

The Green Party: an undeserved success?

Michel Perottino

The success of the Green Party (*Strana zelených*) at the parliamentary elections in June 2006 was both expected and at the same time a surprise. While on the one hand the opinion polls had for several months been predicting a result higher than the 5% necessary for them to gain seats in parliament, on the other the particularly tense electoral campaign and above all the increasing tendency towards bipolarism (favouring the social democrats – ČSSD – and the ODS party) had been corroborated by the erosion of support for the smaller parties, notwithstanding the “tribunes of the people” dimension of the Communist Party. We shall not attempt to analyse here this development, although it had quite serious consequences for the development of the Greens, as we shall see later.

Political science is somewhat at a loss as far as environmental parties are concerned, particularly in the Central European region, where the Czech party is something of an exception. Thus for example the classification of an environmental party following the conceptual map of Stein Rokkan sometimes proves difficult, since the urban/rural cleavage (in a way the occupation of the agrarian “market niche”) appears inadequate to capture this type of reality. However, it is possible to adopt the arrangement proposed by Daniel-Louis Seiler and to position them on the “nature” side of the nature/market cleavage. This needs to be properly adapted to the Czech situation, where it can be seen that this divide has on many occasions proved a relevant one, especially in relation to the positions taken on climate changes, above all those adopted by Václav Klaus. Incidentally, the changes that have taken place in the programme of the Greens over the last two decades have

been considerable, notably with regard to the nuclear issue.

In the case of the Czech Green Party, the beginnings were relatively difficult if we take election results as a reference point, and it was only once the party abandoned a strictly ecological political line that it started to emerge from its relative anonymity¹. One of the moments of differentiation of political environmentalism was, in the Czech Republic, the start of privatisation under the aegis of Václav Klaus, or, if you prefer, the start of the primacy of the market economy over all other considerations, but also the options of successive governments in environmental matters and the changes in the system of Czech political parties.

The most recent elections (the regional ones in 2000 and the parliamentary ones in 2002 and 2006) tend to show that the best results are not obtained in the countryside². In 2000, for example, in the region around Brno (Southern Moravia), the Greens obtained an average result of 1.55% (making them eighth among the parties in the region, well behind the coalition with 31.64%, a figure which only the Communists came close to, or even exceeded in certain districts). Now the best result for the Greens was obtained in Brno-City (2.26%), and the worst in the rural districts (Znojmo 0.94% and Blansko 0.97%). During the parliamentary elections in 2002, the Green Party obtained a result of 2.45% in this region, with 3.28% in Brno but only 1.76% in Znojmo. It is therefore difficult

¹ Environmental movements, and also parties claiming to follow environmental principles, are sometimes considered by Czech political science to be extremist groupings. For a critique of this view see Jan Keller in Petr Fiala (ed.) (1999): *Politický extremismus a radikalismus v České republice* [Political extremism and radicalism in the Czech Republic], Brno: Masarykova univerzita.

² www.volby.cz

to sustain the idea that the Green Party today will take the place of the agrarians at the beginning of the 20th century (even disregarding the fact that the results of the agrarians during the First Czechoslovak Republic were substantially better at around 13 to 15%). In Bohemia, the Greens obtained its best results in 2002 (relatively, as the party did not get more than 5% in any region) in the northwest, in three regions that are relatively urbanised and parts of which are industrial (Karlovy Vary with 3.29%, Ústí nad Labem with 2.70% and Liberec with 2.76%), localities where the environment is still extremely polluted. By contrast, the results of this party in Prague were scarcely any better than the national average, and below the average in Bohemia. The situation improved considerably during the most recent parliamentary elections in 2006, confirming the previous results: the Green Party obtained 6.29% of the votes actually cast,³ resulting in six deputies in parliament.

The details of the 2006 results are as follows: 9.19% in Prague (notably 12.46% in Prague 1, the levels in the more “popular” districts being lower) and 9.58% in the Liberec region (with 11.6% in the town of Liberec), while the poorest results were obtained in Moravia (the rural and less densely populated region of Vysočina 4.89%, and the “industrial” region of Moravia-Silesia 4.34%), where the party had had its worst scores in 2002. In particular, it should be noted that the proximity of nuclear power stations such as Temelín and Dukovany does not mean electoral support for the party; in fact, the opposite is the case. The regions that are “traditionally” most heavily affected by pollution, notably in Northern Bohemia (the region of Ústí nad Labem in particular) do not vote for the Green Party in greater numbers. The only exception

³ 336 487 votes, as opposed to 112 929 in 2002 (2.36%).

to some extent is the sub-region of Chomutov, where the Greens received 7.51% of the vote in 2006.

The results of the regional elections in 2008 tend to show a more complex situation in terms of electoral support for the Green Party, ranging from 2% to 4% (with the 5% threshold not being crossed in any region), and no longer completely corresponding to the previous elections. The setback has been put down to internal conflicts (which we will discuss later), and has not called into question the party strategy based on a position with elitist emphases and governmental activity.

A turbulent existence

In 2006, the Green Party gave the impression of being a young party, although the first grouping with this name had officially seen the light of day on 24 November 1989. The original Czechoslovak Green Party (Československá strana zelených)⁴ had a fleeting existence marked by political scandals, notably the privileged relations between its leading figures and the secret police and grandiose announcements, for example about the very large number of members (more than 5000) that the party was supposed to have had after only a few weeks of existence. This first Green party was very soon denounced, both because of these escapades and because of its alleged relations, and it disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared. It was replaced by another grouping which had difficulty in ridding itself of the negative label of its predecessors. The only Green deputies in the Czechoslovak Parliament were

⁴ Lubomír Kopeček, "Strana zelených" [The Green Party], in Jiří Malíř, Pavel Marek (ed.): *Politické strany 1938-2004* [Political Parties 1938-2004], Brno, Doplněk, 2005, p. 1579.

thus elected in Slovakia. Officially the current Green Party came into being as a result of a meeting of different grass-roots associations and groupings, informally on 4 January 1990 in Prague and officially on 17 February 1990 in Brno. “Neither to the right nor to the left, but forwards!” became the new leitmotiv of a party which presented itself as being of a new type. The political orientation of this party in its beginnings was on the one hand rebellious against the left-wing tendencies of its European counterparts, especially the German one,⁵ and also relatively favourable towards nuclear energy. Indeed, as it had its roots in the movement of pre-1989 activists struggling against the environmental consequences of the excessive industrialisation of the former regime, and especially against coal-fired power stations, atomic power seemed to constitute a cleaner alternative. However, the party had to face two major limiting factors: the absence of active elite aware of the practical necessities of ecological activism, and the rejection by grass-roots ecologists.

In fact, throughout the 1990s the Green Party had to come to terms with the mistrust or even the total rejection of ecological activists, who denounced on principle all forms of party organisation as illegitimate on principle and sterile in practice, especially because of the limitations placed on them by their programmes (either the election programme was too ecological and not attractive enough for the voters, or else it was sufficiently open to other considerations, but then the defence of the environment disappeared in favour of other priorities). In addition, the

⁵ This was the case in all its dimensions, in spite of the links with communist parties that its counterparts might have. Thus, for example, there is no mention of the defence of the rights of minorities or of feminism in the first official programmes of this party, which remained tied to the specific features of ecological demands and the specialisation of the party in this field.

environmentalists who came out of dissident circles under the communist regime – and who enjoyed an aura of respect because of this – and who did favour political action on a party basis, all opted for parties that were not specifically ecological. Initially, in 1989 and 1990, they joined the Civic Forum, and then the other new parties, especially the successor parties of the Forum. This was the case for the main leaders of the Czech environmental dissidents, such as Bedřich Moldán (ODS), the brothers Miloš and Petr Kužvart (ČSSD), Jindřich Dejmál (KDS and then ODA), and also Martin Bursík (OH-DS and then KDU-ČSL)⁶.

The electoral failure of this party during the 1990s was undoubtedly due to its image, which it inherited from the first Green Party (they had been denounced as “melons”: green on the outside, but red inside, a reference to the alleged links with the communists), but also, and above all, to its programme, which in the final analysis was not attractive enough, and to the inability of the party to find personalities to head its lists of candidates who were well known among the general public or who had their roots in the environmental “civil society”. In addition, protecting nature became a secondary theme in view of the economic necessities and opportunities opened up by the construction of a market economy, which the majority of Czechs were in favour of at the time. The Green Party experienced some relative successes in the regions where the environmental devastation was greatest, but remained very weak in the towns.

The development of the party after 1990 was also characterised by fickleness and inconsistency in its

⁶ Pavel Pečínka, *Zelená zleva? Historie ekologických stran v Evropě* [Green from Left? History of the Ecologist Parties in Europe], Prague, G plus G, 2002, p. 186-203.

programme, which on occasion led some of its leaders to make rather strange alliances, notably with the extreme right (specifically with the Republican Party of Miroslav Sládek,⁷ primarily on the basis of a rejection of the political milieu, in particular its parliamentary form). In 1992, with a view to the parliamentary elections in June, the Green Party entered into a coalition with two other groupings in the political centre (the Agricultural Party and the Socialist Party) to form the Social Liberal Union, a move which enabled the Greens to have three deputies in the Czech National Council. Others were elected to the Federal Parliament, but internal dissensions and the development of the political scene led to a gradual diminution of this position and to the “Green” deputies leaving the party for other parties, in particular the Social Democrats. This episode marked the end of the presence of the Greens in parliament until 2006.⁸

The most appropriate term to describe the situation of the party during this decade is undoubtedly that of crisis. A multiple crisis from which the party did not emerge until the early 2000s. It should also be noted that there was a fairly strong proximity, if not to the ODS party itself, then certainly to those who voted for it, at least until Václav Klaus made himself known for his literally anti-ecologist position. After the appearance of the Union of Freedom party, essentially a splinter group that broke away from ODS, it became one of the parties that was closest to the ecologists, at least so far as the support of grass-roots ecologists was concerned, bringing together as it did a

⁷ The President of the Green Party who was close to the Republican Party and advocated cooperating with them, Miroslav Kulhavý, eventually left his own party and joined the Republicans, apparently taking the Green Party funds with him.

⁸ We should however note that the Green Party supported and recognised as being “theirs” the senator Jaromír Štětina, although he had not been elected under the aegis of the party and had never been a member of it. He very soon reverted to his “independent” status.

neo-liberal approach and new environmental perspectives, promoted in part by the Union. It is probable that the European dimension also played a role in this support, as the EU was one of the vehicles for placing the protection of the environment on the agenda of public policies. We believe it is important to note this proximity, because it seems to us to have had a considerable impact on the situation of the Czech ecological party over the last ten years: while a significant ecological trend exists with its roots in dissident circles, which is heavily involved in the “civil society”, on the other hand the electoral “success” of the Green Party in 2006 shows a continuity with the political position of the Union of Freedom. Later on we will see the factors that lead us to put forward this hypothesis.

During the early parliamentary elections in 1998 the Green Party put forward lists of candidates without making any alliance with other groupings, and proposed not only environmental measures, including anti-nuclear ones and measures favouring the development of rail transport, but also others that clearly bore the mark of social conservatism, in particular lowering the age of criminal responsibility and tightening the conditions for receiving unemployment benefit. This political profile later underwent several changes following electoral failures and control of the party being taken over by different leadership teams.

The electoral and governmental emergence of a new-old party

Control over the Green Party was assumed by several different leadership groups in succession. The takeover that probably influenced and stabilised it the most was the one it experienced in 2002, stimulated in particular by the group known as the Brandýs Forum, led by Jakub Patočka, the Duha movement, and others. The Brandýs Forum

formalised a network of personalities attached to the “civil society” and fairly close to the positions of the governmental coalition at the time, especially those of the Union of Freedom and KDU-ČSL. (Representatives of the Forum narrowly failed to be nominated on the lists of candidates of the coalition in place of the representatives of the ODA party.) After their failure in the elections of 2002, Jakub Patočka used the Forum as a base to organise the “Green fifty”: large numbers of activists joined the Green Party in order to transform it from within. The small number of party members before this operation made it easy to carry it out successfully.

The advantage of using a grouping that already existed but had no real political dimension is incontestable. In addition to being able to benefit from the label, it also offered the possibility of building on links that had already been built up, particularly from a European viewpoint (meaning the support of the European Greens, including the German ones, their know-how, backing, image, etc.), and thus to benefit from the image and legitimacy of a party that was at the same time both, if not old, at least established, and also “new” in the sense that it was not corrupted by power in advance. This image was incidentally that of all the liberal groupings that only maintained a presence in parliament for a short time.

The arrival in power of the Green Party took place under particular circumstances that made the party and its president indispensable for the ODS party and above all for Mirek Topolánek, who relied heavily on Martin Bursík during the protracted and difficult process of forming his government. Initially the Green Party shouldered an important part of the responsibility in this alliance, and

was allocated some major ministerial posts.⁹ In addition, the Greens were also able to place their “specialists” in other ministries, corresponding to a widespread practice established to the benefit of all the parliamentary parties except the Communists, who were completely excluded. Finally, being in the government and taking part in the decision-making processes, and particularly being close to the centres that decided on the allocation of government contracts – even if it was in the less significant sectors (although the environmental market is beginning to emerge) – constituted a key element which led to the Green Party seeing a substantial increase in the number of its members, to the detriment of its older members, as we shall see later. While no study exists on this matter, it has been noted on many occasions that these new members had formerly been close to, if not members of, the Union of Freedom. It is equally clear that this process of expansion benefited the Greens, who until then had not had at their disposal a member base with sufficient technical and administrative capacities.

A green programme difficult to implement in government

In terms of its ideology and programme, the connection between the current Green Party and certain dissident circles before 1989 is fairly clear, and it is undoubtedly possible to find examples of careers in ecological involvement leading from the grass-roots associations into politics. Links of this type have probably been appearing

⁹ The Ministry of the Environment (Martin Bursík), the Ministry of National Education (Dana Kuchtová, then Ondřej Liška), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Karl Schwarzenberg, although he was not a member of the Green Party), and finally the Ministry for Human Rights and Minorities (Džamila Stehlíková and then Michael Kocáb, who was also not a member of the party).

right from the beginning of the “post-socialist” transformation, and it is interesting to note that it is on the basis of the divide between the maximalists and minimalists that the ecologists involved in politics made their appearance, in opposition to the positions adopted by Klaus. The antagonism towards the current President of the Czech Republic is incidentally due to two factors: the principle of the defence of nature on the one hand, and that of civic involvement on the other. For another feature that is characteristic of the Czech Greens, which tends to grow stronger as they become more institutionalised and their programme is refined further, consists in their attachment to participative democracy, to the development of the “civil society”. However, the maximalist/minimalist divide is not enough for an understanding of the Greens: they have shown that their main preoccupation was the environment, and that the social or economic cost of the measures they proposed was secondary, at least until they joined the government, which forced them to seek compromises, in which eventually ecological demands clearly took a back seat. This dichotomy, together with other explanations and reasons, led to major and violent internal struggles, as we shall see later, and finally to the rebellion and then the expulsion of certain Green Representatives at the end of 2008.

In fact, in many aspects of their programme and ideology, the Czech Greens are far removed from the ecological parties in Western Europe, especially in France and Germany. Politically, they are close to the centre right – both in terms of their member base, which has increased considerably in recent years, and of their voters, with the Greens having benefited from the disappearance of the Union of Liberty from the electoral scene. Finally, since all the parties have for some time included in their programmes passages on the protection of the environment, it has become difficult for the Greens to base themselves solely on ecological issues. This has led

them to fiercely oppose the Social Democrats, whom they have accused of plagiarism, while they themselves have emphasised the fact that they have a programme that is now more comprehensive and wide-ranging than previously. It should be noted that the Greens have differences primarily with the Social Democrats, in other words with the only general party that gives prominence to ecological considerations, rather than with the parties (notably ODS) that obscure such questions.

The fact that the Green Party became part of the government coalition is without doubt a success in itself. Nevertheless, the implementation of the programme of the ecologist party has encountered a series of difficulties, so that the balance sheet after two years is not particularly good, in the sense that the objectives were not able to be met. The first difficulty consists in the way the government functions, and more particularly in the need to arrive at a compromise between the ministers, a compromise which is agreed on by a majority of the members of the government. This means that the Green Party must obtain the support of the ministers of the ODS or KDU-ČSL parties, not only for the ecologist programme to be followed, but also to avoid measures being adopted that would have a negative impact on the environment. The main conflicts have appeared between the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Industry. Furthermore, even in the ministries held by the Greens, the power is often exercised by the vice-ministers or other senior civil servants, with technical or political skills, who are nominated by the other two parties. The difficulties encountered or smoothed out by the Ministers of Education are a good example. The particular situation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs is another, for slightly different reasons which are due in particular to the role played by the Minister for European Affairs in relation to the Czech presidency of the EU.

A specific image and the Havel temptation

As we have seen above, the Green Party has presented itself as a new type of party since the beginning of the 1990s. If this assertion was originally principally negative in character – to distance itself from the Communist practices and the heavily damaged image of party politics – this initial sense was later complemented by another, equally characteristic of the post-1989 period. Not only did it endeavour to present itself as a new type of party, that is to say a new type of party organisation, but it also attempted to link itself to the original frames of reference of the ecologist movements of the 1980s. While throughout the 1990s the Green Party received only a little support from the grass-roots associations, especially from those with their roots in dissident circles, the situation developed favourably in the early 2000s after Jakub Patočka took over control of the party. The reasons for this relative change are undoubtedly complex, and are probably due in part to a realisation of the limited scope for action of the grass-roots associations, but also to the development of the political scene and the difficulties in imposing environmental issues on the “generalist” parties. Another important dimension was the growing awareness of the issue of climate change – and its appearance on the national and international political scene – and the need to impose it on those in power.¹⁰

It should be noted that this aspect grew stronger at the moment when promoting the integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union lost its *raison d'être*. Although the European issue did not disappear, it took on other forms, and rendered certain political programmes (in particular that of the Union of Freedom) obsolete and

¹⁰ The radical positions adopted by Václav Klaus undoubtedly played a role that favoured the Greens.

even useless, leading to the transfer of the support for these pro-integration policies to other political issues and groupings, in the wake of the pro- and anti-Klaus split, from which the Green Party also partially benefited.

It is here that the favour and then the support of Václav Havel, and the hackneyed subject of a “Havelian” party that would uphold and apply his moral ideas, takes on some importance. Although the Green Party did receive some backing from Havel, their expectation that they might become the Havelian party was disappointed. All the same, they were one of the parties to make use of, if not to abuse, the open support of the former President of the Czech Republic.

A party with little institutionalisation in practice

There is no doubt that it is here that the outcome of the short but intense history of this grouping has to be seen: the rules of the game are not yet stabilised and the necessities of government lead to tensions that are resolved under duress or by specific mechanisms such as the mass entry of new members to achieve rapidly changes that would otherwise be impossible. In addition to the uncertainties in the practical organisation of the congresses, in particular, with the delegates in many cases not having assimilated the rules of procedure of the supreme organ of the party, the real power has become centred in the Council of the Republic (*Republiková rada*). Presented for a while as the alpha and omega of the democratic functioning of the party and consequently as the symbol of the alternative character of this political party, this body has turned out in practice to also be a platform for the opponents of the leadership and above all of Martin Bursík, in particular for those who have failed to obtain a seat in parliament.

The most recent congress of the Greens in Teplice in 2008 was the occasion for a number of shows of force by the party elite supporting Martin Bursík. The latter was defended as he was seen as the one who had brought the party its electoral success and ministerial posts, while his competitors were viewed as the outstretched and unseen hand of the Social Democrat Party. Although the different forces of opposition existing within the party had joined forces against Bursík, the latter won a clear victory (although an incomplete one), if not by eliminating the internal opposition, at least by preventing it from speaking in the name of the party, and by finally ousting the main leaders of the dissident forces from positions of influence. One of the distinctive aspects of the way the Green Party is organised, one of the expressions of its way of “carrying out politics differently”, consists in the existence of two leading bodies with different competences, the Presidium of the party (*Předsednictvo*) and the Council of the Republic. The latter was made up partly of opposition figures. Faced with the impossibility of bringing about any change in the Council, Martin Bursík finally achieved the removal of the third of its members who had been elected by the congress of the party in 2007, who were precisely those who were criticising his policies. The remaining members of the Council are elected by the regional organisations of the party, as well as the members of the Presidium and the deputies. The decision was taken right at the end of the congress under particularly tense circumstances.¹¹

Dana Kuchtová was finally expelled from the party for having created a platform within it and above all for having used the party logo. Two parliamentary deputies, Věra Jakubková and Olga Zubová, first left the group of

¹¹ Originally Martin Bursík had wanted to amend the constitution of the Green Party so as to limit the powers of the Council of the Republic.

Green deputies in the Chamber of Deputies in November 2008 after the congress, and then were expelled from the party in March 2009, which eventually worked against the government, because they supported the motion of no confidence which finally brought about the fall of the government.¹² In the same month, Olga Zubová joined the new Democratic Party of the Greens, founded by former members of the Green Party who felt that it was no longer possible to work within their former grouping.

While the Green Party was able to put forward a certain number of specialists (and not only in the field of environmental protection), it often relied on people (specialists, businesspeople, and men and women involved in politics) who had only a very tenuous link with the party. As an example, the list of local government representatives elected on the Green Party ticket in October 2006¹³ consists primarily of people who are affiliated to the party without being members. Thus out of 16 “Green” mayors, 11 were members, while among the representatives as a whole, the proportion shifts in the opposite direction: 260 non-party representatives as opposed to 207 party members.

The national elections (the European elections in June and the parliamentary ones in October) will show whether the Green Party is capable not only of overcoming its internal contradictions but of making do with an image that has been severely damaged, and avoiding the fate of the liberal parties of which it is, in part, the successor in the electoral spectrum. The internal situation of the party,

¹² It should be noted that they voted in favour of the motion of no confidence after having tried in vain to secure commitments from the Prime Minister, Mirek Topolánek, on points contained on the electoral programme of the Greens.

¹³ <http://www.zeleni.cz/878/rubrika/starostove-a-zastupitele/>
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the often violent dissensions that have emerged since 2007, and in particular the absence of a genuine member base (which is to say a member base that is both active and works in the interest of the party), leads one to think that the success of the party could be a fleeting one, as it is focused too heavily on certain personalities.

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Pascal Marty

and Sandrine Devaux

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