

The Czech Pirates: Banking on Europe

Article by Mikuláš Peksa

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Following an impressive rise in recent years, the Czech Pirate Party is one of the main contenders in the country's upcoming national elections. In a political context still marked by divisions from the last century, the Pirates are trying to put forward a different, pro-European narrative. Pirate Party MEP Mikuláš Peksa explains why he is convinced the European level is the place to solve problems such as corruption and threats to digital rights.

This interview is part of a [series](#) that we published in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: The Czech Pirates have gone from strength to strength in recent years; conquering the Prague mayoral elections and electing three MEPs to the European Parliament. Now you're looking ahead to elections in October as one of the main parties. What explains this success?

Mikuláš Peksa: Speaking practically, the Czech Pirate Party (CPP) is part of the broader Pirate movement. We have colleagues in the parliaments of Luxembourg and Iceland, and some other Pirate parties have been successful in Europe. The recipe behind this success is constant striving for transparency, information freedom, self-determination, privacy protection, and protection of fundamental rights. Those are the values that distinguish us.

Countries that were formerly behind the Iron Curtain all share certain structural problems of corruption linked to the continued influence of former Communists. For example, the current Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is a former Communist and member of the intelligence service. He is also one of the richest men in Czechia. That's how it works here and that's why the mix of more transparency, fighting corruption, and improving public services has proved successful. It's something people haven't received from the state since 1989. The people today expect more.

The Pirates are allied with Green parties at the European level but your roots and identity are different: the movement to reject the intellectual property rights enforcement treaty [ACTA around 2012](#) was particularly strong in Central and Eastern Europe, for example. What role do the rising importance of ecology and the green agenda play in Czechia? Is it a major issue and how do the Pirates position themselves?

The Czech Pirates were set up as an optimistic technostructure movement relying on data and science. The "Green Wave" that we see in European politics is closely connected to the scientific findings that show the horrible and worsening state of our planet. Starting from this point without any prejudices, the immediate conclusion is that something needs to be

done. So for us Pirates, the green agenda is a purely rational effort to save the planet and climate.

Most Czech parties are part of the generation that was set up following the revolution in 1989. What they all share is that they position themselves vis-à-vis the former regime: either against it or with nostalgia. In this context, bringing something new – climate protection – creates a huge misunderstanding. We are either perceived as Communists coming from the West trying to impose restrictions on traditional ways of doing things or the former Communist Party whips up their old anti-German and anti-American narratives against us. Most politicians and media figures are still stuck in this 1990s version of the world. That's why we are relying more and more on the new progressive, liberal media that are ready and willing to actually cover climate change properly to deepen people's understanding of the issues.

So that's at the level of politics but what about in society? Are there young climate protestors in the streets or older generations protecting the forests as in Poland? In the 1970s, the Czech environmental movement was quite large and helped destabilise the regime.

The wave of environmental mobilisation that was seen under the Communist regime and during the 1990s weakened in the last couple of decades. That many environmental measures were finally actually applied also partly explains its decline. Today, movements such as Fridays for Future do exist, but they are much weaker than in Germany. Even though most people accept that climate change exists and is a problem, the level of mobilisation and emotions connected to it are too weak to build a campaign purely on environmental or climate issues.

You've mentioned already that you are part of something wider which is the European Pirate Party. How important do you find the European dimension in shaping the direction of Czech politics?

The European dimension is present in the Czech debate however the most prominent sources of input are the European institutions, most commonly the Commission. Many parties actually define their positions on the green agenda with respect to the position of the European Commission. On the other hand, the CPP is part of the Pirate movement. I am proud to be the chairperson of the European Pirate Party. The Czech Pirates have a strong position within the movement currently and are co-shaping its direction. It's a unique situation because it's quite uncommon for a single small country to have such an influence on a broad international movement.

But what role does the figure of "Europe" play? Is it far-flung Europe interfering and dictating, or does Europe still have that "back to the West" feel-good factor of the early 2000s?

Since the financial crisis, the relation towards the EU has been weakened and it worsened again during the migrant crisis. Today the Czech Republic is one of the most Eurosceptic countries in Europe.

I think the most controversial point is the conflict of interest of our current prime minister.

Andrej Babiš is the prime minister of the Czech Republic and the owner of Europe's largest agricultural company by revenue: Agrofert. It is a major agro-industrial actor with connections to the chemicals industry. It is also a tool to suck money from the European budget by means of cohesion funds, agricultural policy, and other funds, as well as being a major polluter.

Within the Czech government and the European institutions, Babiš inherently represents the interests of the company. The company has a direct representative who protects its interests in the reform of European agricultural policy and other European laws. This conflict of interest is a Europe-wide issue and perceived as such by the Czech population because it is simply impossible to support this through European money. That's why the debate is now about whether the prime minister will step down or whether he will sell his company.

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The Czech Republic is an average-sized EU country. It is a former Eastern Bloc member but is now well established in the EU. Where does it sit in the wider European geopolitical landscape, in relation to such constellations as the Franco-German partnership, Brexit, Visegrád, and so on?

I could talk at length about how politics is divided here between people who are oriented towards the East and people who are oriented towards the West. The main part of the Czech mainstream is oriented towards the Visegrád countries: Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia (although Slovakia is not playing the same cards as the other V4 countries).

From the Pirate point of view, we clearly see Czechia as a partner of Western countries. We can definitely find partners within Benelux countries by means of policies, as well as in Germany. Whichever way the elections go in two months, we still expect that Germany will be a partner for us.

What kind of issues - such as green, digital, or rule of law - do you work with your European allies on? Does cooperation take place primarily among the Pirates, with the Greens, or with other progressive capitals alongside Prague such as Warsaw and Budapest?

The European Pirate Party is a distinct political family like the Social Democrats or the Greens, but we share similar positions on issues with other parties and it's important to team up with like-minded partners. We are not running solo. When it comes to the agenda, the digital agenda was always the most important. That's the core of the party and where we started.

Speaking practically, one of the most important issues is the [Digital Services Act](#) and the question of regulation of online platforms, currently discussed at committee level in the

European Parliament. We want to deliver on those ideas to protect people's fundamental rights like dignity and privacy within the existing legislation. Most of us have backgrounds in IT so we share expertise and inner principles that drive the whole approach towards digital policies in a way that secures fundamental rights and democracy. At the same time, climate issues are becoming increasingly important because of the science and there we want to act as partners for other movements who consider those issues to be central.

To what extent do elections elsewhere in Europe affect the Pirates and Czech politics?

As the biggest country by population in Europe and Czechia's biggest neighbour, Germany has the biggest influence. From following the German election campaign, my feeling is that the way the German Greens are being attacked by the Conservatives is similar to those tools that Andrej Babiš's people are using to attack the CPP. They are manipulating our positions on issues such as housing policy. I know for example that the words of a Green mayor in Hamburg were intentionally twisted in order to present him as a Communist. My colleagues in Prague were subject to very similar attacks.

Hungary is another important case because basically what happened at the European level was that Andrej Babiš teamed up with Victor Orbán and they became best friends. Babiš has admitted publicly that they are friends. They both need to protect their corrupt, crony relations within their parties and countries and they strongly support each other. I found myself and many colleagues being dragged further into the issues that are being raised by Fidesz. We are supposed to explain what Fidesz's anti-LGBT law is about and how it works because people are really talking about it and we are here advocating for fundamental rights.

The EU today is facing crucial strategic questions. Tensions are rising between the US and China and climate change, the pandemic, and trade are all global issues. How does the Czech Pirate Party and European Pirate Party see Europe's place in the world and the future of the EU itself?

I can probably answer by explaining how I myself joined the CPP. I read a programme of the German Pirate Party and it said "European politics is not foreign policy. We consider it domestic policy." That was what brought me through the German Pirate Party to the CPP. Nowadays when speaking about it, this is a vehicle to make policies happen.

We have often been criticised by other parties and the prime minister for seeking to resolve the issues of his conflict of interest on the European level through European law. I have to admit he is in conflict with European law which prohibits this type of behaviour. Many colleagues in the national parliament, especially the Conservatives, were scared of this approach. They would prefer to keep our focus on national issues but, no, we are part of Europe and Europe can be a means to solve problems.

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How do you see the EU relating to its partners in the world?

Compared to the Greens, we are a bit more hawkish. We are definitely not scared of seeing European autonomy in areas such as defence or foreign policy. We would very much like to see that happening. Of course, digital issues are at the forefront and Europe's loss of technical competence is deeply worrying. Why can't we produce European microchips? Why are we relying on other actors for technology such as 5G?

We would like to see a digital policy that promotes open design and technologies to allow knowledge-sharing and prevent lock-ins. Pursuing such a policy would allow Europe to build its own capacity for being strategically autonomous in the area of technology.

Where do you see the EU in 2030 or 2035 in terms of internal and external balances?

We need to improve our internal processes so they provide more effective solutions to problems. In the area of foreign policy, we quite often see that the EU is unable to take a single, strong position towards external dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. We need to find a way to improve the process so this is resolved. I'm especially speaking from the position of a citizen of an Eastern European country in close proximity to Russia. The same division also prevents Europe from working as one on tax issues; instead we are constantly struggling to have a more balanced and fairer approach so the richest are no longer hiding in tax havens. The EU is the tool to resolve tax evasion and avoidance.

In my view, Europe needs these structural reforms in order for the EU to further expand. It's not anything against the Western Balkans countries but if every single country at the table can veto any decision it becomes impossible. We can't depend on a system which allows people like Babiš, Orbán, and Kaczyński to blackmail the whole continent with a single veto.

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The elections are in October. What are your party's priorities for this election?

The most important aim is to modernise the state. Czech industry is becoming obsolete. It is based on classic manufacturing but we really need to move to smarter, more digital and green industry that would be competitive with the rest of the world. We're lagging behind and need to update the country and its infrastructure. Unfortunately, it will not be easy because most of the political mainstream seems to oppose that agenda and prefers to focus on calling us neo-Marxists rather than discuss the real issues.

For the first time, it's us against everyone else. Now we are the main target even for our competitors within the opposition, who prefer to attack us rather than the government. This is something new and we are speeding up our processes in terms of how we respond to social media and via other channels. We have hired a company to help us analyse fake news targeting the Pirates. This election campaign is about the reach of communication and we need to be in control despite facing political forces that control part of the media.

Which level of politics is going to be most important for the Pirates in the coming years? Are you focusing on the local, national, or European levels?

We try to connect the levels. There are people who will tell you the local level is the most important but I can tell you the European level is the most important because the Pirate movement's origins lie in issues around the internet. You can't really touch the internet on a national level, it's possible only on the European level. That's where you can influence it, for good or for bad.



Mikuláš Peksa is a Czech biophysicist, political activist, and an elected member of the European Parliament. His work falls under the Committees on Industry, Research and Energy, as well as Budgetary control, Economic and Monetary Affairs and Tax matters. He started his political career with the Czech Pirate Party where he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament. Mr. Peksa also chairs the European Pirate Party and the Tibet Interest Group in the European Parliament.

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