

**Breaking Through or Breaking Apart? The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in Czech Politics Since 1998**

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## **Breaking Through or Breaking Apart? The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia in Czech Politics Since 1998**

### *Introduction*

The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSĚM) is one a number neo-communist regime successor parties in Central and Eastern Europe, which sought to renew and develop a communist identity after 1989 rather than undergoing 'social democratisation' or turning to wholesale to 'chauvino-communist' nationalism. Having significantly increased its share of the vote to 18.5% in the most recent (2002) parliamentary elections, it is also be one of the most successful and well supported radical left groupings in the EU25 (March and Mudde 2003). In a more parochial, Czech perspective, the party's increasing co-operation with other parliamentary parties and instrumental role in electing Václav Klaus as Czech President in February 2003 suggests that it is increasingly successfully overcoming the pariah status and political isolation that characterised its position for much of the 1990s. Moreover, the unpopularity of the current Social Democrat-led coalition, whose painful fiscal reforms have divided both the coalition and the Social Democratic Party itself, seems to offer a strategic opportunity for the party to establish itself as newly significant force on the Czech left and a credible contender for government. However, as the KSĚM's recent 6<sup>th</sup> Congress, held in Ěeské Budjovice on 15-16 May 2004 demonstrates, the party lacks both the intellectual and human resources and the political will to rapidly to reposition itself as a radical left party of broader appeal.

### *A neo-communist subcultural party*

The initial trajectory of KSĚM can be explained by the interaction of historical-structural factors, communist regime legacies, the capacities and resources of party-forming elites, and contingent choices they make at critical junctures in and after transition (for a review see March 2004). The Czech lands' relatively modern social and economic structure before communism gave rise to a mass labour movement and a sizeable mass communist party. This, it has been argued, allowed the communist regime to install itself in 1948 with some level of popular support and to use a relatively modern administrative apparatus to dominate society without the need to accommodate society or adapt pre-existing patronage structures patronage (Kitschelt et al 1999; Gryzmala-Busse 2002). The resultant 'bureaucratic-authoritarian' regime was highly reform averse, but given the country's democratic-socialist tradition faced significant pressure for reform. The collapse of the Prague Spring reform movement following the 1968 Soviet-led invasion, however, reinforced such 'bureaucratic-authoritarianism', largely purging reformist elements looking to democratic socialist traditions from the party and regime. In 1989, transition thus took the form of regime collapse under the pressure of mass popular mobilisation. As elsewhere in Central Europe, opposition elites in Czechoslovakia rapidly displaced old regime elites and - perhaps because of this - ignored calls by radical anti-communists for the banning of the former ruling party. Indeed, following the model of 'roundtables' they sought to include the party into the transition process and the dismantling of the one-party regime through formal consultation bodies. The introduction of an electoral system of list-based PR with a 5% quota for, rather than a more majoritarian system, reflected a similar desire not to exclude minority groups, including the Communists, from democratic institutions (Birch et al 2002)

Like other former ruling parties in the region the Czech Communists – who formed the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSĚM) as a distinct organisation in March 1990- were heavily defeated in the 1990 'founding elections', but retained sizeable minority support (13%). However, in contrast to successor parties in Poland and Hungary, which had meaningful regime exit strategies centring on genuinely negotiated transition, the Communist Party of

Czechoslovakia was paralysed and disorientated. Perhaps because of this in the immediate post-transition period, weak and inexperienced reformist forces did emerge and succeeded in electing a reformist leader, Jiří Svoboda. However, Svoboda and other reformers committed a series of tactical errors and failed to centralise and re-organise the party as a social democratic formation, that could draw broad support as a credible contender for office. Growing tensions culminated in a factional split in mid-1993, which saw the Svoboda's supporters (who commanded approximately 1/3 of delegate votes) leave the party to found a variety of abortive post-communist social democratic groupings (Gryzmala-Busse 1998). Instead of 'social democratisation', the party turned to a 'neo-communist' ideology and programme purporting to offer a systematic alternative to liberal capitalist democracy under the leadership of Miroslav Grebeníček, a former lecturer in Marxist history. Grebeníček has been KSĚM's Chair since 1993. In practice, the neo-communist orientation amounted to a combination of strongly statist and egalitarian policies championing the socio-economic interests of transition 'losers', traditional anti-German nationalism and an acceptance of multi-party democracy and pluralism based on a deeply ambiguous critique of the 1948-1989 (verging on nostalgia). However, it rejected revanchism and neo-Stalinism and both in theory and practice represented an adaptation to democratic politics (Hanley 2002). Although KSĚM sought to represent a broad electorate of 'working people', its support was considerably more narrow strongly skewed towards older and retired voters, residents of rural areas and small towns, groups such as the police and army and localities with historic traditions of Communist voting (Hanley 2001).

At party system level, KSĚM's non-social democratisation enabled the small 'historic' Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party (ĚSSD), which, like similar formations in Hungary and Poland had been marginalised in the 'founding elections' of the early 1990s, to emerge as the principal force on the Czech left. In the June 1996 elections ĚSSD, which had absorbed political elites and voters from a variety of failed centre-left groupings (social liberals, ecologists, Moravian regionalists, reformist breakaways from KSĚM), increased its vote to 26 per cent. This increased to 32 per cent in the 1998 elections and declined only slightly to 30 per cent in 2002.

Table 1: KSĚM Performance in Elections to Lower House of the Czech Parliament 1990-2002

Year	Number of votes	% of vote	Number of deputies/200
1990*	954 690	13.24	32
1992**	909 490	14.05	35
1996	626 136	10.33	22
1998	658 550	11.03	24
2002	882 653	18.51	41

\* Election to Czech National Council

\*\* Left Bloc list

Both these elections produced Social Democrat (-led) governments. Contrastingly, KSĚM's support, which had remained steady at 13-14 per cent in both 1990 and 1992, declined to 10-11 per cent in 1996 and 1998 as the project of a broad Left Bloc reaching into the political centre was abandoned (see table 1)

As I have argued elsewhere (Hanley 2001, 2002), from at least 1993 KSĚM can be understood as a sub-cultural party (Enyedi 1995), combining limited social and electoral support from a distinct constituency isolated by its values from wider society with mass organisational forms encapsulating this constituency. Much of this organisation and its activity fulfills a socio-cultural function of asserting and confirming identity and providing a social network and is, in strictly party-electoral terms, irrational and redundant. In KSĚM's case this constituency was a

generationally-defined, largely elderly, core of voters, who were former members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and for whom the early days of the communist regime were a politically formative period and one which benefitted them in terms of social mobility and educational advancement.

However, despite its isolation KSĚM's impact on the party system was far from marginal. As the Social Democrats considered KSĚM unreconstructed, undemocratic and (thus) unacceptable as a national coalition partner – a position formalised by a 1995 congress resolution - to hold office they were forced to rely on parties of the centre-right. Between 1998 and 2002 they relied on a pact with Václav Klaus's Civic Democrats to sustain a minority administration. In 2002 they formed a coalition with two small, rival centre-right parties, the Christian Democrats and liberal Freedom Union (US). The coalition had a majority of two, which has since disappeared due to defections from the Freedom Union.

### *Breaking through ....?*

In January 1999 Miroslav Grebeníček delivered a speech, which reiterated the initial rationale of the 'neo-communist' orientation, which set out an optimistic vision of his party's future. He saw the Communists as moving from phase of organisational and ideological self-preservation and consolidation to one of extending its influence. KSĚM would, he predicted, hold national office within the next ten years (Grebeníček 1999). Since approximately 1999 there have been a number of indications that the Czech Communists might in fact be overcoming their earlier isolation and marginality and partially fulfilling this scenario. These can be broken down into three elements 1) increasing national electoral support, both absolutely and in percentage terms; 2) growing recognition of KSĚM as a 'normal' party by other political actors, who were prepared to solicit its support and 3) increased access to political office

In 1998-9, the Communists experienced a sudden, rapid increase in popularity, overtaking both the incumbent Social Democrats and Klaus's centre-right Civic Democrats to become the most popular Czech party. According to the IVVM polling institute, in October 1999 the party's rating stood at 23 per cent of potential voters. Although Communist support has since fluctuated, sometime breaking the 20 per cent barrier, more often remaining in the mid teens, it has remained consistently above the levels of the early 1990s. Polling over the last 18 months shows support of 15 – 18 per cent with a gentle upward trend, sometimes placing the party ahead of the Social Democrats, whose support has varied wildly (see figure 1). Crucially, however, KSĚM proved was also able to translate poll ratings into votes. In 2000, in the first Czech regional elections (turnout 33.64%) the party polled 21.1%, easily outpolling the Social Democrats (14.7%) and coming within a few points of the Civic Democrats (23.8%) and the liberal-Christian Democratic 'Quad-Coalition' (4K) (22.9%). More significantly, in the June 2002 parliamentary elections the party's vote increased to 18.5 per cent. Although the Communist share of the vote was arguably again boosted by a low turnout (58 per cent), which reflected the disillusionment of many voters with mainstream parties, it should be noted that KSĚM's absolute level of support also increased significantly, by more than 200,000 votes.

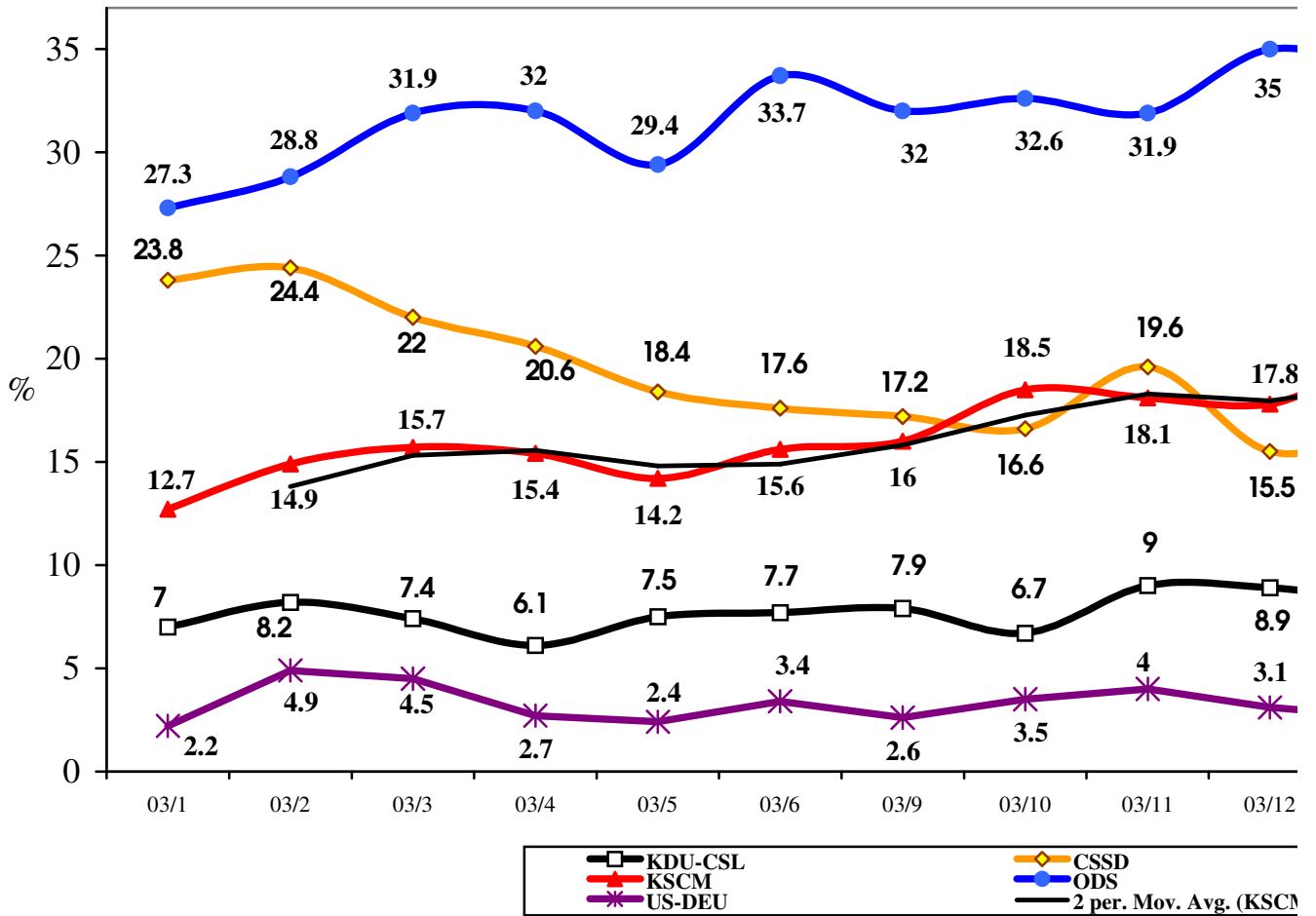
A number of factors can be identified as underlying growing Communist support since 1999. The failure of centre-right Klaus administration (1992-7) to work the once expected economic miracle created a general sense of political and social malaise, which brought Communist rhetoric of 'crisis' closer to mainstream discourse. The disintegration of the far right Republican

party in 1998 freed a small radicalised electorate (5-8%) attracted by economic populism and anti-German nationalism. Most significantly, however the Social Democrats' pact with Klaus's party between 1998 and 2002 and their failure to deliver on its more populist promises in combination of the predictable scandals that accompany office-holding in the Czech Republic led some left-wing voters to gravitate towards the Communists. Despite acquiring a new leader and new partners in 2002, the Social Democrats determination to rein in budget deficits in preparation for euro entry by making cuts in public spending has provided similar incentives. Figure 1. As many commentators have noted, as the only parliamentary party not to hold national office since 1990, the Communists are attractive for some voters not only as a vehicle for protest voting , but also an untried and unblemished alternative with a firm commitment to the 'social certainties' many Czechs value.

Day to day parliamentary contacts between Communist deputies and those of other parties have for a long time been cordial and regular. This arguably reflects Communist legislators diligence and reliability as parliamentarians and the disciplined, well organised nature of their parliamentary faction. However, after the 2002 election, the Communists were for the first time treated like other parties in being allocated parliamentary posts in proportion to their parliamentary representation and nominations to public bodies, where party political representation is the norm. They thus received the chairmanship of three parliamentary committees and one of the five posts of deputy speaker in the lower house of parliament. Communist party members have also been appointed to public bodies including politically sensitive agencies such as the Council of Czech Television.. Since the election of Václav Klaus Communist leaders have been formally included in all-party consultations organised by the President and similar *ad hoc* events such as the (unsuccessful) March 2004 summit to find a national consensus on pension reform



**Party support in the Czech Republic  
(STEM January 2003 - April 2004)**



Despite slightly decreased local representation in 2002, the Communists also significantly increased their representation on the executive bodies of local councils, although, in many cases the more usual pattern of other parties combining to exclude them persisted. In 2002 the second runoff elections to the Czech Senate elections saw a number of local agreements between Social Democrats and Communists to support each other's candidates against a candidate of the right. After the 2002 local elections, Social Democrat-Communist co-operation also enabled the election for the first time of Communist mayors in a number of large municipalities, mainly in the Ostrava region. The issue of how to manage relations with the Communists at national level had always evoked a range of different responses in the highly factionalised Social Democratic Party. However, after 2002, some leading Social Democrats, including Prime Minister Vladimír Špidla and Deputy Prime Minister Pavel Rychetský, suggested that, if the coalition lost its parliamentary majority, they would, in certain circumstances, consider accepting the tacit support of the KSĚM.

On the right too, attitudes towards the Communists were changing. Even before stepping down as leader of his party to pursue the Czech Presidency, Václav Klaus dismissed President Havel's policy of refusing to receive Communist leaders as 'childish'. Despite the earlier anti-communism of the Czech right, ODS and Communist deputies were increasingly inclined to pragmatic co-operation in parliament because of a shared nationalism and opposition to the europhile policies of liberals, Christian Democrats and Social Democrats. In April 2002 the Communists co-operated with ODS to table a parliamentary resolution affirming that the Beneš Decrees, which 'transferred' Czechoslovakia's 2.5 million ethnic Germans out of the country in 1946-6, were a permanent and unalterable feature of Czech law. Moreover, in February 2003 Communist deputies appear to have voted *en bloc* for Václav Klaus in the joint sitting of Parliament which elected the new Czech President, enabling him to defeat the former dissident Jan Sokol, who favoured the cancellation of the Decrees. It seems certain that in addition to choosing the 'lesser evil' over the issue of the Decrees, the Communists also extracted concessions from Klaus regarding his relations with them as President and future appointments to bodies such as the Constitutional Court (made by the President) (Urban 2003). However, unlike the Social Democrats ODS has maintained a strict policy of non-co-operation with KSĚM at all levels of government, consistently de-registering local party branches which violate this policy.

*... standing still ... ?*

However, there are a number of reasons to argue that growth in Communist support and influence is more apparent than real and may have already reached its likely maximum. Analysts of Czech public opinion (Kunštat 2003) have suggested, that, although able to attract some erstwhile social democratic voters, the Communists have failed to attract mainstream undecided voters, who oscillate almost entirely between the ODS and the Social Democrats. This suggests that despite the Social Democrats' often drastic slides in opinion polls, their position as the dominant party of the Czech left is not seriously threatened by the Communists. Indeed, the fickleness of Social Democrat support reflects its underlying ability to attract large numbers of floating voters and – as the experience of the 1998 –2002 Zeman government and 2002 elections demonstrated – its electoral recoveries can be equally spectacular. Moreover, in absolute terms, the Communist 2002 vote is lower than in both 1990 and 1992 elections at the nadir of its political fortunes. The benefit from having more loyal and well mobilised core supporters, whose votes are over-represented when turnout falls and non-voting becomes more prevalent is not a viable one in the long-term. As the party itself notes, there is a growing tendency for Communist supporters,

whose radical views alienate them from the political institutions, not to participate in elections. Estimates suggests that in some elections around 30% of KŠEM members fail to vote (KŠEM 2004: 36). Moreover, as table one indicates, although the party succeeded in attracting more younger voters in 2002 than 1998, almost half of the party's supporters are aged over 60. This suggests that not only is the party's electorate still lacking in diversity, but that as with its membership (see below) it will decline over time unless it attracts new voters.

Table 2: Age composition of voters of selected Czech political parties in 1998 and 2002

Age	Social Democrats (ŠSD)		Civic Democrats (ODS)		Communists (KŠEM)		Christian Democrats (KDU)		Freedom Union (US)	
	2002	1998	2002	1998	2002	1998	2002	1998	2002	1998
18-29 years	25 %	21 %	31 %	21 %	7 %	5 %	16 %	15 %	26 %	32 %
30-44 years	22 %	31 %	30 %	35 %	15 %	21 %	25 %	26 %	33 %	31 %
45-59 years	32 %	30 %	24 %	25 %	30 %	30 %	26 %	22 %	26 %	23 %
60 a years	21 %	17 %	15 %	18 %	48 %	43 %	33 %	38 %	16 %	15 %

Source STEM, *Trendy*10/2002

Table 3: Membership trends in KŠEM 1999-2004

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
<b>Number of members</b>	128 346	120 673	113 027	107 813	100 781
% decline	6.0	6.0	6.3	4.6	6.5
<b>By age</b>					
% under 30 years	0.5	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.5
% aged 31 – 40 years	2.5	2.2	1.9	1.8	1.4
% aged 41 – 50 years	12.0	11.0	9.8	9.0	6.8
% aged 51 – 60 years	18.6	19.3	19.8	20.2	19.8
% aged 61 – 70 years	26.8	25.7	24.4	23.3	21.5
% aged over 70 years	39.5	41.2	43.5	45.2	50.0
Average age	64.1	65.9	66.5	66.5	68.1
<b>By occupation</b>					
% workers	13.4	13.5	13.6	13.9	13.6
% in agriculture	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.6	1.3
% technical occupations	6.8	6.4	6.4	6.6	6.1
% businesspeople	1.9	1.9	1.9	2.0	2.0
% other	7.8	8.3	8.7	8.9	9.6
% retired	68.3	68.4	67.7	67.0	67.4
<b>By education</b>					
% elementary	63.6	62.2	61.4	61.4	59.1
% secondary	27.4	29.0	29.3	29.4	31.4
% higher	9.0	8.9	9.2	9.2	9.7
<b>By length of membership</b>					
% joining between 1990 and 1999	3.3	3.6	3.6	3.5	3.3
% joining since 2000	0.0	0.6	1.0	1.7	2.4
<b>By gender</b>					
% female	42.7	42.8	43.5	43.4	43.2
% men	57.3	57.2	56.5	56.5	56.8

Source: KŠEM (2004: 52)

KSĚM's internal analysis of its membership and organisation presented for its 6<sup>th</sup> congress (KSĚM 2004) indicate that none of these negative trends, previously highlighted in 1995 and 1999, have been significantly halted or reversed. Indeed, many are accelerating. The party's membership is ageing – more than half are aged over 70 - and continues to attract few new or younger members (see tables 2 and 3). Its mass organisational network is continuing to decline and is in places largely moribund, necessitating a continual *ad hoc* process of grouping branches or transferring activities and responsibilities to the next (district) level of organisation. Much of the party's membership has little inclination to engage in political campaigning and has a passive attitude, expecting officials or higher levels of organisation to initiate and organise political activities. Many Communist events are essentially commemorative or ritual in character – what Czech journalists refer to as Communist 'political folklore' - or are merely social events with little real political content (see Montejzík, Meduna, Franta, and Rathovský 2004).

Table 4: Changes in the Age Composition of KSĚM Membership 1999-2003

	1999	2003	Decline
No. under 30 years	641	550	- 14 %
No. 31 – 40 years	3309	1453	- 56 %
No. 41 – 50 years	15 342	6805	- 56 %
No. 51 – 60 years	23 871	19 975	- 16 %
No. 61 – 70 years	34 397	21 621	- 37 %
No. over 70 years	50 696	50 375	- 1 %

Finally, it must be stressed that Social Democratic overtures to the Communists are purely instrumental. Although the two parties currently control a large parliamentary majority, there is no sense on the part of the Social Democrats of a potential Union of the Left. Uniquely, in a Czech context the regime divide between former opposition and former regime runs not between left and right, but between the main parties of the left. Social Democrat statements regarding their relationship with the Communist are thus highly inconsistent. Social Democrat leaders who hint at co-operation with KSĚM in some circumstances will later without hesitation denounce it as irredeemably Stalinist. This was, for example, the reaction of both Prime Minister Špidla (*Právo* 17 May 2004) and the Social Affairs Minister Zdeněk Škromach, who had previously called for the formation of a minority Social Democrat government with Communist support. At both local and national level, Social Democratic co-operation with the Communists largely functions as a means of gaining office, gaining votes for measures that centre-right partners oppose, or exercising leverage on these partners. Moreover, the anti-communism of key elements in ĚSSD sets clear limits to Communist-Social Democrat co-operation at national level, which, if institutionalised in any form, would be likely to provoke destabilising factional discord in an already divided Social Democratic Party.

*...or breaking apart?*

Although not as intense as in the 1990-3 period, when reformers were seeking to 'social democratise' the party, factional divisions on ideological lines has been a persistent feature of KSĚM at all levels. Although most members are broadly supportive of the neo-communist status

quo, opinions within KSĚM range from willingness to transform much of its traditional identity and practice to neo-Stalinist revanchism overtly celebrating the repression of the past and supporting the North Korea of the present. Paradoxically, the party's growing success since 1999 and the apparently increasingly real prospect of gaining a share in national office or at least in exercising a degree of national political power, whilst formally in opposition (the model used by Klaus's Civic Democrats after 1998) has exacerbated divisions in the party.

A faction of what might be termed modernisers, the best known being Vice-Chairs Miroslav Ransdorf (1993-2004) and Jiř Dolejš, have increasingly openly criticised Grebenířek's leadership. Such modernisers such appear not to be social democrats. Ransdorf, one the few genuine Marxist intellectuals still to be found in the Czech Republic, for example, was the architect of the neo-communist orientation, that in 1993 drafted plans to transform KSĚM into a Polish style post-communist alliance. Rather than seeking a new party identity or ideology, modernisers were critical of the party's failure to adapt to contemporary conditions or develop a clear strategy for gaining office. They were concerned that short-term tactical considerations were overriding work on strategy and related internal reforms to enable a political breakthrough. Communist support for Václav Klaus in the Presidential election in 2003 is seen as a typical example of a tactic with a short-term payoff (humiliating and dividing the Social Democratic party and governing coalition; electing a President prepared to receive Communist leaders), but little or no longer term strategic rationale. Despite a shared euroscepticism and commitment to anti-German notions of Czech national interests, the ideological gulf separating them make any real political alliance with Klaus's Civic Democrats is inconceivable. Such pragmatism, it is suggested, made the party too 'normal' in its willingness to ignore principle for the sake of party political advantage.

In this context, the issue of Czech accession to the EU and KSĚM's place within the EU polity has emerged as a touchstone issue. As a radical, anti-capitalist, anti-system party with strong nationalist stance, the KSĚM was unsurprisingly sceptical of rapid integration with existing West European institutions, which it felt could pose a threat to the Czech Republic's national traditions and national sovereignty leaving the country vulnerable to economic exploitation. Its preferred alternative are pan-European political and security structures, which it sees as a means of retaining ties with the former Soviet Union and China. However, despite the party's critical attitude towards accession, Miroslav Ransdorf and Jiř Dolejš both publicly stated that they favoured Czech EU membership. – Dolejš was quoted as saying that Czech EU entry is 'the only sensible option' (*Respekt* no. 28, 8-14 July 2002). For such modernisers non-EU scenarios were unrealistic and more likely to leave the Czech Republic in a 'neo-colonial' position with regard to transnational and US capital. A more realistic strategic was to work within the enlarged EU to transform it building on its social and regulatory aspects. Such views drew fierce public criticism from conservatives within KSĚM, which intensified when the two leading modernisers continued to argue this in public after the party decided to recommend a 'no' vote in the accession referendum. Tellingly, however, the party's position was a 'qualified no', which did not rule out membership in the longer term.

The recent creation of the Party of the European Left uniting communist and leftist parties across the EU25 has also proved similarly controversial within KSĚM. Modernisers saw links with other communist and left-wing parties in the European Parliament and the greater willingness of EU actors and institutions to deal with KSĚM as a 'normal' party could contribute to its efforts to break out of its domestic political isolation. However, the party's delegation to the founding congress of the PEL in Rome, although led by Ransdorf an enthusiastic proponent of KSĚM

participation the PEL, opted not to join ([novinky.cz](http://novinky.cz) 2004; Mahoney 2004). Ostensibly, this was because it was unable to accept the founding declaration's rejection of 'Stalinist practices'. However, the decision also reflected underlying concerns that the party's organisational autonomy as national party would be reduced and that it might be compromised if – as an European parliamentary party - it accepted EU financing (Exner 2004).

Despite the more restricted set of political positions involved, the underlying logic of the debates and conflicts in KSĚM is similar that seen in the party in the early 1990s and in other radical left parties in contexts, including neo-communist successor parties such as Russia's KPRF (March 2002). It oppose those who want to maximise the party's vote by broadening its appeal and acceptability for whom gaining office is the key priority to those for whom organisational and ideological steadfastness and the representation of an establish core constituency are more important

Given such factional conflict, it was expected that Grebeníček might face a serious challenge to his leadership at the party's 6<sup>th</sup> Congress in May. As well as challenges from Ransdorf and Václav Exner, the party's most conservative national leader – both of whom had stood against him at previous congresses – Grebeníček faced a new challenger in Vojtěch Filip, the leader of the Communist parliamentary group in the lower house of parliament. However, in the second, run-off round of voting at the congress for the post of leader, Grebeníček won comfortably, receiving 54% of delegate votes (Bek and Gotzová 2004). Nevertheless, delegate support for Filip was the highest for any leadership challenger since 1993 and, in the immediate aftermath of the congress. Grebeníček, whose term as leader now runs to 2008, was quick to suggest he had contemplated retirement and that Filip was his likely successor. The extremely low support for the more ideologically well-defined candidates Ransdorf (7.24%) and Exner (6.37%) in the first round of voting suggests that grassroots activist opinion in KSĚM is satisfied with the *status quo* and in looking for leadership alternatives is inclined to support 'centrist' power brokers in the party.

Filip's politics, like those of Grebeníček - and indeed KSĚM as a whole – appear essentially ambiguous. While some have seen his talk of opening up the party and developing a broad 'front of solidarity' as a belated form of Czech Eurocommunism, rediscovering the popular frontism of the 1930s (Pešánka 2003), other have noted that his appearances at reunions of communist-era border guards do not presage change. The failure of Ransdorf's usual quixotic attempt to win the party leadership came as no surprise. However, his subsequent decision not to withdraw from the party's national leadership not standing for re-election as a Deputy Chair was unexpected. Although he explained the decision as motivated by a desire to focus on work in the European Parliament to which his likely to be elected in June 2004, it led to renewed speculation that he was considering leaving KSĚM. Although Ransdorf has consistently denied this, his post-congress comments that Grebeníček 'was not the future of KSĚM' left little doubt that the political relationship between the two had broken down.

If followed by other modernisers, Ransdorf's disengagement from KSĚM could have significant consequences for the party. Although always a minority, Ransdorf and his co-thinkers have been a crucial source of strategic thinking and ideological innovation, which party leaders have drawn on, albeit in diluted form. However, there is, moreover, significant reason to believe that there are structural as well as political blocks on further adaptation. The departure of Ransdorf and Zuzka Rojbrová, in conjunction with the failure of Balín to secure election as a Deputy Chair, left Dolejš as the only committed moderniser among the party's five Deputy Chairs. The position

of modernisers was also weakened by the fact that the conservative Václav Exner secured Ransdorf's former brief as Deputy Chair for foreign relations (Lidové noviny 2004).

Powerful resistance to organisational reform appears to reflect vested internal organisational interests within the party and its apparatus as much as political conviction. Despite the replacement of administrative districts subject to central government by elected regional authorities with significant and growing responsibilities (education, non-specialist hospital services, management of many EU-funded projects), after much internal wrangling KSĚM decided not to create regional party organisations. Similarly, more radical proposals by a team led by Ransdorf (2004) that the party create parallel horizontal structures centred on goal-oriented teams to manage its electioneering and campaigning, buy in external marketing and consultancy expertise and seek financing from sources other than membership dues and state financing (e.g. business donations) were predictably ignored. Such changes were seen as not only ideologically questionable in diluting the mass character of the party, but threatened to transfer power upwards away from grassroots local cells and powerful district organisations.

### *Conclusions*

KSĚM is neither breaking through nor breaking down. Rather the Czech Communists are negotiating a slow, but in all probability limited, growth in support and influence coupled with the seemingly irreversible secular decline of its mass organisation and core electorate. Once again the party has chosen incremental change, which may ultimately manifest itself in a managed handover of the leadership from Grebeníček to Filip, rather than dear redignment. Despite the strategic opportunities that appeared at the end of the 1990s, KSĚM's organisational, ideological and human links with the old regime and cumbersome (if internally democratic) mass organisation, mean that it lacked the flexibility, dynamism and legitimacy to become as a populist challenger of broad appeal along the line of Poland's Self-Defence or Slovakia's *Smer* (Haughton 2002). Moreover, the party's self-absorbed bureaucratic culture, lack of recruitment and disconnection from social movements seems unlikely to generate the charismatic leadership crucial to such parties. Paradoxically, however, the absence of any radical realignment enables factional tensions within the party to remain within manageable limits. In political terms, however, it seems unwise to equate organisational decline and probable electoral stagnation with political marginalisation. In the longer term, one might for example, envisage a French scenario, whereby stagnation and decline of the country's once powerful communist party could *facilitate* its entry to national office. Moreover, even if we assume that because of age the party's membership will decline at an accelerated rate over the coming years, in ten year's time its membership would still amount to around 30, 000, a figure larger than the current memberships of either the Social Democrats or ODS and more than sufficient to sustain a national organisational network.<sup>1</sup> Despite the ominous demographic trends and strategic sclerosis afflicting the party, it still seems premature to judge what future role KSĚM may play in Czech politics. Rumours of the party's political death may once again prove exaggerated.

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<sup>1</sup> Arguably, the party's demographic crisis will only impact on its viability only in 20-25 years

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