

Massive, Loud and Uncompromising: Greta Thunberg in the Czech Republic

Article by Matěj Stropnický

December 8, 2019

Greta Thunberg has forced climate change up the Czech political agenda. But it is still uncertain whether and how the debate can influence the country's path. Climate deniers remain strong, and even those who accept the severity of the problem seem willing to drop the topic when convenient. In this context, Matěj Stropnický argues, a strong climate movement will be of utmost importance.

In the Czech Republic as around the world, Thunberg's call to action at the United Nations in September sparked a reaction from politicians and elites stung by the clarity of her words: "How dare you?" Thunberg's speech went further in her criticism of the ruling classes – both political and economic – than she had done before. While she had been welcomed (or benevolently ignored) by the elites up to that point, this speech angered many, triggering numerous fiery rebuttals. Politicians of the Czech Republic were no exception.

The government reaction

"Greta Thunberg has many interesting observations. Yet I am not sure that emotional, hysterical, theatrical, and sometimes even aggressive speech leads to a rational discussion. It is an unfair generalisation that nobody is doing anything. It is not true," reacted Prime Minister Andrej Babiš at the General Assembly of the UN. Although the prime minister claims otherwise, in his case, Thunberg's accusations are very much true. Aside from the new government programme to plant thousands of trees, Babiš and his Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) party have done almost nothing for the environment.

The reason for their inaction is a perceived lack of demand for environmentalism in the Czech Republic. The government is composed of Babiš's ANO, the declining Czech Social Democratic Party, and the similarly struggling non-reformed Communist Party. All of them are ambiguous towards the climate agenda as their constituents, made up of the less wealthy parts of society, are assumed not to care about environmental and climate issues.

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Babiš was one of the Central European leaders who blocked the EU's 2050 target for achieving climate neutrality. "Why should we decide 31 years ahead of time what will happen in 2050?" he was quoted as saying. Although his present government (in office from 2018, but with strong continuity from the previous government of 2013 to 2017) has a climate strategy on paper, its policies are far from ambitious. Coal power plants will not be closed before 2075 – in the meantime two nuclear power plants in Temelín and Dukovany will be enlarged and modernised – and no serious restrictions on polluting businesses are planned. The prime minister himself owns large agricultural and chemical businesses (under the conglomerate Agrofert) and has a strong interest in avoiding

carbon emission regulations.

Right-wing resistance

Green ideas are even less understood on the far right of the political spectrum: many forces deny the existence of climate change outright. It was therefore no surprise when Václav Klaus Jr., leader of a small nationalist parliamentary group and the son of the former president, launched a personal attack with reference to Thunberg's alleged disability: "We do not think that a 16-year-old teenage girl from Sweden with some diagnosed psychiatric disorders should determine Europe or the world's industrial policy."

"I am on the side of reason, freedom, and responsibility, not on the side of ideology and the restriction of freedom," said Petr Fiala, the leader of the strongest right-wing party, Civic Democratic Party (ODS), thereby establishing that his party sees climate denialism as the most reasonable point of view and that he considers all the politicians who listen to Thunberg to be "madmen." His words are especially concerning when you consider that ODS has led several cabinets in the past. Currently it has around 12 per cent support in the polls, but it is not impossible that ODS leads a governing coalition again in the future.

For the far-right, climate denialism is the most reasonable point of view. But the ODS new policies could shift towards a more moderate coalition.

It is hard to predict what such a government would look like. The ODS leadership announced new environmental policies three weeks after Thunberg's speech. This could potentially signal a shift towards a more moderate position resembling that of the British Conservative Party, often ODS's political lighthouse. If that is the case, it would at least mean that climate denialism does not become Czech government policy.

Climate believers on the Right

Three smaller right-wing and centre-right parties – all balancing on the edge of the parliamentary threshold – are more favourable to the green agenda: TOP 09, the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), and the Mayors and Independents party (STAN). "If the pressure, perhaps a little too emotional, will lead the elites to take environmental challenges seriously, then I'm a little grateful," said the leader of STAN, Vít Rakušan. This climate-friendly rhetoric, however, should not divert from the fact that these parties have their own caveats.

TOP 09 is a liberal party that addresses young professionals and middle-aged white-collar workers in larger cities. It supports modernity, innovation, and renewables and opposes the fossil fuel industry. It even has its doubts about nuclear. But due to the party's strong market orientation, TOP 09 believes that change should come from deregulating the service and technology sectors, which are seen to be less polluting.

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STAN and to some extent the Christian Democrats, both parties with rural constituencies, are more supportive of state regulation. The Mayors and Independents party has devised several pro-climate action plans in its regional bases and proposes recreating the paths between fields that were ploughed over under socialist collectivisation. Still

visible on maps, restoring these paths would save rainwater, stem desertification, and reduce soil degradation. Although the appeal is very traditional, the measure would certainly be positive for the health of the soil.

Here comes big businesses

The limits of politics aimed at ‘caring for nature’ become most visible when big businesses face increased regulation. The right-wing liberal weekly *Respekt*, close to the centre-right but that also supported former president Václav Havel, wrote following Thunberg’s speech: “Greta Thunberg offers – knowingly or unconsciously – the overthrow of the existing democratic system. Her message does not try to stay within the limits of a free, and therefore complicated, eternally non-functional, cyclical, and slow world. (...) It obviously makes no sense to take her message seriously.”

Big business warn that reform in the name of the climate could undermine the Czech Republic’s economic growth.

Their position, which confuses capitalism with democracy, is quite popular among the upper and middle classes that work for corporate businesses. They often warn that reform in the name of the climate harms corporate profits, threatens their personal incomes, and could undermine the Czech Republic’s economic growth. Framing the issue as a threat to democracy makes the positions of activists look dubious, as it is harder to support something that is labelled as anti-democratic.

Advocating for climate action is made even harder by the fact that almost all the important private media companies are in the hands of fossil fuel companies. The remaining outlets belong to the prime minister who himself has interests in environmentally harmful sectors. Non-biased coverage of the climate can mainly be found in small, overwhelmingly online media. Although the climate movement has grown over the last year, with Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion often present in the public debate, it is still very weak in comparison not only to Germany or Austria, but even neighbouring Poland or Slovakia.

The absence of the Left

One may ask in this context, where is the Left in the Czech Republic? In fact, it is more or less absent from mainstream politics. The closest thing to a climate-conscious left-wing position can presently be found in one of the governing parties, the marginally influential Social Democrats; in the non-parliamentary and rather weak Green Party; and finally within the emerging Czech Pirate Party, which has somewhat taken the place of Greens. The Pirates have representatives in the Czech Parliament and, since May 2019, in the European Parliament, where they sit with the Greens/EFA group.

The Pirates’ campaign slogan “Ecology without ideology” demonstrates their opportunism towards the agenda.

Pirate Party leader Ivan Bartoš reacted to Greta Thunberg’s speech as follows: “I don’t blame the emotion. It is proportional to the age of the activist. I understand that it is frustrating for a young woman who sacrifices her childhood and adolescence to save the planet and hope for the future for humanity to listen to the voices of statesmen.” The Pirates certainly have some representatives who are deeply devoted to the climate agenda and connected to grassroots movements. But they are also a techno-optimistic party that supports deregulation in favour of innovation, even though experts and climate-conscious individuals know by now that innovation alone will not

be enough to solve the global climate crisis. Their campaign slogan “Ecology without ideology”, while successful with the public, demonstrates their opportunism towards the agenda. Their position is further weakened by the fact that none of their members are experts on environmental topics and that the party does not have the climate agenda at its core. In the future, it could easily become something that they are willing to sacrifice to achieve other goals.

An ambiguous outlook

The climate crisis is definitely on the agenda in the Czech Republic. There is no other explanation as to why almost every political force would feel the need to comment in some way on the words of Greta Thunberg. Whether and how this can have an impact on Czech politics in a possible post-Babiš era is hard to tell.

The 2021 elections will most likely cause another shift to the right, but that does not mean that a shift towards more sustainable politics is out of the question. ODS’s increased attention to the environment (despite their denialist narrative) and the statements of some other parties are positive signs. But whether these manifest themselves in serious policies depends on the pressure that can be exerted by the growing climate movement.

One of the lasting heritages of the communist era is that the more progressive part of the electorate leans right. People in the cities tend to vote centre-right and oppose the present cabinet of Prime Minister Babiš. This attitude persists and feeds into different expectations among voters towards climate politics in comparison with Western European countries. Climate policies based on innovation will find it significantly easier to attract support than those based on regulation. The Pirates have understood this well. In this way, however, climate politics become just another technological race that overlooks social justice, the redistribution of wealth, and the protection of rights.

As none of the present political forces are going to commit to a climate agenda unless they are forced to do so, the weaker non-governmental sector has to rely more on grassroots activity. They have to go out on the streets, show that they are present, and make their voices heard. The push for responsible climate politics must be massive, loud, uncompromising, and sustained – exactly how Greta Thunberg does it.



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Published December 8, 2019

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/massive-loud-and-uncompromising-greta-thunberg-in-the-czech-republic/>

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