficient maneuvering room for potential coalition promiscuity. The long-standing criticism of the current system of Chamber election, which gained traction after the 2017 Chamber of Deputies election due to the greater representation of smaller political parties that had felt aggrieved by the existing method of recounting votes into mandates, resulted in a petition by a group of senators primarily from the STAN club to the Constitutional Court to repeal part of the electoral law. By its ruling of February 2, 2021, the Court abolished both the existing method of converting votes into seats using the D'Hondt divisor method and the summative entry clause for coalitions.²⁶ It is, however, significant for the Czech situation that the new design of the electoral system agreed and subsequently approved in spring 2021, which involved converting votes into mandates through the so-called Imperiali quotas, instead of bringing about a more proportional electoral process, amounted to treading into the unknown with regard to the very limited empirical evidence of the effects of this version in the world and its potential Majority-enforcing impact associated with further added fragmentation of the spectrum.²⁷

The introduction of a popular vote of the president of the Republic and the course and outcomes of the elections in 2013 and 2018 were, of course,

²⁶ "Ústavní soud zrušil část volebního zákona. Koalicím bude stačit pro vstup do Sněmovny pet procent hlasů" [The Constitutional Court Annulled Part of the Electoral Law. Coalitions Will Only Need Five Percent of the Vote to Enter the House], February 3, 2021, *iRozhlas.cz* (online), accessed August 20, 2024, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravodomov/ustavni-soud-navrh-zakona-snemovna-snemovni-volby-senatori_2102030920_dok.

²⁷ Pavel Otto, "Politolog Lebeda: Roztříštěné politické scéně nový způsob rozdělení poslaneckých křesel pomůže" [Politolog Lebeda: A New Way of Dividing Seats for the Fragmented Political Scene Will Help] April 4, 2021, *E15.cz* (online), accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.e15.cz/domaci/politolog-lebeda-roztristene-politicke-scene-novy-zpusob-rozdeleni-poslaneckych-kresel-pomuze-1379317>; Tomáš Lebeda, "The Proportionality of Electoral Formulas for Systems of Proportional Representation," *Czech Sociological Review* 42, no. 5 (2006): 883-912.

another important institutional incentive for strengthening polarization on the Czech political scene dominated by the two-bloc scheme.²⁸

The trend of Morlino's neo-polarized pluralism materializing in the Czech environment after 2017 was confirmed by many developments in Czech politics in the era of the Babiš government, especially the increasing public budget deficit, the continued de-legitimization of poorly institutionalized party actors and, last but not least, the deepening criticism of the country's governance by the civil society; in this context mass demonstrations took place in Prague in 2018-2019, organized by the *Milion chvilék pro demokracii* (*Million Moments for Democracy*) association. Therefore, it can be stated that the Czech party system, even before the 2021 Chamber of Deputies election, clearly (with a few exceptions) showed the traits of the *neo-polarized pluralism* type as described by Leonardo Morlino in reference to Sartori's typology.

Changes to the Czech Party System after the 2021 Election

The Chamber of Deputies election held on October 8-9, 2021, did not represent as significant an element of discontinuity in terms of electoral outcomes as the previous three elections. After three electoral periods, there were no formal changes in party-political actors, and no increase in the number of relevant parties represented in the system. As a matter of fact, after periods of increase, the number of relevant parties decreased from nine to seven.

Two significant elements of discontinuity could be observed: first, two actors traditionally present on the political scene for virtually the entire existence of the Czech party system saw their voter support drop below the five percent threshold, *i.e.*, the two left-wing parties, the ČSSD and the KSČM. Although their electoral support stagnated since the 2017 election, in which they both only achieved single-digit results for the first time in history, in the next period they still had a significant role to play as they were either represented in the coalition government with the ANO movement (ČSSD), or provided tacit support for the government in the Chamber of

²⁸ Jakub Šedo, a kol., *České prezidentské volby v roce 2018, Jiný souboj, stejný vítěz* [The Czech Presidential Election in 2018: Different Fight, Same Winner] (Brno: CDK, 2019).

Deputies (KSČM). Their departure from the scene can thus be identified in a way as a partial demise of the left part of the ideological spectrum.²⁹

The second element of discontinuity in the evolution of the party system was the unusual phenomenon of two successful electoral coalitions with a total of five parties. Before that, electoral coalitions were success stories in only two periods in the Czech political scene. The first came in the early 1990s at the onset of the development of a pluralistic Czech party system. The first parliamentary election held in June 1990 was the successful electoral bid of the *Christian and Democratic Union* (KDU) coalition, then comprising the Czechoslovak People's Party, Benda's Christian Democratic Party, the Free Peasant Party and the Slovak Christian Democratic Movement. They received over 8% of the vote in both houses of the Federal Assembly and the Czech National Council. Other successful coalitions included the alliance of the ODS and Benda's KDS in the 1992 elections, which emerged as the formal winner in the elections to all three parliamentary bodies at the time. It should be noted, however, that the alliance was also notably skewed in favor of Klaus' ODS in terms of the representation of candidates and their proportions.³⁰ The other successful electoral coalition in that election was the *Liberal Social Union* (LSU), which brought together the National Socialists, the Green Party, the Agricultural Party and the Movement of Farmers and Independents. It won around 6% of the votes and made it into both parliaments at the time.³¹ The other period of success for electoral coalitions came with the Chamber of Deputies

²⁹ Michel Perottino, Martin Polášek, Vilém Novotný (eds.), *Mezi masovou a kartelovou stranou: možnosti teorie při výkladu vývoje ČSSD a KSČM v letech 2000-2010* [Between the Mass and the Cartel Side: Theoretical Possibilities for Interpreting the Development of the ČSSD and KSČM in the Years 2000-2010] (Prague: SLON, Sociologické nakladatelství, 2012).

³⁰ Jakub Šedo, "Křesťanskodemokratická strana" [The Christian Democratic Party] in *Politické strany. Vývoj politických stran a hnutí v českých zemích a Československu v letech 1938 – 2004* [Political Parties. Development of Political Parties and Movements in the Czech Lands and Czechoslovakia in the Years 1938-2004], eds. Jiří Malíř and Pavel Marek (Brno: Doplněk, 2005), 1557-1561.

³¹ The Czech Statistical Bureau, *Výsledky voleb a referend* [Results of elections and referendums], *Volby.cz* (online), accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2017/ps311?xjazyk=CZ&xkraj=1>.

election ten years later, when the KDU-ČSL and US-DEU joined together in an electoral coalition and achieved a result of almost 15% of the votes.

In all three of these cases, the elections yielded the following results, in which only one of the original coalition parties succeeded on their own, and the others either ran in a different coalition or failed to succeed and thus definitively fell into oblivion. In 2021, however, it was the first time that only parties that had become relevant actors in the system on their own in previous periods and were represented in the Chamber of Deputies independently after the last parliamentary election in 2017 took part in the election as part of successful coalitions. What does the presence of electoral coalitions mean in terms of the evolution of the Czech party system, regarding the nature of the actors?

Electoral Coalitions in the Party-system Theory

Classical theories of party systems operate with individual party actors, which they believe also encompass the electoral coalitions themselves.³² However, electoral coalitions may not be self-sustaining, to the extent that they can be considered relevant entities *sui generis* without any link to the sources of electoral legitimacy of the respective parties which form them. In other words, electoral coalitions may primarily represent the sum of the electoral support of the respective coalition parties, and only for a limited part of the electorate may they represent a self-sustaining alternative. The question that becomes crucial from the viewpoint of the evolution of the party system format is, for how long and in what mode of stability the electoral coalitions have been functioning, and whether they constitute predictable actors in terms of post-election coalition ties. Again, this confirms that the party-system mechanism cannot be ignored when evaluating the format development.

The first author to incorporate the aspect of electoral coalitions into a theory of the party system, in an attempt to typologically define the aspect, is the Canadian political scientist Steven Wolinetz. His attempt to

³² Sona Nadenichek Golder, "Pre-electoral Coalition Formation in Parliamentary Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 36, no: 2 (2006): 193-202.

reformulate the starting points for the typological determination of party systems in the face of changes in the party-political systems of individual countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain is in a similar vein to Leonardo Morlino's aforementioned concept. Even Wolinetz realized that Sartori's moderate and polarized pluralism types were too exclusive for practical application in the context of the empirical reality, especially in newly democratized countries, and explained little about the specific nature of party systems. Wolinetz points to the fact that in the vast majority of cases, when applying Sartori's typology rigorously, one is forced to conclude that almost everything falls under the moderate pluralism type, and that polarized pluralism, on the contrary, is almost non-existent today in its pure form (according to the Italian and Weimar-German model).³³

Wolinetz rejects the contributions of many authors who tried to define a new typology of party systems based entirely on Sartori, although he acknowledges the analytical quality of two similar attempts: the *effective-number-of-parties* and the *effective-number-of-parliamentary parties* concepts as proposed by Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera and the modification of Jean Blondel's typology by Alain Siaroff.³⁴ However, instead of abandoning the original Sartorian framework of analysis, Steven Wolinetz tries to enrich it with other factors which, in his opinion, are not sufficiently represented in it.

In relation to Sartori's framework of analysis, Wolinetz stresses the importance of the *number-of-relevant-parties* criterion. At the same time, however, he adds that the criterion is not the most important one when assessing the configuration of actors within a system format, as increasing the number of relevant actors does not necessarily imply a change in the system logic. In other words, it cannot be mechanically argued that increasing the number of actors automatically leads to polarized pluralism. In the

³³ Steven Wolinetz, "Classifying Party Systems: Where Have All the Typologies Gone?" (Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2004), 5.

³⁴ Markku Laakso, Rein Taagepera, "Effective Number of Parties: Measure to Application to Western Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 12 (1979): 3-27; Alain Siaroff, "Two-And-A-Half-Party Systems and the Comparative Role of the 'Half'," *Party Politics* 3, no. 3 (2003): 267-290.

1960s, the American political scientist Douglas Rae pointed out that an increasing number of actors in a system does not imply a change in the mechanism of the system unless the actors in question all compete with each other to the same extent. The upshot of this was distinguishing “fractionalization” from “multipartism.”³⁵ Wolinetz builds on this thesis by pointing out that, especially in the 1990s, we observe changes in the systemic format in some countries, accompanied by a reduction in the degree of polarization between these actors, allowing them to be more easily combined into broader electoral blocs.³⁶ This means that what is important is not just how many parties there are in the system, but rather the degree of polarization between them. This brings us to the systemic format and the competition dimension: whether it is unipolar or centripetal, bipolar versus multipolar, and whether clustering occurs, *i.e.*, whether permanent or semi-permanent electoral coalitions exist in the system.³⁷

According to Wolinetz, the degree of polarization does not constitute a distinction between moderate and polarized pluralism, but rather an expression of the nature of inter-party competition. Polarization can be extensive, but it depends on whether the axis of competition is composed of one party or whether the competition is bipolar, and whether there are multiple parties in competition in multiple dimensions, or whether they compete as two opposing blocs but within one dimension (the system is then formally a multiparty system, but effectively a two-party system). Among the illustrative examples of the latter type, Wolinetz includes Poland after the emergence of a democratic party system in the 1990s, but also Italy after the collapse of the First Republic system and the emergence of new party actors after 1993.³⁸

In an attempt to come up with his own typology, Wolinetz thus differentiates Sartori’s moderate pluralism type according to the following three aspects: the first two as he himself admits are based directly on Sartori’s perception of the important functional characteristics of the system: the number of relevant parties and the degree of polarization,

³⁵ Douglas Rae, “A Note on the Fractionalization of Some European Party Systems,” *Comparative Political Studies* 1, no. 3 (1968): 413-418.

³⁶ Wolinetz, “Classifying Party Systems,” 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

conceived both broadly and loosely. However, he himself adds a third aspect to the two, which he refers to as the aforementioned “clustering,” *i.e.*, the grouping of parties into blocs in a bipolar configuration. He refers to this type as *extended multipartism*. Wolinetz then divides both moderate and extended multipartism into unimodal, bipolar, or multipolar. Unimodal distribution of actors implies competition in only one dimension. The bipolar configuration means the possibility of competing in multiple dimensions, but in two blocs. A multipolar distribution means multiple actors competing in multiple dimensions.³⁹ Based on contemporary knowledge, Wolinetz assigns the Czech Republic to the unimodal moderate multipartism type. It should be noted here that Wolinetz does not go too far terminologically distinguishing between the moderate multipartism class and the moderate pluralism type in the spirit of Sartori, essentially treating the terms “multipartism” and “pluralism” as synonyms instead.

Typological Classification of the Czech Case in 2021

Having classified the Czech party system as being of the Morlino’s type, we can assess to what extent the Czech case came close to the Wolinetz extended multipartism type in the period under review. Morlino’s neo-polarized pluralism is closest to the bipolar or multipolar extended multipartism type in Wolinetz’s scheme. These types are primarily characterized by a larger number of relevant actors (six or more), as well as a high degree of polarization between actors along either one or several dominant axes. This subsequently makes it possible for us to determine the bipolar or multipolar configuration. Unlike Morlino, Wolinetz adds the clustering aspect, *i.e.*, the formation of blocs of ideologically close actors, typical especially of the bipolar configuration. Although there are more actors in the system, in fact the ideological distance between actors is large along the main axis between the two party blocs, not within the coalition blocs themselves. Thus, the length of the competition space is rather small, because as Wolinetz himself points

³⁹ Ibid, 15.

out, while the length of the space is crucial for the number of parties, the number of parties does not imply the presence of radical subjects. It is the complete or partial absence of isolated anti-system parties that predetermine the system for the dominant direction of inter-party competition to be centripetal. However, the competition between the two dominant blocs is characterized by a high degree of polarization, and so there are no centripetal tendencies. This touches on the important observation that the dichotomy of centripetal versus centrifugal electoral competition may not be sufficient for the extended multipartism type, since it is more about the intensity of electoral expansion in the relevant direction than its elementary presence.

It is precisely the type of bipolar extended multipartism presented by Wolinetz that seems to be suitable for explaining the Czech party-system realities after the 2021 Chamber of Deputies election. The following three conditions seem to corroborate this conclusion: first, the bipolar configuration and the weakening of centripetal competition, combined with the concurrent absence of centrifugal tendencies. Second, the number of relevant actors remains above six: seven to nine. This means that small parties that have been less relevant in the 2021 elections are, however, potentially usable in future electoral alliances with the current opposition. And third, the parties forming coalitions and the alliance-like bipolar logic clearly speak in favor of the above type. The situation in the current Czech Republic is reminiscent of the historical example of Italy in the 1990s, but also of the long-term tendencies of the party systems in Israel or in Poland, which culminated in the double Polish elections in 2019. The May 2019 European Parliament elections pitted the *United Right* bloc (the ruling PiS and its marginal satellites) against a united opposition called the *European Coalition*. In the Polish parliamentary elections in October this year, a bloc of liberal parties called the *Civic Coalition*, a bloc of left-wing parties in alliance with the dominant SLD, and a bloc of Polish People's Democrats with the movement of the rocker Paweł

Kukiz on the ticket of the established PSL joined forces against the *United Right*.⁴⁰

In what ways, however, is the Czech case different from the Wolinetz type defined in this way? First of all, the bipolar two-block structure is highly asymmetric. While in the case of the right portion of the spectrum, the clustering of smaller center-right parties into two coalitions is in principle consistent with this theoretical definition, the notional left part of the spectrum has only one actor, namely the ANO 2011 movement. The full symmetrical fulfilment of the two-bloc structure would only occur if the ANO movement formed an electoral coalition with at least the ČSSD as its former government coalition partner, as President Miloš Zeman suggested to Andrej Babiš before the 2021 election.⁴¹ At the same time, an ANO/ČSSD coalition would mean that votes for the Social Democrats (regardless of the actual gain) would not be forfeited, *i.e.*, they would translate into actual gained seats. Such a coalition would have been very likely to win the Chamber elections in October 2021.

By contrast, despite all the pre-requisites for possible cooperation, the ANO movement and Okamura's SPD cannot be regarded as forming a homogeneous bloc, even though the two parties remained in opposition after the center-right government of Petr Fiala assumed power. The SPD formally stood in opposition to Babiš' government from 2017 to 2021, and although for most of that period it was common knowledge that Babiš' government was far less hostile to the SPD than to the other opposition parties (and vice versa), the SPD never became part of the official government majority, and with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and its criticism of the restrictive measures adopted, the party more or less ideologically distanced itself from Babiš' government.

⁴⁰ Petr Jedlička, "Vítězství PiS potvrzeno, může vládnout sama" [Victory of PiS confirmed, it can govern alone], October 14, 2019, *Deník Referendum* (online), accessed August 20, 2024, <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/30280-volby-v-polsku-vitezstvi-pis-potvrzeno-muze-vladnout-sama>; Marcin Ślarzyński, "The Emergence of Right-Wing Partisanship in Poland, 1993–2018: Reconciling Demand-Side Explanations of the Success of Illiberalism," *Perspectives on Politics* 22, no. 3 (2024): 692–716, DOI: 10.1017/S153759272300275X.

⁴¹ "Zeman: ANO a ČSSD by měly uzavřít koalici" [Zeman: ANO and ČSSD should form a coalition], January 21, 2021, *Novinky.cz* (online), accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/zeman-ano-a-cssd-by-meli-uzavrit-koalici-40348482>.

Yet, such considerations are not essential in terms of the typological classification of the Czech party system in its post 2021 election setting, because the resulting configuration did not change the bipolar position of the actors and the corresponding direction of party competition, with the number of party actors, regardless of the coalitions, remaining relatively high at seven, and the future hypothetical return of at least one of the two left-wing parties could increase it even further.

Let us now look at the fundamental functional characteristics of the Czech party system after the 2021 election through the prism of the theories mentioned in the introduction to this paper.

Conclusion

In this paper we focused on the evolution of the Czech party system with an emphasis on its shape after the last Chamber of Deputies election in 2021 in terms of stability and change. According to Giovanni Sartori's classical typology, the Czech party system oscillated for a long time between the polarized and moderate pluralism types, while the more fundamental changes in the system format after the last three elections, associated with the emergence of new system actors and a significant increase in voter volatility, have increased the Czech party system's propensity to the polarized pluralism type. Nevertheless, the importance of the other dimensions of competition is not being strengthened and it is mainly the right-left socio-economic axis that remains dominant, with the *establishment versus anti-establishment* divide overlapping with this axis almost completely since the 2017 elections at the latest. The strengthening tendency towards systemic bipolarity, the absence of one strong centrist actor, but also the absence of strengthening of the extreme poles of the system and of centrifugal competition with the concurrent increase in the number of relevant actors above the threshold of six brings the Czech party system closer to the neo-polarized pluralism type as defined by Leonardo Morlino. In addition, the last election in 2021 saw the rise of the electoral coalition phenomenon and the tendency towards bipolar blocs. Although this is a completely new phenomenon whose future

forms are difficult to predict, the trend is clearly reminiscent of Steven Wolinetz's bipolar extended multipartism type.

The second possible typology is the now classic concept developed by Peter Mair. His distinction between a closed system, characterized by either no or complete rotation of government actors, and an open system, characterized by partial but disorderly rotation of government actors, correlates with the concepts of many analysts about the normative stability of the party system. A closed system as conceived by Mair implies stability, orderliness and predictability, while an open system implies a greater degree of uncertainty, instability and unpredictability.

Through this analysis, we concluded that despite the seeming notion of fundamental instability of the Czech party system, associated with changes in the system format, elements of stability and continuity of the system's development still prevail at the mechanism level in its direction that appears predictable and therefore unsurprising. The stability of the system, normatively conceived in this way, is a positive finding, especially in the sense that changes to the party system leading to greater power uncertainty and instability are traditionally perceived as crisis factors for the democratic political system as such. In this respect the development of the Czech party system, and thus of Czech democracy today, can be seen as relatively favorable.

Table 1

Czech Electoral Results 2017

Party	Votes (%)	Seats	Ideological position ¹
ANO 2011	29,64	78	No family
ODS	11,32	25	Conservative
Pirates	10,79	22	No family
SPD	10,64	22	Far-Right
KSČM	7,76	15	Radical Left
ČSSD	7,27	15	Socialist
KDU-ČSL	5,8	10	Christian-Democratic
TOP 09	5,31	7	Conservative
STAN	5,18	6	Liberal

Source: CHES Data Trend File 2019.

Table 2

Czech Electoral Results 2021

Party	Votes (%)	Seats	Ideological position ²
SPOLU (coalition ODS, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09)	27,79	71	Conservatives and Christian Democrats
ANO 2011	27,12	72	No Family
Pirates and STAN	15,62	37	Coalition Liberals and No Family
SPD	9,56	20	Far-Right

Source: The Czech Statistical Bureau, Výsledky voleb a referend [Results of elections and referendums]; CHES Data Trend File 2019.

¹ Ideological position of each party is defined by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Europe 2019, <https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-europe> (6.8.2024)

² Ideological position of each party/coalition is defined by the Chapel Hill Expert Survey Europe 2019, <https://www.chesdata.eu/ches-europe> (6.8.2024)