**Achievements and Challenges of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia\*[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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**[Abstract]** Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is the direct successor to the Komunistická Strana Československo. Founded shortly after the political upheavals of 1989, it is one of the few parties in Central and Eastern Europe to retain the name of the Communist Party and to adhere to Marxism-Leninism. Since its founding, it has maintained the status as a parliamentary party, successfully entering the European Parliament and participating in local public administration after repeatedly breaking through political isolation. In 2018, it even indirectly became part of the state power by supporting the minority government. Its electoral victory is unique among communist and workers’ parties in the CEE region and rare among communist and workers’ parties in the world today. Despite its success, it faces three serious challenges: a declining and aging membership; a massive loss of voters; and possible changes in the leadership and direction of development.

**[Key Words]** Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia; Overseas community parties; Socialism; Political party system

The Komunistická Strana Československo (Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, hereinafter referred to as “KSČ”) celebrated its 100th anniversary on May 16, 2021. In 1946, the KSČ won the first free elections in the country since the end of the Second World War. In July 1960, the constitution adopted in Czechoslovakia proclaimed the victory of socialism and established the leadership of the Communist Party in the country. In November 1989, the political upheavals in Czechoslovakia led to the collapse of the communist regime and a serious setback to socialism. Founded in 1990 as a direct successor to the KSČ, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (hereinafter referred to as “KSČM”) is one of the few parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to retain the name of Communist Party and to adhere to Marxism-Leninism. In the early 1990s, many Czechoslovak politicians and scholars predicted that the Communist Party would either withdraw from the political arena or become marginalized in a political environment of free competition among several parties. However, the historical development of the last 30 years has shown that the KSČM not only has more members and primary organizations than other parties, but it has also maintained the status as a parliamentary party, successfully entering the European Parliament and participating in local public administration after repeatedly breaking through political isolation. In 2018, it even indirectly became part of the state power by supporting the minority government. In recent years, KSČM’s support has declined for a variety of reasons, but its influence on the country’s domestic and foreign policies has increased significantly. Despite its success, it also faces a number of challenges that make its future uncertain.

I. Development and Evolution of the KSČM

Since its founding in 1990, the development and evolution of the KSČM have shown different characteristics in three phases, which can be described as follows.

1. From 1990 to 1993: Clash and differentiation inside the party during its early years

After the “Velvet Revolution” in November 1989, some “vaciliating” members of the KSČ joined other political parties, such as the center-left wing Czech Social Democratic Party, the center-right wing Civic Democratic Party, and the centrist Christian and Democratic Union, the KDU-ČSL. Only those loyal communists remained in the party.[[2]](#footnote-2) At that time, the KSČ was faced with the problem of how to continue its activities in the new context of competition among several parties. At the extraordinary congress of the KSČ held in December 1989, it was decided to establish regional organizations in the Czech Republic and Moravia, thus putting an end to the asymmetric arrangement of the existence of only the Komunistickej Strany Slovenska (Communist Party of Slovakia, hereinafter referred to as “KSS”).[[3]](#footnote-3) In March 1990, the KSČM convened a founding meeting. In October, it convened its first congress. At the 18th congress of the KSČ held in November, the united KSČ was transformed into an alliance of the KSČM and the KSS. The KSS was soon renamed the Party of the Democratic Left and began a transformation towards social democracy, like some other post-communist parties in the CEE region. The alliance between the KSČM and the Party of the Democratic Left officially ended in April 1992 when the latter decided to become fully independent. During this period, there were also calls from within the KSČM for a transformation similar to that of the KSS. In an intra-party referendum at the end of 1991, 76% of the members voted to keep the name as it was, and members who voted for a name change seceded from the party.

In June 1990, in the first free elections held after the upheavals, the KSČM stood for elections within the framework of the KSČ and presented itself as the second most popular party in the Czech Republic with 13.24% of the votes. In the second parliamentary elections held in June 1992, the KSČM initiated an electoral coalition called the “Left Bloc” with the “Democratic Left”, and received 14.05% of the votes. They successfully became the second largest party group in the Czech Federal Assembly.

Around the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, clashes and disagreements within the KSČM became even more pronounced. In December 1992, the KSČM held its second party congress in Kladno and adopted a party programme that emphasized the communist orientation in the new context. This programme is still the basic programme of the KSČM today.

Clashes within the party intensified when Chairman Jiří Svoboda advocated reform and again proposed to change the party’s name, which met with increasing resistance from the membership. In order to resolve the crisis within the party, the third congress was held in June 1993, and it was decided to keep the party’s name as it was and to adhere to the communist orientation. Miroslav Grebeníček was elected as the new chairman. Then, a number of small fractions within the party who were dissatisfied with the results of the congress gradually left the KSČM to form new parties, such as the Party of Democratic Left, the Left Bloc and the KSČ People’s Party. This ended a period of differing views and unclear development goals within the party.[[4]](#footnote-4)

1. **From 1993 to 1999: Toward stability and unity**

By the end of 1993 and early 1994, the division of the KSČM come to an end. Of the political parties derived from the KSČ, the KSČM became the only influential political force in the political arena. Although it also advocated democratic socialism in its programme, it remained loyal to the communist orientation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

From 1994 to 1996, the leader of the KSČM launched bitterer criticism against the Czech ruling coalition and the social system as a whole after the upheavals and consistently pursued radical opposition policies as the dominant party at the leftmost end of the Czech political spectrum.[[6]](#footnote-6) At the fourth congress held in December 1995, it was concluded that the party had overcome internal disagreements and was moving towards stability, with its programme and strategy recognized by its members. At this congress, Miroslav Grebeníček was re-elected chairman.

In the parliamentary elections held in 1996, the KSČM received 10.33% of the votes and became the third most popular party in the parliament. The relatively stable voter coverage encouraged the KSČM to focus on more effective campaigning and planning of programmatic visions. During this period, the KSČM began to take an active stand on the country’s foreign policy, opposing the *Czech-German Declaration on Reconciliation*, taking a negative attitude towards the Czech accession to the EU, and criticizing the decision of the Czech Republic to join NATO. In the early parliamentary elections held in 1998, the KSČM received 11.03% of the votes and reaffirmed its position as the third most popular party in parliament.

At the fifth congress held in December 1999, the party made it clear that it accepted and adhered to the communist orientation. In the report of the Central Committee of the KSČM, it was stated that the party would maintain its communist character and defend its unity against attempts to undermine unity, social-democratic intentions and dogmatic voluntarism.[[7]](#footnote-7) A number of programmatic documents were adopted at this congress and emphasized more intensive youth work and more attention to vulnerable groups in society.

1. From 2000 to Present: More intensive party building and enhancement of political influence

In the 21st century, the KSČM continued to maintain its communist party character, adhere to Marxism, defend the interests of vulnerable groups in society, and be committed to maximum redistribution of social income. At the same time, it was still critical of the political situation in the country. In the first local elections held in 2000 since the independence of the Czech Republic, the KSČM won a significant victory as the most popular party in Ústecký and the second or third most popular party in other krajs. It was not able to be part of any kraj government because it was isolated by the other parties. In the general parliamentary elections held in 2002, the KSČM won another victory with a support rate of 18.51% and 41 out of 200 seats in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in the Czech Republic. Its Deputy Chairman Vojtěch Filip was elected Deputy Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, where the chairmanship and deputy chairmanship of a number of committees were also held by members of the KSČM.

In May 2004, when the Czech Republic joined the EU, the KSČM convened its sixth congress. The congress adopted a number of resolutions on youth, social issues, elections and various party issues. In particular, it adopted a programmatic document called *Hope for the Czech Republic*, which further completed the *Kladno Programme* adopted in 1992. It was stated in the programmatic document that the basic programmatic aim of KSČM policy is socialism, a democratic society of free and equal citizens, a society which is politically and economically pluralist; it is based on maximum civic autonomy and it is prosperous and socially just; it cares about preserving and improving the living environment and secures a dignified standard of living for the people and promotes security and peace; this relates to a strategic aim of the KSČM which is based on longstanding traditions of Marxist thought and achieved by a democratic path; the KSČM has always rejected practices which allow or justify the restriction of democracy, discrimination or repression of opinions and create conditions for the emergence of a cult of personality.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In the European Parliament elections held in the following month, the KSČM received 20.26% of the votes as the second most popular party in the Czech Republic, and it held 6 seats in the European Parliament.

On October 1, 2005, Grebeníček resigned, and Vojtěch Filip was elected the new Chairman of the KSČM at a meeting of the Central Committee. In the general parliamentary elections held in June 2006, the KSČM received 12.81% of the votes and held 26 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, maintaining its position as the third largest party in the parliament. In May 2008, the KSČM held its seventh congress and adopted the documents called *Declaration on Socialism* and *Socialism in the 21st Century*, as well as a statement for the self-employed and SME operators and a resolution against the building of U.S. radar bases in the Czech Republic and other countries.

In the elections to the European Parliament held in 2009, the KSČM was the third most popular party with 14.18% of the votes and held 4 seats in the European Parliament. In the parliamentary elections held in 2010, it had a support rate of 11.27% and held 26 seats in the Chamber of Deputies as the fourth largest party in the parliament. At its eighth congress held in 2012, Chairman Filip stated that the KSČM would work to build a more equitable social order - socialism, where people would get what they work for, where social interest would be prioritized, and where assets would no longer be the decisive criterion for social stratification.[[9]](#footnote-9) In the early general parliamentary elections held in October 2013, the KSČM received 14.91% of the votes and held 33 seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

In May 2016, the KSČM held its ninth congress at which it reflected on the history of the period from 1948 to 1989. The delegates argued that the failure of socialism in Czechoslovakia was the result of a combination of objective, subjective, internal and external causes, but that the main causes were problems with the functioning of internal systems, weakened civic initiatives, increased differentiation within the party, poor scientific and technological development and living standards, and insufficient concern for ecology; they also attributed the outbreak of the “Velvet Revolution” in Czechoslovakia in November 1989 to social contradictions that had been persistently neglected and unresolved, upheavals caused by changes beyond the control of the Soviet Union, an ideological crisis, and economic destruction.[[10]](#footnote-10) At this congress, nine priorities were identified for the KSČM: Strongly promote the legitimate demands of citizens; respect all forms of ownership and emphasize that the future form of ownership is social ownership of the means of production; demand a longstanding combination of direct and representative democracy; advocate the rights of citizens to work and to fair pay; support public education services, cultural heritage preservation and popular sports; demand fair wages and decent pensions, and levy progressive tax on the profits of multinationals and oligarchs; make a transition to an economically, ecologically and socially sustainable life; advocate a peace policy, aim for a socially equitable, economically efficient and ecologically sound EU based on equality for all nations and peoples, where member states follow their own security policies, and strive for the Czech Republic’s withdrawal from NATO; demand for strict control of economic migrants, and show zero tolerance towards manifestations of terrorism, neo-fascism and nationalism.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the parliamentary elections held in October 2017, the KSČM had the worst election results ever, with only 7.76% of the votes, which relegated it to the fifth largest party in the parliament. However, by supporting the minority government formed by the largest party, ANO 2011, and the sixth largest party, the Czech Social Democratic Party, the KSČM ended its 28-year status as an opposition party and seized the historical opportunity to maximize its participation in politics since the upheavals occurred. Another sign of its increasing political influence was the appointment of Chairman Vojjeh Filip as the First Vice-chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in the Czech Republic on June 27, 2018.

In April 2021, the KSČM terminated the agreement of understanding with the minority government and declared that it no longer trusts in the government because the government failed to fully deliver on its promises to the interest claims of the party. On June 3, at the initiative of the opposition parties, the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in the Czech Republic held a vote of no confidence in the current government. The KSČM remained neutral and abstained from the vote, allowing the government to remain in power and thus preventing political unrest in the country before the parliamentary elections.

II. Reasons for the KSČM to Repeatedly Overcome Political Isolation

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the upheavals in Eastern Europe, few communist parties in the CEE region were able to remain a parliamentary party for a long term. Over the 31 years since its founding, the KSČM has been represented in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament and remained the third largest party for an extended period of time.

In fact, during the “Velvet Revolution” in 1989, leaders of opposition parties had the idea of dismissing the KSČ. However, the proposal was not adopted in the context of the political developments at the time. Most leaders of opposition parties feared that radical measures against communist parties, once taken, would destroy the process of a non-violent and bloodless regime change.[[12]](#footnote-12) After the “Velvet Revolution” and shortly after the Czech Republic became independent, there were debates on whether communist parties should be banned. The Czech political scientist Jan Charvát identified three reasons why they were not banned in the end. Firstly, the ruling elites at the time tried to prove that they would not ban some parties, as the communists in power did before 1989; secondly, it was generally argued that to legally ban communist parties was unnecessary because both their members and voters would soon grow old and disappear; thirdly, if communist parties were banned, their members would form other political parties and obscure their communist identity.[[13]](#footnote-13) Therefore, the KSČM became a legitimate part of the Czech political system and had a role to play in its functioning. However, the topic of banning communist parties never fades away in the media and the political circle in the Czech Republic, and from time to time there are politicians who suggest that communist propaganda should be explicitly banned by law. Moreover, having been persistently isolated by other parties in the Czech parliament, the KSČM had almost zero potential build a coalition despite its stable support rate. The KSČM was able to break through political isolation and had increasing political influence for the following reasons.

1. Active cooperation with other political parties

The KSČM took a pragmatic stance towards political participation and focused first on breaking through the isolation at the local government level. After the municipal elections in 1994, the KSČM worked politically with the Centre-right wing Civic Democratic Party in a number of municipalities as a coalition partner in local governance. After the municipal elections in 1998, it worked politically with the centrist Christian Democratic Union - the KDU-ČSL to form a ruling coalition present in a number of municipalities. After the municipal elections in 2002, the KSČM broke completely out of the isolation at the local government level, having two members elected as mayors, being represented in more than a quarter of the municipalities nationwide, and owning extensive powers.

After the KSČM gained the best electoral results since the upheavals in the parliamentary elections held in 2002, it called on the leader of the strongest party, the Czech Social Democratic Party, to form a left wing, popular government with it, as the public required.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, the Czech Social Democratic Party refused to accept the offer and simply cooperated with it in votes at the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament.

The KSČM has tried to present itself as a good partner at the local government level. Not only did it manage local affairs well, but it stayed out of corruption scandals when the other parties could not. After the municipal elections in 2014, the KSČM signed an agreement with the “Action of Dissatisfied Citizens 2011” (“ANO 2011”) and the Czech Social Democratic Party on the formation of a ruling coalition in the city of Cheb from 2014 to 2018. This cooperation experience of the three parties at the local government level laid the foundation for continued cooperation at the central government level in 2018.

In June 2018, the Central Committee of the KSČM decided to support the minority government formed by the “ANO 2011” and the Czech Social Democratic Party. Although it was not a direct member of the ruling coalition, the government’s programmatic manifesto included its seven basic demands: to continuously increase the minimum wage standard; to increase pensions; to protect natural resources from foreign control; to strengthen public management of water resources; to tax the property returned to the Church by the state; to prevent further increases in house prices and to support the construction of public housing; and to maintain high-quality health care services without increasing the spending of patients.[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. Support from two presidents

On December 29, 1989, the playwright and dissident leader Václav Havel were elected president of Czechoslovakia, which marked the complete collapse of the communist regime in the country. Although Havel did nothing to ban communist parties because he argued that they would disappear from the political arena over time, he ignored the KSČM and refused to consult with its leader on state affairs during his term as Czech President from 1993 to 2003. His successors Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman both showed completely different attitudes towards the KSČM and created the conditions for it to participate in politics.

In February 2003, the KSČM played a key role in the election of Václav-Klaus as the second president of the Czech Republic, when the members of both chambers ran in the election. Shortly after he took office as President, Klaus broke the tradition to invite the leader of the KSČM and the leaders of other parliamentary parties to discuss the Czech Republic’s accession to the EU in his summer residence, the Lany Castle. Almost ten years later, Bohuslav Sobotka, then Chairman of the Czech Social Democratic Party, commented that this invitation was the first important step towards the legalization of the KSČM.[[16]](#footnote-16) In July 2006, President Klaus invited Vojtěch Filip, Chairman of the KSČM, to discuss how to break the deadlock in the organization of the cabinet after the parliamentary elections - the first time the leader of the KSČM had been invited to the Office of the President for consultations after the upheavals. This showed that the KSČM was a political force to be reckoned with on the Czech political arena.[[17]](#footnote-17) In May 2008, in a letter responding to Chairman Filip’s invitation to the seventh congress of the KSČM, President Klaus stated that he had maintained the right relationship with the KSČM during his presidency although he had different views and positions from the KSČM; the democratic development, stability and prosperity of the Czech Republic required the concerted efforts of all important political forces in the political arena, and he hoped that the KSČM would contribute to making positive changes for the development of the country after 1989.[[18]](#footnote-18)

In January 2013, the Czech Republic held its first direct general presidential election. In his request for support from the KSČM, Miloš Zeman, a presidential candidate and former Chairman of the Czech Social Democratic Party, promised that he, as president, would have no problem in appointing a government that relied on the support of the KSČM or in which the KSČM was directly involved if the KSČM won the general parliamentary elections.[[19]](#footnote-19) Zeman was later successfully elected president with the support of the KSČM. When he stood for re-election in January 2018, he again received support from the KSČM. When President Zeman authorized Andrej Babiš, Chairman of the largest party, “ANO 2011”, to organize a cabinet, he preferred it to work with the Czech Social Democratic Party and the KSČM. In April, President Zeman was invited to the tenth congress of the KSČM and delivered a speech, becoming the first Czech president to do so since 1989. He described the KSČM as a democratic party and called on the KSČM to participate in the public administration of the country and in the formation of the government.[[20]](#footnote-20) During Zeman’s presidency, he met regularly with Chairman Filip of the KSČM to discuss about the country’s domestic and foreign affairs. Thus, the political position of the KSČM was significantly increased. President Zeman and the KSČM held similar positions on a number of issues, such as strengthening social security, taxing the property returned to the Church by the state, opposing the compulsory refugee quota system of the EU, and advocating cooperation with China and Russia.

1. Changing attitude of the same left wing Czech Social Democratic Party against the KSČM

In the context of Western party politics, the KSČM is considered as an ultra-leftwing party and the Czech Social Democratic Party as a Centre-leftwing party. They are the only two left wing parties in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in the Czech Republic. The two parties have a long-standing and complex relationship. In May 1921, due to an ideological clash within the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Labour Party (CSDLP), a number of radical left wing fractions seceded from the party to form the KSČ. In June 1948, the CSDLP ended all of its activities and merged with the KSČ. Some of the CSDLP leaders who had gone into exile abroad formed the Central Executive Committee of the party in London and supported domestic dissidents during the rule of the Communists from 1948 to 1989. After the political upheavals of 1989, the CSDLP resumed as one of the few non-post-communist parties among the social democratic parties in the CEE region. Until the dissolution of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic on December 31, 1992, both the KSČM and the CSDLP were opposition parties, but they did not cooperate with each other.

In 1993, the CSDLP was renamed the Czech Social Democratic Party, which was promoted by Chairman Miloš·Zeman to the largest left-wing party in the country. *Bohumín Resolution*, adopted at the national congress of the Czech Social Democratic Party in April 1995, banned political cooperation with the so-called extremist parties, including the KSČM. The resolution prevented political cooperation with the KSČM only theoretically, but no consensus was reached on whether the ban would apply universally or at the central government level only. In the parliamentary elections held in 1996, the Czech Social Democratic Party became the second most popular party, followed by the KSČM. Both as opposition parties, they competed with each other to win the support of left-wing voters. In the early parliamentary elections held in 1998, the Czech Social Democratic Party was the most popular party and later formed a single minority government, ruling on the basis of an agreement of understanding with the Civic Democratic Party, the largest opposition Centre-right party. Because it signed this “agreement with the opposition”, the Czech Social Democratic Party was criticized by other parties for monopolizing state power and nurturing corruption, and some left wing voters, dissatisfied with the political reality, turned to support the KSČM.

As the KSČM enjoyed a stabilizing support rate and held more seats in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament and local representative institutions, the Czech Social Democratic Party realized the importance of cooperating with the KSČM. After the parliamentary elections held in 2002, although the victorious Czech Social Democratic Party still avoided building an open ruling coalition with the KSČM, it relied on cooperating with the KSČM when voting in the Chamber of Deputies because the coalition government that it formed with the centrist Christian Democratic Union - the KDU-ČSL and the right wing Freedom - Democracy Union held only a narrow majority of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament and because the ruling coalition was under constant disputes due to ideological differences and differing policy inclinations.

From time to time, there were calls for abolishing *Bohumín Resolution* inside the Czech Social Democratic Party. This issue came to the surface again when the Czech Social Democratic Party began negotiations with other parties on the organization of a cabinet after the parliamentary elections held in the autumn of 2013. then Chairman Bohuslav Sobotka proposed to solve it through an intra-party vote although he did not think that there was an urgent need to discuss the abolition of *Bohumín Resolution*.[[21]](#footnote-21) In February 2017, Prime Minister Sobotka declared publicly that *Bohumín Resolution* was outdated and that he found no problem in the formation of a coalition government between the Czech Social Democratic Party and the KSČM after the parliamentary elections in the autumn; since the two parties had already cooperated with each other at the kraj and municipal levels, there was no reason why they should not cooperate at the central government level.[[22]](#footnote-22) Despite the different views on security and foreign policies between the two parties - for example, the KSČM would like to see the Czech Republic withdraw from NATO and adopt a critical attitude towards the EU, while the Czech Social Democratic Party hoped to keep the Czech Republic in NATO and adopted a pro-European stance - their cooperation at the central government level was unstoppable.

1. Changes in the balance of political powers in the Czech Republic

From 1993 to 2017, the Centre-right wing Civic Democratic Party and the Centre-left wing Czech Social Democratic Party alternated as the ruling party in the Czech Republic. The results of the parliamentary elections held in 2017 had a dramatic impact on the party and political ecology in the country: “ANO 2011”, a popular party without an ideological base but committed to the fight against corruption and the efficient functioning of the state, became the only major party in Czech politics; 9 political parties were represented in the Chamber of Deputies under a fragmented political system; the left wing power declined dramatically, with the Czech Social Democratic Party falling from the top position to the sixth place in the Chamber of Deputies and the KSČM as the fifth largest party with less than 10% of the votes, a historic low; Andrej Babiš, Chairman of “ANO 2011” and the second richest person in the Czech Republic, was boycotted by most of the parliamentary parties for allegedly cheating on EU subsidies.

Babiš, supported by President Zeman, was authorized twice to organize a cabinet. President Zeman was open and pragmatic about cooperation with the KSČM. Even before the kraj parliamentary elections in the autumn of 2016, Babiš had considered cooperating with the KSČM at the kraj government level. He declared publicly that the votes for the KSČM should not be taken lightly and the KSČM should not be ignored if it had a support rate of 15%.[[23]](#footnote-23) In July 2018, Prime Minister Babiš defended the cooperation with the KSČM in front of the media, describing the KSČM as a democratic party that contributed to the building of the nation and facilitated the formation of the government.[[24]](#footnote-24)

III. Challenges for the KSČM

Although the KSČM has never withdrawn from functioning in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in the Czech Republic as an important political force in Czech politics and one of the two stable left-wing parties with growing coalition potential and political influence since its founding, it faces three serious challenges over the development course.

1. A declining and aging membership

The KSČ used to be one of the strongest communist parties in Europe, with 1.70 million members before the political upheavals of 1989. The KSČM inherited much of its membership, with 756,000 members at its inception in 1990. Over the following 31 years, due to intra-party differentiation and the death of some older members, its membership has kept declining from 350,000 in 1992 to 140,000 in 1998, 77,000 in 2008, and only 31,600 in 2020. Currently, the KSČM still has the most members among the parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament in the Czech Republic, and a declining membership has been a long-term trend. Membership in political parties is not popular in the Czech Republic, and gone are the days when political parties of a mass character prevailed. The KSČM has only a limited number of new members, which was as few as 200 in 2019. Petr Šimůnek, the First Vice-chairman in charge of party affairs, said that many people that have good faith in the KSČM refuse to join partly because of the mistakes made by the KSČ as a ruling party and the fear that the party membership would hinder their employment.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In 1999, the average age of the KSČM members was 64 years. In 2001, only 12% of its members were under 50.[[26]](#footnote-26)

 In recent years, the average age of its members has been around 74. The aging membership also means decreasing electoral potential. In the municipal elections held in 2018, the KSČM failed to field the most candidates among all the parties for the first time since 1994, due to the aging membership, and it was surpassed by the Christian Democratic Union - the KDU-ČSL. Compared to the municipal elections held in 2014, the KSČM fielded 1/5 fewer candidates and fell short of candidates in 300 municipalities. Some Czech scholars believe that the trend of decreasing KSČM candidates will accelerate in the future. The KSČM has taken the following countermeasures: Firstly, it trains younger members and encourages them to participate in local administration before running for the Chamber of Deputies; secondly, it cooperates with other parties to field candidates together; thirdly, it recruits independent candidates for elections.[[27]](#footnote-27)

In the process of changing from a political party of a mass character to an electoral party, the KSČM faces a major challenge of how to maintain good electoral performance and some political influence despite the declining and aging membership.

(II) A massive loss of voters

Voters supporting the KSČM are mainly manual workers from de-industrialized regions after the economic transition, rural areas and small towns who are poorly educated and who are mostly elderly people. In contrast to voters who support other political parties, they used to be highly loyal, disciplined, and active in elections.[[28]](#footnote-28) They are generally “protest voters” who are dissatisfied with the social reality after the upheavals. When its support rate reached a peak in the early 21st century, the KSČM attracted a significant number of left-wing voters who had previously supported the Czech Social Democratic Party.

Over the past two years, various opinion polls have shown that the support rate of the KSČM has fluctuated around 5%, and it suffers a massive loss of voters for the following five reasons. Firstly, the former KSČ members, who took up a large share of the KSČM voters, became a lost share when they aged or passed away. Secondly, “ANO 2011”, the first major party, is a popular party that puts forward some policies and programs aimed at left wing voters to attract some of the KSČM supporters, such as strengthening social security and reducing unemployment. Thirdly, the extremist right wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy, founded in 2015, which opposes illegal immigration and advocates the expansion of direct democracy, also attracts some of the KSČM voters. Fourthly, when the KSČM was isolated by other parties and was an opposition party, it was regarded by the “protest voters” as a pure and clean party that stayed away from problems common in the development course of the country after 1989, such as corruption, collusion between politics and business, and power-for-money deal, and thus received their support. After the KSČM supported the minority government, some “protest voters” tied it to problems in government governance and turned to support protest parties.

Fifthly, the KSČM has limited potential to attract new voters.

According to a poll conducted in early July 2021, the KSČM had a support rate of 5.5%, while the threshold for entry into the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament is 5%. In June 2021, the KSČM launched the campaign for parliamentary elections and put forward four priorities, namely children protection and education, ecological environment, peace, promotion of hard work and taxation on the rich. Chairman Vojtěch Filip also claimed that the KSČM was free from corruption scandals, “defecting” parliamentarians and unexplained assets, and he hoped to convince the KSČM voters that they had chosen it for the future of the Czech Republic.[[29]](#footnote-29) The KSČM now faces the urgent task of regaining the trust of voters in a limited period of time before the parliamentary elections in October by demonstrating its election program and real work achievements, so as to continue to play an important role in Czech politics.

(III) Possible changes in the leadership and direction of development

Vojtěch Filip has been Chairman of the KSČM for 16 years. He is a pragmatic politician, and under his leadership the party as a whole has become increasingly influential in Czech politics. He intended to give up the chairmanship after the defeat in the parliamentary elections in 2017, the Kraj parliamentary elections in 2020 and the elections to the Senate of the Parliament. According to opinion polls conducted before the parliamentary elections held in 2021, the support rate of the KSČM reached its lowest level since the upheavals and was on the verge of failing to meet the 5% threshold to enter the Chamber of Deputies. Some members within the KSČM who were unhappy with its current development hoped to remove Filip from the chairmanship and achieve generational succession in the party’s leadership. The KSČM postponed the elective congress several times because of COVID-19. On April 17, 2021, the Central Committee of the KSČM convened a meeting to discuss whether Filip should be removed from the chairmanship, and 46 of the 75 delegates present voted in favor of his removal. However, according to the party’s constitution, removing the Chairman requires the approval of 2/3 of all 90 members of the Central Committee, which equates to 60 votes. In the end, the Central Committee decided that the priority then should be to prepare for the parliamentary elections in October and that a congress would be held in November to discuss leadership succession. However, the decision failed to quell the disagreements within the party, and 1/3 of the party organizations at the county level still called for an extraordinary congress to elect a new leadership. On July 17, the Central Committee of the KSČM again decided to hold an extraordinary congress on October 23, which was two weeks after the parliamentary elections, to elect a new leadership.

A number of candidates in the KSČM were interested in replacing Filip as Chairman, and the most popular candidate was Kateřina Konečná, a member of the European Parliament who focuses on vulnerable groups in society. She argues that the KSČM should move from being a nostalgic party to a modern left wing party. She advocates putting the interests of workers first, emphasizes green politics, calls for more attention to environmental protection, and attaches importance to the protection of the interests of the majority through parliamentary struggles.[[30]](#footnote-30) Konečná has never nodded to the decision of the KSČM to support the government led by Chairman Babiš of “ANO 2011” and is highly critical of Filip’s continuation in office. She was the Vice-chairwoman of the party from 2018 to 2021 and resigned after the Central Committee failed to remove Filip from the chairmanship in April 2021.

Jiří Dolejší, a KSČM parliamentarian with a more liberal stance, argued that the party would have enough time after the elections to resolve the generational succession of leadership. The change of leadership should be deliberate and smooth, based on political consultations; the party should pull together and be united now to face the parliamentary elections, as its support rate was only around 5%. The emergence of different views would not help the party in the election campaign or in maintaining a good image among voters. He also pointed out that the KSČM would not survive as a party in the long term if it did not modernize and achieve generational succession; nostalgia for the history before 1989 would not help, and the 21st century is a time when social problems have to be solved with the tools available.[[31]](#footnote-31)

V. Conclusion

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the upheavals in Eastern Europe, communist and left wing parties in general experienced bumpy development paths in the CEE region, including the Czech Republic. In this context, the KSČM has been able to maintain a stable support rate, repeatedly break through the exclusion and isolation of other parliamentary parties, and become increasingly influential on the political arena thanks to the deep communist tradition in the Czech Republic, the strengths and strategic responses of the party, and the changes in the Czech political ecology. By supporting the minority government formed by the popular party “ANO 2011” and the Centre-left wing party, the Czech Social Democratic Party, the KSČM has significantly improved its political status, but it also faces two negative consequences: First, the loss of traditional “protest voters” has led to a decline in the support rate for the KSČM, putting it at risk of disappearing from the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament; second, the party is becoming more divided, and its leadership is being challenged.

The upcoming parliamentary elections in early October 2021 will be of great importance for the KSČM and will, to some extent, determine whether it can continue to be a major force in the Czech political arena. Only if the KSČM can put aside its conflicts and differences before the parliamentary elections, run a united campaign, and convince its traditional voters that it can defend their interests and will indirectly participate in power in order to fulfill their demands, will it be able to regain the support of the voters. The results of the parliamentary elections will also influence the change in the KSČM’s leadership and the direction of its future development. If it succeeds in entering the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament, the legitimacy of the current leadership will increase, and the course of the party may not change significantly. If it loses the parliamentary elections, the current leadership will be under pressure to resign and a younger generation of leaders will be likely to lead it towards a modern left wing party.

1. \* This article is a phased deliverable of “Czech History Research” (18VJX090), a “Less Popular and Profound Learning” research project funded by the National Social Science Fund of China.

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