

The Czech Republic Needs a Green Velvet Revolution

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In the heavily industrialised communist Czechoslovakia, the democratic revolution of 1989 was also an environmental one, which produced important results in the 1990s. In today's Czech Republic, that green momentum has run out: the country is among the most carbon-intensive in the EU, and fossil oligarchs control most of the media. But change may come when least expected.

There are few clearer examples of the confusion in contemporary Czech public life than the debate on the climate crisis. The Czech economy is one of the most carbon-intensive in the EU, and the country's per capita emissions are far worse than the European – let alone global – average. But the Czech debate on climate reflects neither the urgency of the issue nor the particular responsibility the country has as one of the world's leading polluters.

Czech government policy has a long history of neglecting environmental priorities. The low level of construction of new renewable energy sources or the absence of commitment to carbon neutrality by a certain date are just two instances. In general, Czech climate policy only moves forward under pressure from the EU.

This was not always the case. The catastrophic state of the environment was one of the main reasons for the delegitimisation of the communist regime before its fall in November 1989. In fact, environmentalist groups and their demands were an essential part of the movements that brought the communist regimes down throughout the Soviet bloc. The Czech Republic was no exception.

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After the Velvet Revolution, many environmentalists became members of governments, and their achievements, such as reducing air pollutants by setting limits on coal mining and better protecting nature, are among the undoubted successes of the post-1989 changes. The Czechoslovak revolution was not only “Velvet” but also green.

However, with few exceptions, Czech society's interest in environmental conditions gradually waned in the new democratic conditions. And nowadays, it shows a deep ignorance of the climate crisis. What are the reasons for this decline?

Productivist mantra

The Czech political debate traditionally places a strong emphasis on the country's productive capacities. Many politicians promote large infrastructural projects such as highways, nuclear power plants, mines, or

car factories. This tendency dates back to the period immediately following the Industrial Revolution when the Austrian Empire decided to concentrate a lot of its heavy industry in its Czech “periphery”.

Heavy industry was also a top priority of the pre-1989 communist regime. Czechoslovakia was sometimes called the “forge of socialism”, producing a wide range of strategic and consumer goods for the whole of the Soviet bloc.

Leading figures of the communist regime had a great passion for long lists of statistical data about the number of cars and refrigerators produced, raw materials extracted, apartments built, even tons of steel and cement produced. This did not end with the fall of the Communist Party.

The neoliberal turn in the 1990s – which was not the original ambition of the 1989 revolution – promised to lead the country out of socialist “backwardness” and to catch up with Western economies. Almost three decades after this ambition was declared, we can safely describe it as a spectacular fiasco.

In most purely economic indicators, the Czech economy has not come close to matching the performance of Western Europe. The gap is most evident in areas where efficiency matters. Moreover, the income gap between the Czech Republic and most Western European countries is still about the same as it was thirty years ago.

This does not prevent practically every prime minister from making promises to “catch up with the West”. The current one, Peter Fiala of the right-wing ODS party, is no exception. His vision, which he recently presented at a conference organised by the country’s most powerful companies, is to invest heavily in infrastructure such as building hundreds of kilometres of new motorways or new nuclear reactors at the Dukovany power station. At the same time, he wants to cut public spending.

Large green projects such as wind farms or support for community energy systems are also in the prime minister’s visions of the future, but only to achieve a more “modern” and productive economy. The Czech Republic should be a country “where it is worth living, investing, but also travelling for holidays or studies,” Fiala said at the conference.

In fact, the country is subject to a constant brain drain as many of the most talented young people choose to live in more privileged parts of Europe. And the policy of austerity, which has undermined budgets for education, health, culture, and other areas essential to a good quality of life, can only exacerbate this trend.

Moreover, the authoritarian and far-right opposition is reaping the rewards of the government’s shortsighted austerity policies. The most likely scenario now seems to be that the country will follow the path of Slovakia and Hungary after the election in two years’ time.

Technocratic salvation

The priority given to productivism has the effect of minimising political debate on key issues. Politicians do not need to offer policy visions, they just need to offer the best way to increase economic output. In other words, the best politician is the expert, someone with a technocratic background who “knows how things work”.

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Technocracy has long been influential in the Czech Republic, and “experts” have traditionally been seen as the people to whom we look for salvation. This tendency is perhaps stronger in Czech political culture than elsewhere; the Czechs are sometimes described as a “nation of engineers”.

The best example of this phenomenon is the completely irrational relationship of the Czech political establishment to nuclear power. This has deep roots in the communist era, when the idea to build one nuclear power plant per five-year plan was born: the communist party planners wanted to build one in every major district of Czechoslovakia – ten in all. And most of them had already chosen their sites.

Eventually, only two of them were completed before 1989, and two more, one in Slovakia and one in southern Bohemia, were under construction at the time of the Velvet Revolution. Both were completed – with massive delays and cost overruns – after some bitter battles and huge protests from civil society.

Today, the same technocratic structures, the nuclear lobby, and corporate interests that pushed through the projects in the 1990s and early 2000s are promoting nuclear power on the pretext that it can be part of the solution to the climate crisis, even if this idea has been discredited.

Rational arguments are not the strongest asset in the current Czech public debate, especially when it comes to energy policy. The discussion on the subject is heavily influenced by the media with direct links to fossil oligarchs, big business, and their corporate structures.

The oligarch Daniel Křetínský, who invests heavily in coal mines, coal and gas power plants, and other fossil infrastructure, also owns media houses and newspapers. He is the second largest Czech publisher after another oligarch, former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who is currently in negotiations to sell his media empire to comply with new conflict of interest legislation.

Křetínský controls one of the largest Czech tabloids, *Blesk*, the influential weekly *Reflex*, and several radio stations. In addition, one of the largest liberal magazines, the weekly *Respekt*, as well as the most read economic daily *Hospodářské noviny*, are owned by former coal mine entrepreneur Zdeněk Bakala.

These oligarchs have a strong interest in maintaining the status quo, which is dominated by large fossil or nuclear energy corporations such as Daniel Křetínský’s EPH and Pavel Tykač’s Se.ven, as well as state-owned ČEZ. Opportunities for smaller enterprises and new models of energy production based on sustainable resources and ownership distributed among diverse communities and cooperatives are far behind the horizon of the Czech political debate on climate.

Conservative science

The third leitmotif of the Czech debate is the peculiar role played by climate experts. Those who are regularly given a floor in the media seem more worried about being considered “radical” than they are about the climate crisis. They tend to be evasive, often downplaying the link between extreme weather events and climate disruption. Radim Tolasz, an expert of choice for much of the mainstream media, has a reputation for warning more often against “climate extremism” and “green radicals” than about the burning of fossil fuels.

Another regularly quoted voice is Radan Huth, head of the climate research centre at the Czech Academy of Science. He is an active member of the ruling ODS, which has a long tradition of climate denial. However, Huth is not an outright climate denier. He acknowledges human-made global warming, but he often repeats that today’s climate policies cannot solve climate change and that the solution lies in technological progress and adaptation to extreme weather conditions. In a country where oligarchs

control most of the media, Huth's arguments support the status quo based on fossil fuel.

A new green class

If the Czech Republic wants to fulfil its climate commitments, it obviously needs far-reaching economic transformations. But this cannot happen without a critical mass of citizens who push for those transformations to happen. Change is difficult to achieve with a fossil oligarchy controlling most of the energy industry and media houses, and without clear climate science.

The lack of informed discussion on the green transition and the climate crisis also shows how social injustice, weakening democracy, and ecological devastation are interlinked and cannot be solved unless they are tackled simultaneously. The first necessary step is to remove fossil fuel interests from any negotiations about the energy transformation and future energy policy. This is one of the areas where the EU is failing miserably to protect the interests of its citizens.

Of course, the Czech Republic also offers virtuous examples when it comes to fighting for climate and democracy. In recent years, new initiatives and organisations such as [Re-set](#) and [Limity jsme my](#) have emerged in the Czech climate movement. They promote cooperatives and sustainable energy systems owned by local communities or municipalities, and work tirelessly for the necessary transformation to a green, just, and truly democratic society.

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For the Czech Republic, the way to a better future is to build a movement that resists the interests of fossil-fuel corporations and oligarchs. The country is a laboratory in which we can test what future lies ahead. Will it be run by the exploitative oligarchs and corporations heading towards authoritarian rule and ultimately disaster, or will it turn towards green, social, participatory democracy?

It seems that the time has come for another change of political and economic system on the scale of the Velvet Revolution. And it should happen with the same spirit and aspirations of 1989 – a just, green, and truly democratic society. The fact that a few years before 1989 no one saw the revolution coming offers some hope.

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