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Czech Greens in the 2002 General Election: A New Lease of Life?

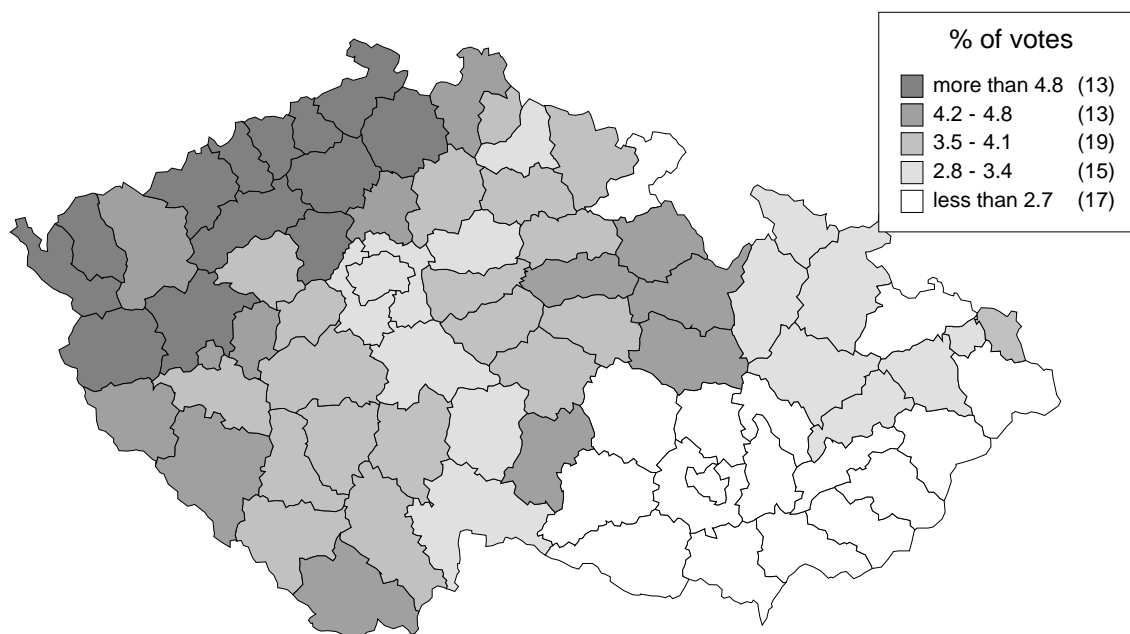
Introduction

For a short period immediately after the political change November 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia, the quickly established Green Party represented the popular environmental concern. The Green Party, founded in the Czech Republic (CR) by people with no environmental or political credentials, was reported in February 1990 to have 15,000 members. In contrast to the steep rise of the Greens, traditional environmental groups that had in their ranks personalities involved in dismantling the communist regime, were in a sharp decline and lost most of their members. However, the popularity of the Czech Greens was short-lived. For the rest of the 1990s environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs), benefiting from western funding and transfer of know-how, became the key actors in environmental politics in the CR, while the Green Party was in a continual decline. During the whole decade the relationship between the Greens and environmental groups was marked by mutual indifference verging on hostility. The June 2002 parliamentary election was a turning point for the Green Party both in terms of its electoral fortunes and its relationship with the environmental movement. The Czech Greens took an important step towards becoming a party resembling west European green parties, both in terms of their membership and electorate.

Czech Greens between 1990 and 2001: From Marginality to Oblivion

Despite far higher initial expectations, the Green Party did not pass the five per cent threshold in the 1990 Czech general election as it polled only 4.1 per cent. The party found its main electoral base in small and medium size towns in the most polluted north-western regions of the country (Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Green Party's results in the 1990 parliamentary election by districts¹



Waller and Millard [1992] had noticed already in the early 1990s that green politics in Eastern Europe lacked its post-materialist social base. Both the Czech Greens and other environmental groups soon realised that the number of supporters was very small. While environmental NGOs compensated for the lack of members by their ability to attract foreign funding and established themselves as important actors in Czech environmental politics and policy, the Greens' tiny membership and electorate

challenged the party's existence. The party seems to have attracted members only immediately after its establishment (viz. 44 per cent of those who were members in 1993 joined the party during the first month of its existence [Jehlicka, 1999]) and since 1991 it has been only losing members. As a consequence, at the end of 2001 the party had 239 remaining members, mostly party veterans in their fifties and sixties described by Pecinka [2002] as 'inconspicuous, but often devoted people, who have little interest in politics other than the environment'. The Greens' electoral chances were further undermined by the persistent refusal of environmental NGOs to support the party. This was due to the NGOs' dismissive attitude to party politics in general and furthermore to the fact that the Green Party members had no history of involvement in the environmental movement. Another reason was the murky origin of the Green Party in Prague whose founders had links to the Communist secret police. Although these people were later expelled from the party, the accusation of the Green Party being a hideout for the Communist secret police agents was for the rest of the 1990s habitually used by NGOs to demonstrate the party's untrustworthiness.

It soon became clear that apart from the name and party constitution, the Czech Greens were effectively a different party from their west European counterparts. Western Greens were typically younger university-educated (primarily in social sciences and humanities), post-materialist middle-class professionals, who were often members of environmental groups and who found their electoral support among voters with a similar social profile living in relatively affluent urban areas. The majority of Czech Greens had achieved secondary level education primarily in technical disciplines. Only 20 per cent of Green Party members were post-materialists [Jehlicka 1999]. The majority of those Greens with completed tertiary education

(about a quarter of the membership) had degrees in technical disciplines and science (77 per cent). There was no membership overlap between the Greens and environmental NGOs.

Nevertheless, one feature that the Czech Greens shared with most activists in environmental movements, was little enthusiasm for left-wing politics. This was confirmed by the exodus of an estimated two thirds of party members following the leadership's decision taken before the 1992 election to join two other small parties – the Socialists and the Agrarian Party - to create a leftwing coalition called the Liberal Social Union. Although three Green Party candidates on the coalition list were elected to the Czech national and three others to the Czechoslovak federal parliament in the last Czechoslovak election, this was the Greens' swan song in parliamentary politics. For the rest of the following decade, the Greens became a party forgotten both by the voters and the media.

The declining party was not only forced to withdraw temporarily from national politics (it was unable to take part in the 1996 general election due to financial constraints)² but with the falling membership it also found it difficult to keep a foothold on the local level. While after the 1990 local elections 900 local deputies elected throughout the country were Greens, the party later became almost incapable of taking part in local elections. Before the 1994 local elections, the party was already disorganized to such an extent that in 27 out of 77 districts it was unable to establish the party list in a single municipality. In eleven other districts Greens were able to secure less than 0.2 per cent of the total vote. The results of the 1998 local elections confirmed the Green Party's marginalization at the municipal level. The number of districts where the Greens were

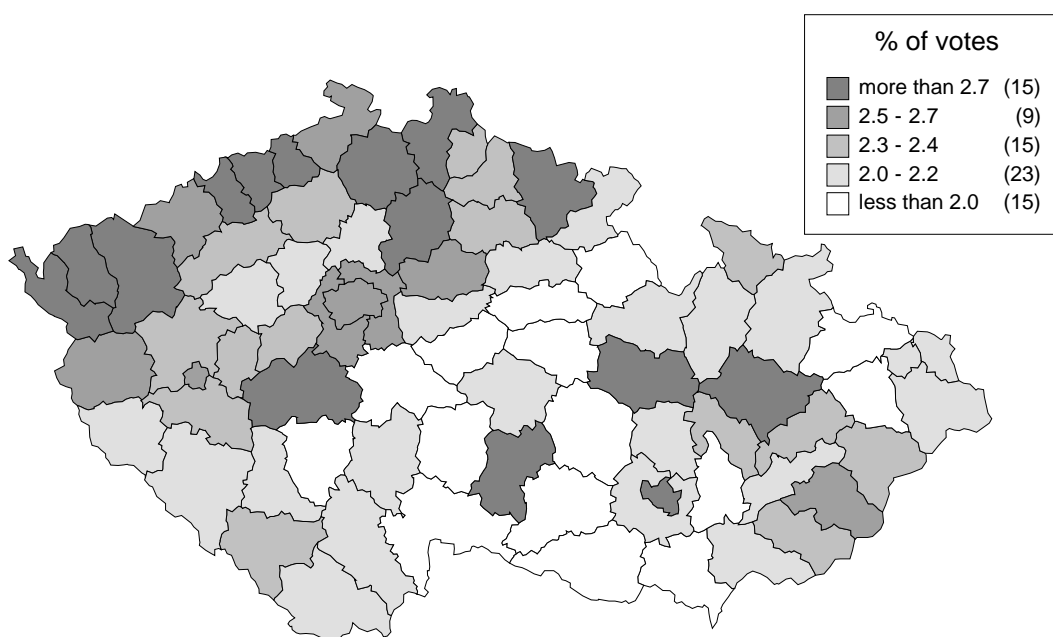
not able to participate in the elections in a single municipality increased from 27 to 33 and the number of elected Green deputies was only a few dozen.³

On the other hand, the total number of votes received in the 1998 local elections slightly increased, mainly due to the growth of support in several industrial urban districts – Mlada Boleslav, Karlovy Vary, Chomutov and Brno. Environmental damage was no longer the main explanatory factor in the distribution of the Green votes. The shift of the Greens' electoral base to urban and relatively prosperous areas was confirmed in the 2000 regional elections that took place following the creation of self-governing regions (kraj). The Green Party was only able to participate in five out of 13 regions but the districts where it achieved its best results largely overlapped with those that emerged out of the 1998 local elections.

The 2002 Parliamentary Election

At the beginning of 2002, the electoral prospects of what Pecinka [2002] called 'the torso of the Green Party' were dismal. With membership of 239, and debt of 12 million Czech crowns (400,000 euros) run up in previous unsuccessful electoral campaigns and no coalition partners, the party seemed to have been destined for yet another electoral humiliation. In the end the Greens emerged from the two polling days (14 – 15 June) as the sixth largest party in the country with 2.36 per cent of the vote. Far from an electoral breakthrough, this result nevertheless meant that the party doubled its share of the vote on the 1998 general election and received over 11 million crowns of state funding for its 112,000 votes.⁴ The financial collapse that threatened to sink the party has been averted.

Figure 2: The Green Party's results in the 2002 parliamentary elections by districts



The map (Figure 2) reveals a relatively evenly spread support for the Greens as the party received over two per cent in 62 districts out of 77 but also confirms a change in the geography of the Green vote signalled in previous local and regional elections. Environmentally damaged north-western Bohemia remained an important Green stronghold, but in contrast to the situation in the early 1990s, the party's electorate is now extended to a number of large and prosperous cities that are not stricken with environmental pollution.

The way to the Green Party's renewal started in autumn 2001 when a loose group of civil society activists called the Brandys Forum negotiated with the representatives of the coalition of four parties (Peoples' Party, Freedom Union, Civic Democratic Alliance and Democratic Union) with the aim of committing these parties to widening

the space for civil society actors in the post-election period. By their co-operation with the Coalition the Forum also sought to reinvigorate Czech democracy, crippled by four years of the 'oppositional agreement' under which the minority Social Democratic government was held in power by their notional opponents - the Civic Democratic Party. After hectic and confused negotiations, the idea of placing Brandys Forum members as candidates on the Coalition's ballots was rejected by the leadership of the Coalition. At the beginning of March 2002, the Green Party held its annual conference which elected a new chairman, Miroslav Rokos, a Brno - based party veteran. Rokos responded positively to Brandys Forum's proposal to enable its members to be candidates on the Green Party's ballots.

In the run-up to the election, the mainstream media took stock of these new developments in the Green Party. Searching the Czech printed media in 2001 for the key words 'Green Party' returned references only to the German Green Party's participation in the German government and to the Austrian Greens' opposition to the Czech nuclear power plant at Temelin. The first reference to the Czech Greens appeared in the Czech press only in April 2002 in connection with the Green Party's registration for the upcoming contest. Soon afterwards the media began to distinguish the Green Party from 25 other small non-parliamentary parties as one of the few considered worth voting for. A turning point came when a number of commentators disillusioned by the power-sharing deal between the two major parties, abandoned their traditional advice to the voters to refrain from wasting their votes by choosing small parties. Searching for ways to open the political system, many journalists stressed that a vote for a party that secures 1.5 per cent should necessarily not be

considered as a wasted vote as the ensuing state funding for the party enables its further development.

The Green Party was not only endorsed by a number of leading public intellectuals and the intellectual media but several opinion polls indicated that a significant shift in a similar direction occurred also in the electorate. The results of the opinion poll among first time voters for *Lidove noviny* daily documented a relatively high popularity of the Greens among the youngest generation of voters [Kholova 2002]. According to this poll, the Green Party was the only non-parliamentary party that would exceed the five per cent threshold if only first time voters voted. The popularity of the Greens was highest among the most educated young people as nine per cent of university students intended to vote for them. The tendency of the young and educated to vote for the Greens was also confirmed by the data poll collected by CVVM pollster only a week before the elections.⁵ Around that time the membership of the Green Party started to change too. Between March and August the initiative 'Green 50' created by the Forum's leading figure Jakub Patocka brought in to the party about 150 new members, mostly well-known intellectuals and civil society activists.

Towards a Western-Style Green Party?

The significance of the June 2002 election for the Czech Green Party rests not so much in its partly regained electoral ground, as in the pre- and post election convergence with actors of the Czech civil society and environmental movements. For the irony is that in contrast to a number of west European countries where the measure of the success of Green Parties is their performance in governments [Müller-

Rommel and Poguntke 2002], what is at stake in the Czech Republic is whether the Green Party succeeds in connecting with its potential electorate – the educated, urban and environmentally minded voters – which started to emerge in recent years. Throughout its history, the Green Party had continuously failed to attract people from this segment of society not only as voters but also as party members. By the end of 2001 the party was on the brink of collapse. At the eleventh hour and by a twist of fate, to its rescue came activists from Brandys Forum. With the participation of its candidates the party was for the first time able to offer a credible public face in the electoral campaign. The current chairman of the Green Party seeks to use this momentum to re-reshape the party in the vein of west European Greens. The success of this project critically depends on the ability of Brandys Forum activists and other like-minded people who have recently joined the party to outmanoeuvre the faction of party traditionalists.

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NOTES

1. These are administrative, not electoral districts, that nevertheless provide a convenient level of resolution for depicting changes in the geographical differentiation of the Green vote.

2. The party participated in the 1998 parliamentary election but received only 1.2 per cent. In the 1996 Senate elections held under the single-member constituency two-round majority system, all Green candidates were eliminated in the first round, receiving (with one exception) less than five per cent of votes [Kopecek 2002].
3. Interview with Miroslav Rokos, chairman of the Green Party, Brno 1 August 2002.
4. Political parties that secure more than 1.5 per cent of the vote in elections to the lower house of the parliament are entitled to state financial contributions equalling 100 crowns per vote. In addition, parties with more than three per cent of the vote receive 6 million crowns as an annual state contribution.
5. This data was made available to the authors by courtesy of CVVM.

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