

John Torpey 00:05

How resilient is populism at the ballot box? The Czech Republic held parliamentary elections this past week, and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš faced a test. He was one of the country's richest people even before he was elected, and the Pandora Papers revealed just before the elections that he secretly owned a luxury chateau on the French Riviera through a shell company. The European Union also found him to have a conflict of interest when his company, Agrofert, received subsidies from the EU. In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Czechs have protested against his government. Yet his ANO, or yes, party has remained popular, and the right generally remained more successful in the elections than the left. The Social Democrats and Communists failed to overcome the 5% hurdle and are out of the new parliament entirely. Do the recent elections foretell the continued resilience of populism in Europe?

John Torpey 01:06

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Today we're fortunate to have with us to discuss the recent elections in the Czech Republic, Petra Guasti, an Associate Professor of democratic theory at the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University in Prague. She's also been a Fellow at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz in Germany, and at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. She serves as an expert for the Bertelsmann Transformation Index, V-Dem [Varieties of Democracy], and Nations in Transit with Freedom House. And she holds two doctorates: one in political science from the University of Bremen, in northern Germany, and another in sociology from Charles University where she continues to teach. Welcome to International Horizons, Petra Guasti.

Petra Guasti 02:29

Thank you, John, for having me.

John Torpey 02:31

Great to have you with us. So for those who are perhaps less familiar with what's going on in the Czech Republic, maybe you could briefly set the stage about how we got to this moment, what are some of the broad developments in history since the end of socialism in 1989? And what happened in these recent elections?

Petra Guasti 02:54

Yes, thank you for the question. So I will start with the broad sweeps of history. So I think your listeners will know about the so called Velvet Divorce of Czechoslovakia, at the end of 1992, then 1999 entry into NATO, 2004 Czech Republic became a member of the EU. Domestically and more recently, I think the most important turning point was the Great Recession. After that the Czech party system became very fluid and increasingly fragmented.

Petra Guasti 03:32

It also brought the rise and fall of parties; the fall of established parties or significant decline, and the rise of populist and anti-system parties. An important aspect of Czech politics in that period was the presence of permanent opposition on both sides of the political spectrum. The Communists, unreformed Communists, on the left, and the radical right on the right side of the spectrum. This has pushed parties to cooperation while preventing ideologically coherent governing coalitions.

Petra Guasti 04:10

In 2013, we saw the rise of technocratic populism. So that was the ANO project, or YES, of Andrej Babiš, a business guy who came and promised to run the state as a firm. He was a successful businessman. And his idea was a quite smart one. So by promising to run the state as a firm, he alluded to technocratic expertise, and that allowed him to transcend the left and the right divide. So in a way to appeal to voters on both sides of the spectrum. And he remained in government as a prime minister. He's still a prime minister, but should be resigning soonish after losing the elections.

Petra Guasti 05:02

So what happened in the Czech Republic? We had general elections this past weekend. And they brought a huge change. So I would say the changes were three. First, perhaps mentioning the losers. So after 100 years, the Czech communists have departed the Czech Parliament. Also did not make it across the 5% threshold were the Social Democrats. The third losers, I think, in a way is the prime minister's ANO [party], who has who has finished second, and will have will have 72 mandates in the new Chamber of Deputies. Who also weakened was the radical right, which have, however, made it into the parliament.

Petra Guasti 05:56

And now to the winners. This was the two democratic coalitions. The Together coalition was 71 votes and the winner of the election. This is the conservative coalition of three parties. And the liberal coalition of Pirates and Mayors. And these five parties, or two coalitions, are now building the new government and they have, for the Czech Republic, a very comfortable majority of 108 seats in the 200 seat parliament.

John Torpey 06:32

So to what do you attribute the fact that the left seems to have been left completely out in the cold and the right seems to have really consolidated its power, even though Babiš seems in many ways rather unpopular?

Petra Guasti 06:50

Well, I think that Babiš, in a way became the victim of his own success. I mean, his voters were formerly the voters of both Communists and Social Democrats. He represents a very strong bloc especially composed of seniors. He increased -I mean, that is the interesting thing from how do technocratic populists then govern because they are neither left nor right. And this is perhaps best exemplified -so on one hand, Babiš was the first one who increased significantly the minimum wage, but also the pensions. On the other hand, he also cut taxes. So he's kind of trying to -he has something for everybody. But that's where the voters are.

Petra Guasti 07:41

Another important aspect is to say that about because of the threshold and the new electoral formula, about 20% of the votes finished below the threshold, and these were mostly the votes of the fragmented left-wing parties. The Communists have been declining for a long time. And so now you could say that they are more like center-left parties only present. But I think that will be the big task for the next four years. If the left can kind of form a block or a coalition and find a new way to appeal to the voters because they really need representation.

Petra Guasti 08:29

And a final point I want to say, I think that for at least the last past 10 years, the left-wing parties, mostly focused on kind of, that's what allows Babiš to get a foot in, because they reduce their agenda to promising and delivering, let's say more like on welfare, on welfare issues and outbidding each other like we are going to increase the pensions by this and we by this. And they actually didn't address important social issues. And I think that would be important, because currently, like issues about the future, about climate change, about housing, they are not present; they are not present in in the Czech parliament.

John Torpey 09:21

This is interesting, because it seems to me that typically populism thrives where immigration is an issue, and I don't think you've mentioned that as an issue at all. So could you explain is that, you know, in fact, an issue that is exploited by the sort of right populists or is it really not an issue?

Petra Guasti 09:42

Well, that is a great question, and how shall I answer? So, of course, migration, and especially immigration has been an issue for at least since 2015 in the Czech Republic. And that was the most important issue with which Andre Babiš tried in this current in this year's campaign to, like, scare the voters. So it was kind of project fear, like only I can defend you from the migrants. But the voters didn't buy it, because there are no migrants. So there are no big migration streams, Czech Republic for the migrants and asylum seekers. Czech Republic is not, it's more a transition country, which they just want to go through and get to the West.

Petra Guasti 10:37

And on the other hand, it's also important to say that Czech Republic has about 1 million migrant workers especially from, majority from, Ukraine, which are not taking jobs from Czechs and are generally if not accepted then tolerated. The presence is there. Companies are seeking them, because they just have for lower skilled jobs, which are not attractive to the people. But the turn of the anti-immigration rhetoric kind of painted this picture of a Muslim refugee, which will come and take over the country. And, and it didn't work because there are no Muslim refugees. So eventually, this has to like kind of, the issue extinguished itself.

John Torpey 11:31

And it's not an issue because migrants, asylum seekers, refugees are not really seen not really to be interested in staying in the Czech Republic is what you're saying. I mean, it seems a little odd given that it's a historically relatively tolerant place. And, I don't know that it has a great, long experience with Islam. But you know, it's a relatively prosperous place as Eastern Europe goes as well.

Petra Guasti 12:03

I think this is one of the major paradoxes. So actually, I am puzzled by it actually since the migration crisis. And it kind of shows you how important the supply side is in anti-immigration. So even if there was any immigration of Muslims in 2015-2016, in this big migration wave across Europe, this wouldn't have been the first time. The first Muslims emigrated during the Balkan Wars in the late 90s. And they generally integrated very well into the society mostly remained. Only a small majority returned. And I went back to the newspapers in 2016, to the newspapers from 90s, and it was not an issue. And some of the politicians were still the same by 2015 and 16. And their tone completely, completely changed. So I think there is a lot of like, learning among the populists, but it has its limits, if you have nothing to base it on.

Petra Guasti 13:17

And finally, I would like to say that this summer, especially more recently was the Afghanistan and Afghan refugees. Czech Republic brought its interpreters and people which were helping the Czech military in Afghanistan, and this move has been broadly supported by the population and was regarded as our responsibility to people who helped. So they were settled and but it still is going, what's interesting, the government gave them the choice, do you want to stay here, or shall we organize move to another Western European country? I think it's also because you don't have the migrants are going where they have, like a community they could rely on to start. And as it's not there, in the Czech Republic, it would be very difficult without any assistance without any networks, and neighboring countries. So either in Germany, or more further away in Scandinavia, that would be more to the places where, where they're trying to get to.

John Torpey 14:28

It's very interesting. And I don't want to spend all our time talking about this. But I mean, the other group that always comes to mind in this part of the world is the Roma. And there was of course, always a lot of concern after the end of communism that you know, the Roma populations, you know, were in some places indeed mistreated, but in any case, they were not going to be treated particularly well. Has that been an issue, is that a popular issue that the populists exploit?

Petra Guasti 15:00

They do, but it more masquerades as targeting, like, welfare parasites. So they wouldn't call it, they wouldn't call out Roma they would call people who are unemployed by choice, who are living off the welfare handouts and so on. But it's not exploited by the radical right because this is like the baseline. Even the mainstream right is saying that they will not call Roma out they will frame it more broadly in a non-racial terms, although everybody knows that it's mostly, that it's kind of a label they are using for Roma.

Petra Guasti 15:51

And although Roma are still facing huge issues: in employment; it's much harder for them to gain employment, it's easier to lose it; they face issues in trying to get housing, public housing, etc. So the Roma discrimination continues, there are organizations which are trying to deal with it. But the issue is not owned by the radical right, because the baseline kind of is, "yes the Roma are living off the state, of the generosity of the state." And in fact, recently, actually still under the Babiš government, they made some rules stricter on welfare. So to kind of make it harder to misuse them. But it's never never presented as targeting this group specifically.

John Torpey 16:55

I see. So, let's turn to an issue that came up right before the election, and that might have been thought to be rather damaging, and, of course, the revelation about the Chateau on the French Riviera that was held for Babiš by this shell company. And, of course, you know, the Pandora Papers revelations have revealed something that in some sense, I suppose, kind of goes without saying that the very wealthy have ways of hiding their wealth and engaging in corruption, tax avoidance, etc. So, one might imagine and combined with certain revelations from the EU, or criticisms from the EU about his conflicts of interest with regard to subsidies to his company, all of this might have blown up very badly and perhaps knocked him out. But that does not seem to have happened. So what how do you explain that?

Petra Guasti 18:02

Well, unlike some Western journalist, I don't believe that the media reporting on Pandora Papers have played a major role in in the Czech general elections in 2021. Of course, some Member of the Parliament for the Pirate Party tried to go to France and kind of in a [Alexei] Navalny style video on YouTube about the properties. I'm sorry to report that the chateau it's actually a villa. So that was a little disappointment, if we may call it like that. But to speak more seriously, I think that it's really hard that these corruption issues are difficult to leverage in elections.

Petra Guasti 19:00

So for the voters of ANO and the seniors, they voted with their wallet. They either don't care or don't believe that this is the case. They believe the Prime Minister when he says that the media is against him, his own media don't report on it. So kind of he controls what information they consume. But even if they knew, they kind of prize it in, "yeah, politician steal but the other ones who were stealing or corrupt, didn't increase our pensions, and he did." So kind of that would be the voting with their wallet.

Petra Guasti 19:36

I think the voters of the two opposing blocks; the democratic opposition, they already knew that he is misusing the EU subsidies that his companies has, that his success was not [because of] his business genius, but [because of] his ability to exploit state and EU subsidies, so that he is basically ruling over a castle made of sand, and of the subsidies. So if you will to take the subsidies out of it, that will kind of all implode.

Petra Guasti 20:14

And finally, the voters of the radical right, I mean, they perhaps believe that, but they already believe everybody, all politicians and all politics, is corrupt. So I think in this atmosphere, the Pandora Papers kind of cemented in the people's position of, and if anything, perhaps could influence turnout. But I don't think so.

John Torpey 20:44

Right. So, ANO, this party whose name is simply YES, seems to represent a broader trend of parties that are sort of anti-political parties. I mean, I think of Italy Forza Italia, which simply means "Go Italy". Emanuel Macron's La République en Marche, which just means "the republic on its way" or something like that. And ANO sounds like a similarly kind of techno-populist, if you like, kind of name that really says we don't have really an ideology, we're just here to get things done. So do you see that concept of technopopulism, which we've had author Carlo Invernizzi talk about here on the podcast as a kind of important type of populism.

Petra Guasti 21:44

Thank you for this question. I have to say I'm a huge fan of Professor Invernizzi-Accetti and Chris Bickerton and their new book on techno-populism. So I think that the techno-populism in a way is a response to the people's disenchantment with these ideologies, with the politics of the left and of the right. But also with the globalization, which is kind of pushing, reducing the space of the government, where government can actually make some decisions that influence people's lives.

Petra Guasti 22:23

Look, Czech government has relatively little control over Amazon, which now has a huge new plant on the border with Germany, which actually only serves Germany. So Amazon doesn't send to the Czech Republic, but it's all packaged in Czech Republic, with Czech workers, working for Czech salaries. But of course, the Czech government has, beyond some labor rules, has little control over the global capital. And that's the case for most governments around the world.

Petra Guasti 22:59

I mean, what techno? I think it's important to distinguish here, that these parties, they come, the technocratic element is not necessarily how they govern. It's how they come to power. So it is combining the the appeal of technocracy and the appeal of populism. It is always connected with kind of a strong person, you mentioned Emmanuel Macron. We could mention also Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, which I think was the major figure in this. What's interesting is that technocratic populism may be relatively new in Europe, but it has existed in Latin America for a lot of time, and exactly this kind of appeal of good governance. That's that's what people what people mostly want. So this is what the promise is in the election.

Petra Guasti 23:57

Andrej Babiš summarized it in promising to run the state as a firm, which also wasn't original because Berlusconi already promised that before. But I think that then they get plagued with this hubris of corruption of many, many issues. And I think what's important in government is that this appeal to experts, is an attempt to avoid accountability for decisions. So kind of hiding behind the facades of

experts. But then we need to ask the questions, how were these experts selected? Why do they stay, which expert solutions were not, not included, etc, etc.

Petra Guasti 24:46

And this is something which the Czech Constitutional Court addressed when it said that some of the pandemic measures the government of Andrej Babiš adopted are in breach of the Constitution. And there was a very interesting passage in the in the decision, which was that the government bears political responsibility, even if it relies on experts for advice and expertise. But the responsibility is political. And it remains political. It cannot be shifted on experts. It remains with the elected officials. And I think this is kind of the limit of the expertise.

Petra Guasti 24:46

And it remains to be seen, whether, and how we assess whether Andrej Babiš and Emmanuel Macron really try run the state as a firm. I believe that democratic states are not firms, because citizens are not stakeholders. And what I find the most worrying in this is this kind of telling the people that once they give the vote to this technocratic populist in the elections, they can just relax because they will only assemble at the next at the next shareholder meeting. So the elections kind of turn into the shareholder meetings, but we are not shareholders, we want to hold our elected officials or we should want to hold our elected officials accountable, not just once in four years, at the ballot box, but throughout.

John Torpey 26:23

Right. So I mean, these trends, and also the fact that the Communist Party, as you mentioned, for the first time in I guess, 100 years, you said, has been kept entirely out of the Czech parliament. That seems to me, you know, a kind of major milestone. You know, how much of the politics of the Czech Republic today are product of the kind of socialist era? Or is the era of transition now definitively over?

Petra Guasti 26:56

Thank you, John, this is another great question. And I have to admit that I've been asking myself for some time, whether post-communism ever ends, you know, is it like a temporary period? Or is it like, is it the marker, which remains for a long time. And I quite agree with Mark Twain who said that history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. But I believe that Czech politics, and the challenges it's facing today, are now closer to the contemporary challenges in Europe and in the United States.

Petra Guasti 27:30

And I think that this almost 20% of the votes below the 5% threshold, if the forthcoming government will not seek to represent the losers of transformation and globalization, we could see the return of illiberalism in the next elections. And I think this is somehow I would like to build a bridge for your readers: I think this is the same challenge the United States is facing that if this government, if the Biden Presidency, does not succeed, there will be, it will be much harder, if not impossible, to steer clear of the illiberals who have promised cure and have the diagnosis.

John Torpey 28:18

Well, I'm sure that's right. And obviously in that sense, we're all cheering for Joe Biden right now. But I wanted to sort of finally widen out the lens a little bit and look at the Czech Republic from a kind of comparative perspective in comparison with its neighboring countries. You know, when we were getting ready for this, you said some interesting things about it.

John Torpey 28:43

My image of the Czech Republic has always been the kind of 'punches above its weight' as we say. It's a pretty small place, but what comes out of there generally has a pretty good reputation. And of course Franz Kafka, but on the political side, Tomas Masaryk and of course, most famously, most recently, Václav Havel. And I wonder what you would say about the sensibilities of the Czechs and how they differ from the Poles and the Hungarians, and perhaps the Austrians, that surround them.

Petra Guasti 29:19

Yeah, thank you. So I would say yes, it's a strange country. And I think it owes a lot to its geography. And so when we were discussing I was saying, Masaryk more than 100 years ago wrote an essay, which was discussing where does the country belong, if it's to the West or to the East, and we have still not definitely answered the question. I mean, I would like it to be in the West. Masaryk saw it, but Masaryk had another proposal and he saw the importance of like a belt of democratic countries going from the Balkans to the Baltics, and seeing them as kind of insurance against the war. That of course didn't work out in the Second World War. We know that now. And so I think in this, they are still they are still stuck there.

Petra Guasti 30:20

I think that in many ways, the major difference between the Czech Republic on one hand, and Poland and Hungary on the other is that the Czech institutions remain resilient. So it's not that Andrej Babiš didn't try, he even succeeded in awarding himself the subsidies and retaining impunity. But he did not, I mean, he was trying to push against the guardrails as hard as he could, but they held.

Petra Guasti 30:56

And I think this is really, this is really a test to those scholars and constitutional lawyers that have written the Czech constitution, that the Czech parliament has the upper chamber, which has turned important, that the Constitutional Court has held and that that it remained nonpartisan, and that even in the pandemic was calling on the government that you cannot put the health of the people over the health of the democracy and calling for responsibility. So I think this is this is really important.

Petra Guasti 31:34

And perhaps interestingly, we seem to think in political science about fragmentation as something bad. But if you're looking at Hungary and Poland on one hand, and Czech Republic on the other, perhaps it was the fragmentation which have prevented the total control by one leader. And the biggest difference I would say between between Viktor Orban of Hungary, Andrej Babiš of Czech Republic and Jarosław Kaczyński of Poland is that only Viktor Orban is governing with a constitutional majority. That in Poland, they have majority but coalition government, now the coalition is bit fragmenting. But Andrej Babiš had

a minority government. And so that's why he couldn't change anything about the guardrails. So in a way, fragmentation can be a blessing in disguise as it turned out in the Czech Republic.

Petra Guasti 32:38

And I think also, this nativism which we see a lot in Hungary and Poland, did not resonate with a large enough group in Czech Republic. Last week, Prime Minister Babiš even invited Viktor Orbán to one election rally, and everybody was just like, "this is what you are like, are you admitting that this is where you want us to go? Or you think that this is appealing to us?" So that kind of was very interesting that, he played his cards like this, and it didn't work out.

John Torpey 32:44

That was a very interesting analysis that makes my kind of comment about Czech exceptionalism that much more appropriate, I think, because it sounds sort of like a Tocquevillian analysis of Czech democracy. And of course, as you know, the founding fathers' insight was precisely what you were saying, that "the more difficult you make it to actually do anything, the easier it is to resist power grabs, and unitary power and that sort of thing." And if that's what they were trying to get away from.

Petra Guasti 32:47

And finally, I would be remiss not to mention the strength of the Czech civil society, which has been absolutely crucial. A group formed in 2018, called Million Moments for Democracy has in 2019 organized the largest protests since 1989, that kind of brings us to the Velvet Revolution. So that was the first time since Velvet Revolution that in Prague, Letná Square, 300,000 people gathered. And they gathered for the same reason in 2019, like in 1989, for democracy and the rule of law.

Petra Guasti 33:45

And it was this group, which organized through not just in Prague, but throughout the country, and called on the fragmented democratic coalition to build fragmented democratic parties, which were five at the time, telling them "you have to build coalitions, we are going to support you, but you cannot run each by yourself, you have to come together." And I think they succeeded in that, on like pushing on the parties to form this coalition to overcome personal and policy differences. And understand that when democracy is at stake, you have to come together.

Petra Guasti 33:46

And finally, in now 2021, they ran for the first time, a grassroots campaign, I would call it the US style grassroots campaign throughout the country. And I think that it's especially thanks to them that the turnout increased by almost 5%. So I think that it's the guardrails that are holding and civil society which is not willing to give up that makes Czech Republic resilient to the illiberals who are trying to change it.

John Torpey 35:42

I mean, it's also interesting to me, you know, relative to what's going on in South Africa, where I can recall conversations with people who have spent their whole lives working on South Africa and telling me that, you know, they saw South Africa as not likely to go to Zimbabwean route. And that had to do they thought with the kind of respect for the rule of law. I don't know about civil society so much, but a

kind of respect for institutions that you're pointing to. Now, I think it's unfortunately not so clear that this is really the case in South Africa, but time will tell.

John Torpey 36:21

But in any case, I want to say thanks very much for a fascinating conversation. That's it for today's episode, I want to thank Petra Guasti for sharing her insights about the recent Czech elections and Czech democracy and civil society in general. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Merrill Sovner for her help putting this episode together. And Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. And I want to acknowledge Duncan McKay for sharing this song "International Horizons" as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.