

Historical roots of contemporary Czech politics

EUP406 Czech Politics

Outline

1. Finding the Czech political identity: the Austrian-Hungarian Monarch and the foundation of the First Republic
2. Czech communism and its historical legacy – from a totalitarian regime to a social contract
3. Class discussion

Czech lands under the Austrian rule

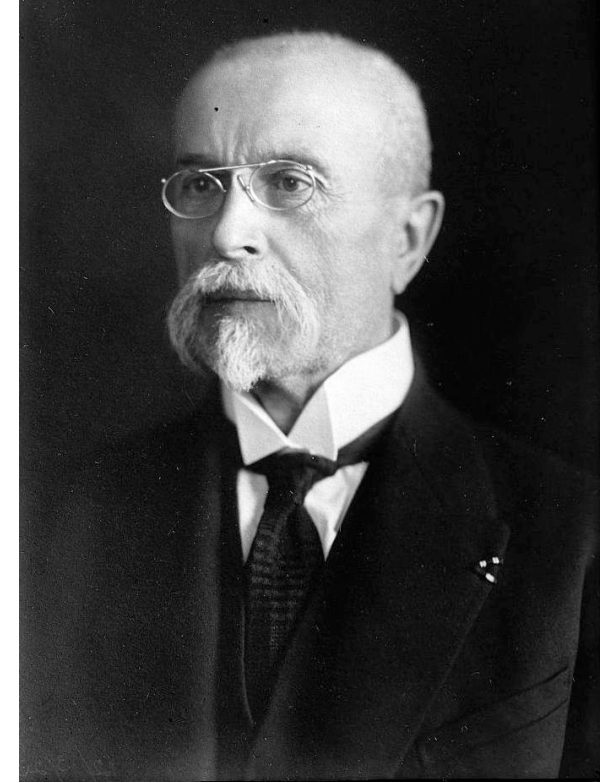


Czech lands under the Austrian rule

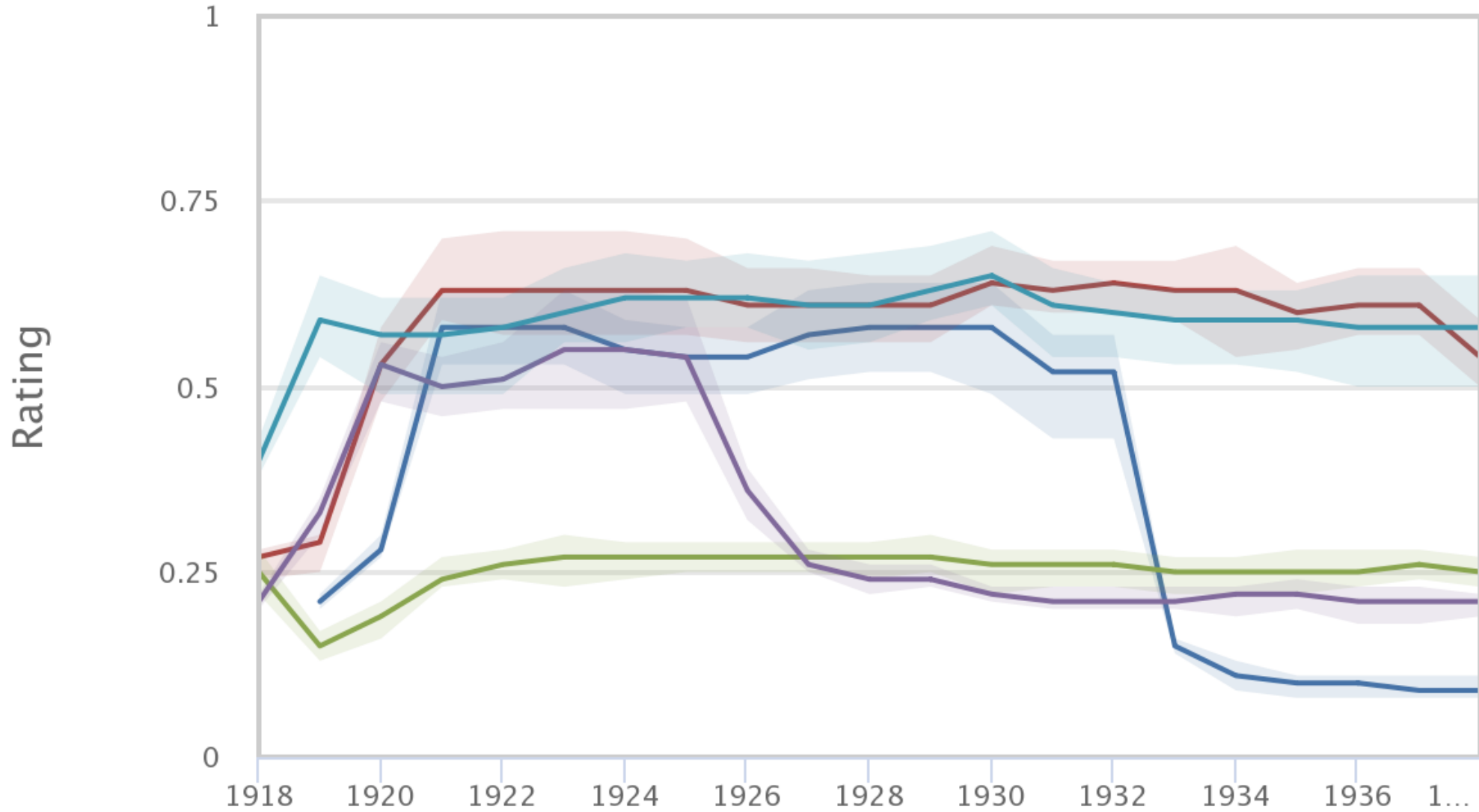
- The position of the Czech lands
- Czech nationalism in the 19th century Habsburg empire – Czech national renaissance/revival
- Politics of „passive resistance“
- The National Theatre, Czech language (Josef Dobrovský, František Palacký, Božena Němcová, ...)
- Unsuccessful fight for autonomy in a quite liberal multinational monarchy
- Establishment of the first political parties (*Young Czechs, Old Czechs, Czechoslavonic Social Democratic Party in Austria*)

The First Republic (1918 – 1938)

- One of the newly-born states after WWI (Pittsburgh Declaration)
- October 28 – Declaration of Czechoslovak Independence
- Basic principles of the Czechoslovak state
- Multiethnic state
- Presidents of Czechoslovakia ([TG Masaryk](#) and E. Beneš)
- A democratic and economically successful exception of the interwar Central and Eastern Europe – *the tale of the First Republic*

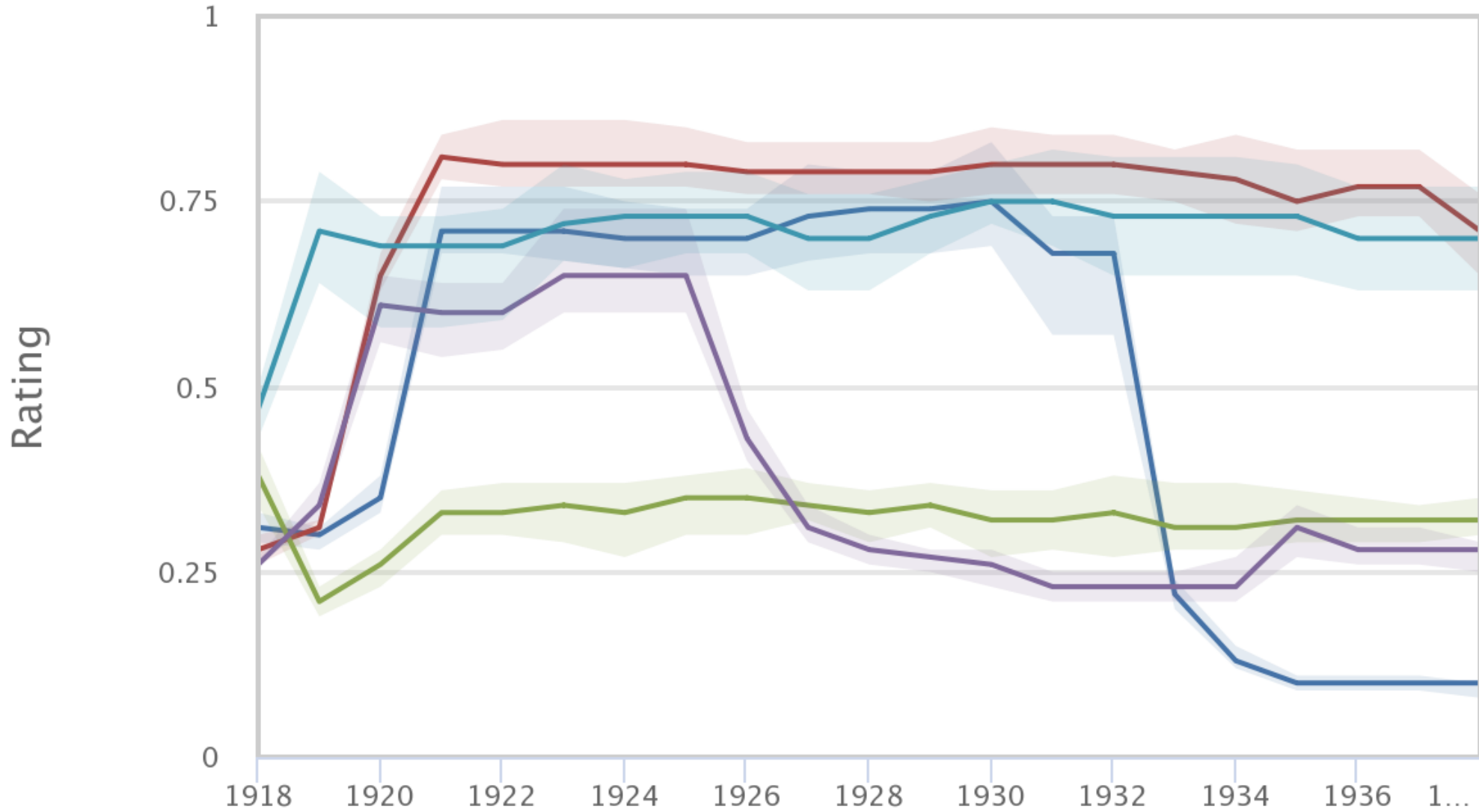


Liberal Democracy Index



— Austria — Czech Republic — Hungary — Poland — United Kingdom

Electoral Democracy Index



— Austria — Czech Republic — Hungary — Poland — United Kingdom

Czechoslovak communism



On the road to totalitarianism (1945-1953)

- Democratic backslide since the second half of the 1930s – the Second Republic (1938 – 1939) and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (1939 – 1945)
- Parallel resistance movements
- Yalta and Potsdam conferences
- Dominant role of the Red Army during liberation
- President Beneš's vision of the political system and attitudes the First Republic

On the road to totalitarianism (1945-1953)

- 1946 general election – limited pluralism (the National Front)
- KSC winning the election (40% of votes)
- 1948 – the "victorious February" in Czechoslovakia
- Not violent – government crisis
- Support from the society (left-leaning attitudes of society and part of the elites, disappointment with the interwar republic, „Munich betrayal“, liberation, international situation)
- Quick installment of a totalitarian regime

On its way to totalitarianism (1948-1953)

- Totalitarian regime (Fridrich & Brzezinski)

1. **The Party** – the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (hegemonic party system – Sartori, the National Front), institutional *façade*, not independent from the state, the Party is the state
2. **Ideology** – Marxism-Leninism, omnipresent (policies, education, media)
3. **Political terror** – purges, trials, hundreds of people killed by the regime, hundred thousands jailed/sent to working camps, suppression of the enemies of the régime (the Church, „bourgeoisie, ...)
4. **Communication monopoly** – censorship, no freedom of speech, state media, propaganda
5. **Monopoly on weapons** – secret police, police, army directed by the Party
6. **Centralized economy** – five year plans, investments to heavy industry



The monetary reform

- *“Our currency is strong and monetary reform will not take place. Class enemies are merely spreading rumours about it.”* (A. Zápotocký)
- Pertaining rationing system, internal indebtedness
- drastic currency reform that devalued the current Koruna by a factor of 50:1 (depending on type and amount of money)
- Uprising in Pilsen brutally repressed
- Results – further centralization of the economy, the regime got control over the last capital in the country

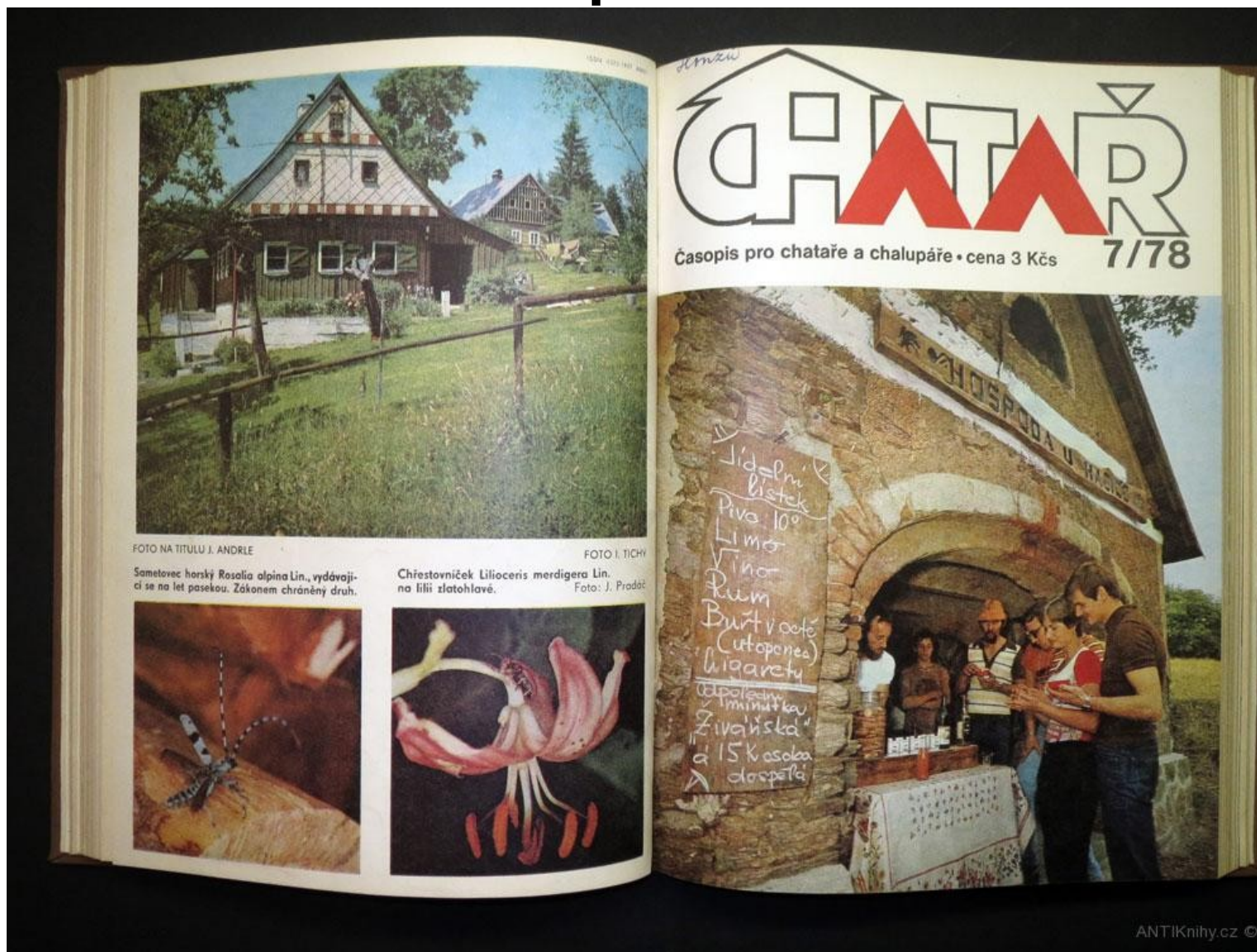
The Prague Spring

- 1953 – death of Stalin and gradual destalinization
- Economic difficulties (monetary „reform“)
- Liberalization of the regime since the early 1960s
- Partial freedom of press, civil society and arts restored
- Plan of an economic reform and possible democratization
- August 1968 – invasion of the Warsaw Pact (Brezhnev doctrine)
- Popular culture: e.g. *Pelíšky (Cosy Dens)* movie

„Real socialism“ (1968-1989)

- The Prague Spring of 1968 soon followed by so-called "real socialism"/normalisation – a classic example of a frozen post-totalitarian régime (Linz):
 - Gradual disappearance of the ideology from the public sphere
 - Intra-party purges
 - Lack of mobilization
 - Resignation on total control of citizens' lives
 - Still/again central planned economy (collectivization)
 - so-called silent *social contract* – political passivity for decent living standards (BUT need for enormous social capital)
 - Weak opposition (Charta 77) and still quite a suppressive regime with almost non-existent political and societal pluralism

Private escape to the countryside



Charter 77 and the opposition

- No legal opposition activities – suppression
- Limited to a small groups of people
- **Charter 77** – followed the Helsinki conference
- J. Patočka, J. Hájek and V. Havel
- Specific approach to opposition activities – dialogue with the regime in the area of human rights
- „live within the truth“ and „live within the lie“ – private revolt, no ambitions for anti-regime actions
- Anti-political politics

Types of communisms (Kitschelt)

Patrimonial communism (Romania, Post-Soviet Republics)

- Based on strong charismatic leadership
- Low level of intra-party contestation, high level of clientelism
- Severe opposition repressions

National communism (Hungary, Poland)

- Intermediate level of political contestation
- Economic liberalization

Bureaucratic-authoritarianism

- High level of bureaucratic institutionalization
- No economic reforms
- Czecho(Slovakia) and GDR

Class discussion

- What are the most important elements of the past for the contemporary politics in the Czech Republic and why?
- What is the Czech national/political identity like?
- What do you consider the most important features of the Czech communism? And why?
- Was there something potentially good in the Czech communism?
- Any other interesting events/features of the pre-1989 Czech politics?

Roots of the transition

While it took 1000 days in
Poland, 100 days in Hungary,
it took 10 days in
Czechoslovakia. T. G. Ash

The change of the 1980s

The economy:

- Worsening of economic conditions (supply of even basic things)
- Breaking of the social contract

International context:

- *Perestroika* and *glasnost* in the USSR
- Emergence of opposition in the neighbouring countries (*Solidarność*)

Internal opposition

- Strengthening of the opposition and transformation of its goals
- Catholic demonstration in Velehrad in 1985 (200.000 people), the candle demonstration in Bratislava



The trigger

The 17th November 1989

- A student demonstration on the 50th anniversary of students' oppression during the Nazi occupation – approved by the regime
- Turned into an anti-regime rally
- A violent conflict between the students and the riot police
- Rumours about a death of a student (conspiracy theories) escalated the situation
- Public unrest and new demonstration
- The drama of Velvet Revolution started



Actors

The Party

- The unreformed party – intraparty gerontocracy
- Milouš Jakeš - as "the sole picket in a fence" (Jako kůl v plotě)
- The lack of "liberal" reformers willing and able to take over power
- Completely surprised by the situation
- Unable to react (the People's Militia)
- Quick disintegration of the National Front (Christian Democrats, the Czechoslovak Socialist Party)

The opposition



- Student demonstrations activated the dissent
- Joined by artists, philosophers
- The leading role of the Charta 77 with Václav Havel as the leader
- November 19 – the Civic Forum established
 - Broad *anti-regime* movement – Charta 77, catholic dissent, neoliberal economists, reform communists
 - Grassroot movement – hundreds of branches
 - Turned into the main opposition platform
 - Careful attitude, lack of experience
- Roundtable talks

The process of transition

- Quick resignation of the old cadres (Jakeš, Lenárt, Biřák, řtěpán, ...)
- KSČ pulled by the situation, ready to relinquish power
- OF – aim to „control “ the government, not to take over it
- Party – opposition talks: 15 + 5 government rejected by the public
- A change of the strategy of OF + the emergence of M. Čalfa as the new leader-in-talks of KSČ
- A new government led by Čalfa appointed – resignation of President Husák
- December 29 – Václav Havel elected unianimously the President of the Country by the Federal Assembly – the first period of transition completed

Political changes

- Renewal of **political pluralism** (small and big laws political parties) – acknowledgment of the existence of several political parties including KSC̣ (see also later)
- **Constitutional changes** – free mandate instead of the imperative one, abolition of the leading role of the Communist party and the Marxist-Leninist ideology, co-option of MPs on federal, state and local levels, proportional representation introduced
- **Fair and free elections arranged** – the “referendum” about the change

The 1990 election

- Landslide victory for the Civic Forum (50 % of votes, **96 %** turnout)
- Other parties also successful – Christian Democrats, Moravian regionalists and...
- ...the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (13% of votes)
- A new government of OF, VPN (Slovakia), Slovak Christian Democrats and the Moravian Movement formed with Čalfa as the Prime Minister

Two Václavs and two approaches to politics

Václav Havel



Václav Klaus



Decommunization (and the fate of the Communist Party)

What to do with the communists?

- Public demand to abolish the Party X the result

Reasons:

- The history – generally leftist public (although not necessarily communist)
- KSČ led by pragmaticians (a deal with Havel?)
- Havel's approach – rejection of a hard punishment
- The notion of the legal continuity
- The transition process – legitimation of the Communist Party confirmed by the election
- *Contradictio ad excludendum*

Decommunization

- Law on Restitution of the Property of the Communist Party to the Czechoslovak people
- Lustration laws – forbidding access of former communists and secret police members (collaborators) to positions in public administration
- Law on Crimes of Communism
- The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (including the period of the communist rule)
- But also continuity (justice system, administration, economy,...)
- Anti-communism and evolution of the party system

The economic transformation

- Conflict of paradigms (gradualists vs radicals)
- The Czech Republic vs Slovakia
- The radicals won (Václav Klaus) – introduction of reforms inspired by neoliberalism including widespread privatization (*voucher privatization*) and liberalization of the economy
- The breeding ground of the later conflict between the *losers and the winners of transition* (far right in the 1990s) + the conflict of Czechs and Slovaks

The end of Czechoslovakia

- Historical experience (A-H monarchy, First Republic, Communist rule)
- the lack of strong Czechoslovak identity
- separated party systems
- Religious differences
- Economy
- *The hyphen – war*, several rounds of negotiations
- non-functional federal polity
- August 1992 – Declaration of Independence
- 1993 – the emergence of the independent Czech R. and Slovakia – one of the most peaceful ends of multiethnic states in the history

Class discussion

- Given the nature of both the previous and the new regime, the aim is to discuss the attitudes towards the communist past in general and the communist party in particular.
- It is closely linked to the question of dealing with the past. Would you ban the party in the beginning of the 1990s? Why?
- How would you deal with collaborators with the regime? What are possible and actual outcomes of different approaches?

Political system – institutions I.

Basic principles of the new state

- The new constitution – December 1992 (intensive discussions)
- Inspiration by the First Republic but also by USA, France...
- Basic principles:
 - Democracy
 - Republicanism
 - Unitary state (Moravist movement)
 - Representative democracy
 - Parliamentary democracy
 - Stress on human rights (the Charter of Basic Rights and Freedoms)
 - Key role of political parties
- Duality of institutions (dynamic vs stable ones)

Basic principles

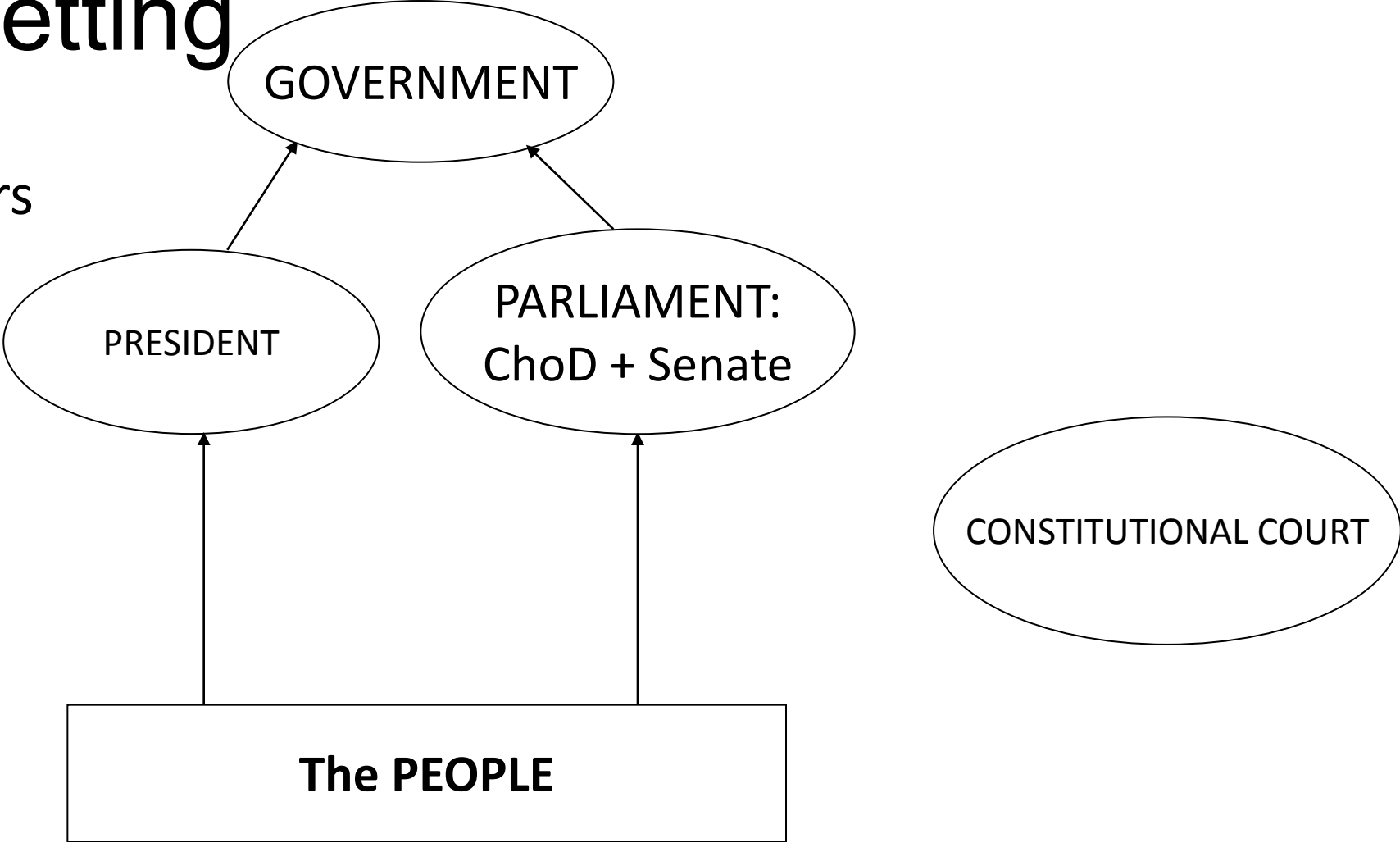
- *„As a free and democratic state founded on respect for human rights and on the principles of civic society,
As a part of the family of democracies in Europe and around the world,
Resolved to guard and develop together the natural and cultural, material and spiritual wealth handed down to us,
Resolved to abide by all proven principles of a state governed by the rule of law,
Through our freely-elected representatives, do adopt this Constitution of the Czech Republic.“ (Preamble of the Constitution of the Czech Republic)*

Democracy

- „The Czech Republic is a sovereign, unitary, and democratic state governed by the rule of law, founded on respect for the rights and freedoms of man and of citizens.“
- „All state authority emanates from the people; they exercise it through legislative, executive, and judicial bodies.“
- „The political system is founded on the free and voluntary formation of and free competition among those political parties which respect the fundamental democratic principles and which renounce force as a means of promoting their interests.“
- „Political decisions emerge from the will of the majority manifested in free voting. The decision-making of the majority shall take into consideration the interests of minorities.“

Institutional setting

- Separation of powers



Bicameralism

- The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate
- Inspiration by the First Republic
- Senate as a stabilization institution
- Dominant role of the Chamber of Deputies
 - Legislation procedure (state budget)
 - Relationship towards the government
 - (election of the President)



Chamber of Deputies

- 200 MPs elected for a 4-year term using the „*principle* of proportional representation“
- Established in 1993 by transformation of the Czech National Council
- Organized by resort-oriented committees
- Party groups (at least 10 MPs)
- Can be dissolved under strictly defined circumstances
- Control power via the government (investiture vote, vote of no-confidence, questioning...)

Senate

- 81 senators elected for 6 years (1/3 each two years) by a majoritarian system
- At least 40 years – „the chamber of wise men“
- Established not earlier than in 1996
- Struggling with legitimacy (electoral turnout around 15 %)
- Not a clear position in the political system
- Important but *dormant* competencies – legislature, approval of constitutional judges, involved in the process of impeachment of the President
- Cannot be dissolved

Legislation procedure

- Legislative initiative
- 3 readings in the Chamber of Deputies
- Senate – approval, rejection, amendments, neglection (30 days)
- Chamber of Deputies (majority of all MPs)
- President – 15 days for signature, veto – Chamber of Deputies (majority of all MPs)
- Special position of Constitutional Laws, elections laws, state budget

Other competencies

- Approval of the government (more later)
- Approval of judges of the Constitutional Court (Senate)
- Election (ChoD) and nomination of the Ombudsman and her deputy

Executive

The President

- Directly elected for five years (two consecutive terms allowed)
- Formally rather weak but strong informal authority (history, Prague Castle, Presidents elected)
- Head of the State with representative function
- Appoints and dismiss members of the cabinet (see also later), members of the National Bank and of the Constitutional Court, judges
- Foreign policy
- Rather limited role in the legislative process, suspensive veto of ordinary bills
- Dissolves the ChoD
- Has the right to issue amnesty



CR towards semi-presidentialism?

- Direct election as a stronger source of legitimacy
- Historical legacy
- Strong persons willing to go beyond written constitution (ministerial appointments and dismissals, cabinet formation)
- The case of Rusnok cabinet

- Mixture of institutional setting + willingness to get power + context of the party system

The government

- Collective body appointed by the President but responsible to the Chamber of Deputies
- investiture vote X vote of confidence
- Headed by the Prime Minister (Primus inter Pares)
- Crucial role of political parties
- Low stability (694 days on average – in 2017), often minority cabinets: reasons (anti-system parties, electoral system, personal animosities, intra-party cohesion)

Judiciary

- Four levels of the system of courts (counties, regions, 2 Upper Courts and the Supreme Court)

Supreme Administrative Court

Constitutional Court

- Protection of constitutional rights
- Can repeal laws
- 15 judges proposed by the President and approved by the Senate (10 years, 1 renewable term)

Conclusion

- The Czech Republic as a parliamentary democracy
- Assembly parliamentarism (Sartori)
- Asymmetrical bicameralism
- Real functioning strongly influenced by the party system (weak governments – more in lectures on executive and party politics)
- Concurrent locus of power in the Prague Castle
- Discussions over reforms (the Senate, number of MPs, electoral system...)
- Strong position of the Constitutional Court

Class discussion

- Given the nature of the regime and the institutional setting, the discussion should aim at the roots of the **weak points of the regime**, its consequences and possible **corrections** (avoiding the electoral reform which is the topic of the next class).
- Should the **powers of the head of the state** be limited? Would you **abolish the upper chamber** of the parliament? Should there be more **direct democracy**? What are the different discourses on Czech political institutions?