



Bankov, P. (2020) Czech stalemate? The role of party organization for the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia since 2010. *European Review*, (doi: 10.1017/s1062798720000265).

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Deposited on: 1 July 2020

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Czech stalemate? The role of party organisation for the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia since 2010

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Abstract:

Almost three decades after the regime change in Central and Eastern Europe, some of the political parties that were successors of the communists continue to enjoy important electoral support. This article makes an attempt to understand why this happens and focuses on the role of the party organisation. It includes a qualitative analysis on the typical case of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) based on series of semi-structured interviews with party cadres and independent researchers. These reveal that the stable territorial distribution of their performance midst significant electoral volatility since 2010 highlights an organisational impasse within the party.

Keywords: successor parties, organisation, electoral support, Czech Republic

1. Introduction

Recent studies on the electoral performance of parties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) reveal the vital role of their organisational strength (Biezen 2003; Gherghina 2014; Tavits 2013; Webb & White 2007). Political parties do not exist in vacuum, but are integral part of society through their organisational presence across communities and through the activities of their members during and between elections (Gherghina *et al.* 2018). In such context, parties with extensive organisational network and membership, continuity of representation and decentralised candidate selection are more capable to establish firm links with society and, thus, improve their electoral performance (Gherghina 2014). The recent experience of the communist successor parties, however, questions the validity of this notion in absolute terms. On the one hand, existing studies on parties with roots in the communist regime in the form of property, membership and/or leadership (Ishiyama 1995 p. 148), emphasised the crucial role of their party organisations for their electoral performance. In the 1990s these parties inherited from their predecessors extensive and largely intact organisational networks with considerable memberships that aided their electoral survival in the initial democratic elections following the end of the authoritarian regimes in CEE (Bozoki & Ishiyama 2002; Grzymala-Busse 2002). Even nowadays communist successor parties remain among the largest organisations in the party systems in CEE (van Biezen *et al.* 2012). Yet, while these parties have extensive organisational networks, some continuity of representation and centralised candidate selection (Bozoki & Ishiyama 2002), it was their non-material resources, such as usable pasts and cadre expertise that shaped their electoral redemption and eventual return to power by the turn of the century (Grzymala-Busse 2002). This suggests that the strength of party organisation should be rather understood in relative terms. Main puzzle in this respect is to what extent the party organisations of communist successors in Central and Eastern Europe explain their electoral performances in the past decade.

A suitable methodological and theoretical approach to this puzzle is the territorial distribution of their electoral support at national elections. A focus on it offers a contextual explanation for their electoral performance, as it holds the unit of analysis (a political party) and the timeframe (an electoral period) constant (Snyder 2001), thus, placing the party in

different socio-economic and political circumstances across a country. In doing so, this approach focuses on the role of party organisation in a variety of social settings and its ability to use these settings for its electoral goals. In other words, the role of party organisation in different conditions reveals how well political parties use their organisational capabilities, understood as the organisational resources and opportunities at a party's disposal, for electoral mobilisation. Main research question of this article, therefore, is to what extent the organisational capabilities of communist successor parties in CEE contribute to their territorial distribution of electoral support? On the one hand, the territorial distribution of electoral support for a communist successor may be a product of the external socio-economic and political environment (H1), thus revealing a limited organisational contribution. On the other hand, a party may successfully build up electoral support across a country through its organisational capabilities (H2), highlighting the considerable role of its party organisation in this respect.

This article focuses on the case of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) from the Czech Republic since 2010. While the party both excelled and failed electorally in the decade since the Great Recession, its territorial distribution of electoral support at national elections remains rather stable, as the party mobilises relatively similar levels of electoral support across the 14 electoral constituencies of the country. A study on the reasons for this development reveals that the party is not able to use its organisational capabilities to mobilise support. On the one hand, the party remains present across the country through its comprehensive organisational network that allows it to mobilise its core voters across the Czech Republic. On the other hand, KSČM struggles to expand its electoral base due to declining activeness of its party structures across the country and due to its inability to transpose its presence and engagement with communities into a source for electoral mobilisation at national elections. Main reason for these challenges is an organisational impasse, characterised by an organisational disconnect between national and regional party structures and by declining membership turnaround. Overall, the experience of KSČM could not confirm neither hypothesis, suggesting that while the organisational strength is an important factor for the electoral performance of parties in CEE, the way this strength has been used by a party accounts for the extent of its influence.

Basis for this argument is the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with party representatives on national and regional level and independent researchers, held prior to the 2017 general election. These interviews aimed to investigate the role of the KSČM regional party organisation for the electoral performance at national elections in three Czech regions (Ústí nad Labem, South Moravia, and Prague), where the party mobilises consistently different levels of electoral support at the 2010 and 2013 elections. This article is structured as follows: the following two sections discuss the theoretical background for the potential role of party organisation to the territorial distribution of electoral performance of a party. Afterwards there is a brief presentation and justification of the research methodology, and three sections that analyse the interview data in light of the research question. A conclusion summarises the overall argument of this article and looks into the broader implications for the party systems and for the electoral performance of communist successor parties in CEE in recent times.

2. The role of party organisation for the territorial distribution of its electoral support

The party organisation plays a crucial role for the territorial distribution of electoral performance as it enables a party to accommodate the diverse social contexts across a country in order to handle the effects of its political structures. In this sense, a political party can shape its electoral performance through its own organisational capabilities. The main organisational capabilities of a party that allows it to do so are its organisational presence, engagement with communities, and transposition of local legitimacy.

2.1. Organisational presence

Firstly, organisational presence refers to the level of party complexity. Having a comprehensive territorial coverage across a country through a network of regional and local organisations, represented by active members is an important prerequisite for a party to successfully reach potential voters and mobilise them electorally (Harmel & Janda 1982). A party organisation at a particular place offers a stable basis to facilitate the process of socialisation between a party and community and perpetuate its effects throughout time (Johnston & Pattie 2006). Furthermore, regional and local party structures serve as important campaign resource, through which a party can spread its electoral messages to potential voters (Seyd & Whiteley 2002). Organisational presence is expected to be the main

organisational asset for communist successor parties to influence their territorial distribution of electoral support. Previous studies regularly emphasise their comprehensive organisational networks and high levels of membership in comparison to their political and electoral opponents (Bozoki & Ishiyama 2002). Yet, despite this organisational advantage their membership experiences continue to decline (van Biezen *et al.* 2012), which may prevent communist successors from maximising their electoral potential across a country. Nevertheless, it is expected that the territorial outreach of its party organisation and the concentration of its members across a country reveal the organisational abilities of a communist successor to influence the territorial distribution of its electoral performance.

2.2. Engagement with communities

Secondly, engagement represents the level of activity of party organisation across communities. Being present across a country is not enough for a party to shape its territorial distribution of electoral support. There is need for active interaction with society in order to successfully develop a lasting association between a voter and a party and, thus, improve the electoral potential of a party within a community. In other words, a party needs to be active in a community in order to become a viable electoral option for the electorate. To do so, a communist successor may rely on two specific factors. First, it can be engaged in regional and local politics. By representing particular regional or local interests in the system of regional governance, a communist successor may in fact use this system to build local legitimacy across a territory that can be mobilised electorally at national elections. While such engagement may not be completely relevant for communist successors, as the majority of the post-socialist democratic systems across CEE remain unitary, the history of their predecessors during the inter-war period highlights the electoral potential of using regional governance. For example, between 1910 and 1923 the Bulgarian Communist Party established in the places, where it governed, so called ‘municipal communes’, providing cradle-to-the-grade services and, thus, promoting its political program. In this respect, the more engaged a party is in regional and local politics across a country, the more impactful would be its party organisation on the territorial distribution of electoral support.

Second, a party can interact with a community through its relations with mass organisations and social movements that share its ideological and programmatic aims. Supporting or facilitating joint campaigns with non-party organisations highlights the

sensitivity of a party organisation to the specific regional socio-economic and political conditions and, thus, allows it to build electoral support as a reliable local actor. Despite the declining influence of mass organisations in CEE, these relations had an important contribution to the electoral recovery of communist successors since the 1990s (Waller 1995). Furthermore, since the turn of this century CEE experiences noticeable growth in activity from organised civic society (Forbrig & Demeš 2007), which can potentially also be of benefit for communist successors. In this context, if a communist successor maintains active relations with mass organisations and social movements across communities, these should highlight the impact of party organisation on the territorial distribution of its electoral performance.

2.3. Transposition

Thirdly, in order to make an impact of its organisational presence and local engagement, a party organisation should be able to transform these experiences into electoral capital on national elections. This article calls this transformation a transposition, as it essentially requires a party to bridge its engagement at sub-national level with nationwide political contexts. Pivotal for transposition is the level of autonomy of sub-national party structures from the national headquarters. Existing work highlighted that both, a centralised party authority around the party elite, if not leader (Grzymala-Busse 2002; Keith 2011), as well as decentralised party powers that control the party leadership and provides other party organs with powers (Gherghina 2014; Harmel & Janda 1982) can lead to improved electoral performance at national elections. From that perspective, the transposition of local presence and engagement consists of two main factors. First, the internal party procedures of candidate selection can bring the communist successor closer to communities across a country. Particularly this can be done by providing regional and local organisations with candidate selection powers, which enables the promotion of candidates with local electoral credibility and reflecting local conditions (Gherghina 2014). Therefore, by involving sub-national party organisations in the decision-making process related to national elections a communist successor highlights the importance of its own organisational network for mobilising electoral support across a country.

Second, the particular approach of an electoral campaign can further influence the extent a party organisation shapes the electoral performance across a territory. In this

respect, generally at national elections parties strive to communicate a coherent electoral message across a country in order to maximise their voter potential. Hence, its campaign efforts should focus on ensuring such coherence. In order to achieve this, a party requires a centralised electoral campaign that coordinates and controls the efforts of regional and local party organisations to mobilise support at national elections. Therefore, the more centralised the more influential will be the party organisation for the territorial distribution of electoral support on national elections.

Overall, a party organisation can influence the territorial distribution of electoral performance in three main ways. Firstly, it should be present across a country, reflected in the organisational outreach and concentration of party members. Secondly, it should be engaged across communities through its involvement in regional and local politics and through its relations with non-party organisations. Thirdly, it should be able to transpose its regional and local presence and engagement across a country into a source of electoral mobilisation at national elections through a decentralised candidate selection procedure and centralised campaign strategy.

3. Case selection and research methodology

The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) is a typical case of the contemporary experiences of communist successor parties in CEE for three main reasons. First, the party experienced noticeable decline in its performance in the last decade compared to the 2000s. While its average electoral support in the 2000s was 15.7%, this decade the party dropped to 11.3% on average (Czech Statistical Office 2018). Second, the party remains a permanent actor in the Czech parliamentary arena, in spite of the fact that it kept ‘communism’ in its name. Third, organisationally the party remains the largest Czech party in terms of membership (Gherghina 2014), highlighting the potentially significant role of its party organisation for its territorial distribution of electoral performance. Overall, KSČM represents one of the most likely cases of shaping its electoral performance through its organisational capabilities.

In contrast to previous studies on the territorial distribution of electoral support for KSČM, this article relies on a qualitative research design, given the focus on the role of party organisation. This, therefore, demands data directly or closely associated with the party. In

such context, primary data came from semi-structured interviews with KSČM elite cadres at national and regional level, as well as with independent researchers that follow closely the developments of the party. While such data, especially from the former, may be biased, given the direct relation of the interviewee and the object of study, it is nevertheless worth engaging in a discussion with such sources, as they dispose of rich experience in electoral and party politics, and thus, may provide important insights for the actual role of party organisation across different settings.

The identification of potential interviewees from KSČM followed a two-stage process. First, the electoral performance of the party on the 2010 and 2013 election for the lower chamber of the Czech parliament, the Chamber of Deputies (*Poslanecká sněmovna*), was used to identify places with consistently different levels of electoral performance. That way the research can compare the role of the party organisation in qualitatively different electoral settings for the party. The analysis on the electoral performances of KSČM was done at regional level (*kraje*), as the 14 Czech regions coincide with the electoral constituencies for parliamentary elections. The analysis at this stage identified the Ústí nad Labem, South Moravia and Capital City Prague regions as constituencies of consistently different levels of electoral support for KSČM at the 2010 and 2013 elections.

Second, executive party cadres from the KSČM regional organisations in these three regions were approached for an interview, given their recent experience in daily party and campaign work. Furthermore, executive party cadres from the national headquarters were also approached for an interview in order to obtain information about the general involvement of party structures across the Czech Republic and the ways national and regional party structures approach national elections. The identification of independent researchers was based on their previous work that explored the three party faces (Key 1964) of KSČM. These researchers are not affiliated with the party, which ensures their impartiality. The information from their interviews helped to triangulate the information from the elite interviews with party cadres.

Potential interviewees were contacted via email on two separate waves in early 2017. In total, 37 unique potential interviewees were contacted with 28 responding in total. From the 28 respondents, interviews were successfully conducted with nine persons: three

party representatives (one at national and two at regional level) and six independent researchers, held at their place of work in the spring of 2017. While this may seem a limited base for an informed and comprehensive assessment, it should be noted that parties remain very secretive about their inner workings (Mudde 2007). This is particularly the case for KSČM, as very few academic studies on the party included insights gained from elite interviews. Hence, even if nine interviews seem very few, this still is a very significant number for a research of any political party. The discussions with the interviewees aimed at gathering their insights on the role of the party organisation in general across the country or in the particular region, in which they live, without the intent to challenge their views. Transcripts of these interviews were analysed qualitatively with the aim to identify common themes related to the influence of five independent variables on the territorial distribution of electoral performance of the party.

4. The territorial distribution of electoral performance of KSČM since 2010

In the past decade KSČM participated on three elections (2010, 2013, and 2017) with noticeably volatile results. While in 2013 the party achieved its second best vote share in the Czech post-communist history (14.9%), in 2017 it dropped to an all-time low (7.8%) (Czech Statistical Office 2018). Despite its electoral volatility, the territorial distribution of electoral performance of the party remains largely unchanged. The party consistently achieves its worst results in the Prague and its best performances in the Ústí nad Labem constituency, whereas in the remaining 12 constituencies the differences remain generally marginal. As it will be seen in the following paragraphs, such combination of electoral volatility and stable territorial distribution derives from an organisational impasse within KSČM, where the party has both strong and lacking organisational capabilities. In this context, neither of the two hypotheses could be confirmed.

4.1. Passive presence

Such impasse is visible in the passive presence of the party across the Czech Republic. While KSČM maintains a wide territorial coverage through a vast network of party organisations, the majority of those organisations remain rather inactive. The party remains one of the largest political parties in the Czech Republic by membership numbers (van Biezen *et al.* 2012). It also enjoys a dense organisational network that stretches across all regions and districts of the country, as well it is present in a majority of municipalities,

according to data from the official website of KSČM. As one party member states in this respect: 'We are still a mass party [...] other parties don't have structures, don't use members' (Interview E, 2017). This allows KSČM to 'combine different levels of activities to [address] issues' (Interview E, 2017), suggesting that the stability of the territorial pattern of electoral support is enshrined in its party complexity.

However, despite this comprehensive organisational presence, the party remains rather disengaged and inactive across communities. This is particularly visible in the lack of a correlation between number of members and electoral performance. While official data is not accessible, the conversations revealed that the party has its largest party organisation in Prague, where the party continuously fails to mobilise significant support. One party cadre explains this trend with the socio-economic conditions in the city: 'We are able to mobilise vast numbers of members here in Prague, but the overall situation of wealth does not allow us to perform better' (Interview E, 2017). More importantly, despite the importance of organisation and members, the conversations revealed significant challenges for the party to maintain this network. One party cadre highlights the problem, stating that 'we have now villages, where our local party organization does not exist since already 10 years, [although] people still vote for us there' (Interview G, 2017). Main reason for this is the declining activity of party members: 'Our members, unfortunately, are unable to actively support us for a long time. That is why we often don't know whether a party organisation in a particular place, especially if it is a small place, still exists' (Interview G, 2017).

An important reason for the passivity of party members is the lack of generational turnover within the party. 'What we lack is attracting younger members, engaging the youth, we face real challenges there', highlights a party member (Interview E, 2017). Another adds that 'to attract the youth we would need a fundamental change in our structures, in our approach, in our work, but I don't see that happening for now' (Interview G, 2017). An independent researcher explains that the sources for the lack of generational turnover are to be found in the traditionalist image of the party. 'The youth is in the big cities, studying or travelling to work, very few of them remain in their place of living. [...] This party, however, seems out-dated for them, very conservative, very unattractive; it does not correspond to their rather cosmopolitan views' (Interview C, 2017). As another independent researcher highlights this is a major issue even for those who enter the party to develop as career

politicians. 'KSČM is very open for newcomers and will almost immediately place them on top places on their lists for local elections, for example. [...] But you do some work and start to engage with the party and you clash with an ideological wall, which discourages many' (Interview H, 2017).

The outcome of such passivity is the general difficulty of the party to address the particular regional or local socio-economic conditions across the country and, hence to build electoral support. According to the interviews these conditions determine the extent of support for the party across the country. For example, when discussing the party performance in Prague, a party representative immediately stressed that the city is an economic, financial, and service centre of the Czech Republic and its overall higher standard of living is an important reason for the limited interest in the topics that the party raises (Interview E, 2017). In discussions with independent researchers, it comes out that Prague is not an exception in this respect, as other major cities, such as Brno or Liberec, are in similar situation: a high standard of living stifles the appeal of topics raised by the communists (Interview B, 2017; Interview C, 2017). This suggests that due to its organisational passivity, the party is unable to offer a relevant political agenda across communities, highlighting the potentially limited role of party organisation for its electoral performance and territorial distribution.

Despite its inability to mobilise support in places, where the party underperforms or achieves relatively average results, KSČM remains a viable electoral option in its strongholds. As the interviews highlighted, the historical legacies from the authoritarian communist regime in the country remain a major source of electoral mobilisation for the party. A party member states in this respect that KSČM 'reaps the [voters'] experiences from the previous regime' (Interview G, 2017), suggesting that it is the individual relation to the past regime that determines whether a person would support the party. This is particularly visible in the sources for its strong support in the border areas of the Czech Republic. First, a party member from Ústí nad Labem pointed out the loss of industries and services after 1990 as an important factor that mobilises people in the region to vote for KSČM (Interview F, 2017). This highlights that the social context of economic and social decline is an important factor for the strong electoral performances of the party in the Czech peripheries. Second, conversations with independent researchers attributed the strong support for the party

there with the concentration of former border guards alongside the former Sudeten region (Interview A, 2017; Interview I, 2017). Given that former border guards remain an important social constituency for the party (Holubec 2011), especially in Czech border areas where KSČM maintains an image of a representative of minor regional interests (Lach *et al.* 2010), it seems that their stable territorial distribution of electoral performance stems from the strong linkage between the party and its core voters. This, therefore, suggests that the role of its party organisation is to maintain this linkage, while it is unable to provide resources for expanding its electoral base.

4.2. Hollowed-out engagement

Its organisational passivity is also visible in the rather limited engagement with communities. In terms of involvement in regional politics, the party achieved noticeable success at regional elections in the past decade, but fails to use it to mobilise support at national polls. In the late 1990s the Czech Republic introduced a comprehensive administrative reform that saw the introduction of 14 regions with some executive and legislative authority, enshrined in regional governments and parliaments (Baun & Marek 2006). Since 2002 KSČM entered into regional governments in 12 of those (only the Prague and Liberec regions have not had a communist participation in regional government), experiencing significant rise in support at the 2012 regional elections (Ryšavý 2013) and decline in 2016 (Pink & Eibl 2018). This suggests that its party organisation across the Czech Republic maintains significant organisational capabilities to engage with communities.

Participation in regional politics, however, does not translate into an improved electoral potential for the party at national elections for two main reasons. First, KSČM party cadres at national and regional levels were unanimous that regional politics have limited impact at national elections. This is due to the rather de-politicised nature of regional politics. An independent researcher states that ‘the region is the last [place] where people think [it] can change something for them. Prague is too far, it’s only taxes, but when it’s a social question it is a local question, but it is not an ideological question, not a political struggle, people had to live together’ (Interview B, 2017). In other words, it seems that regional politics in the Czech Republic remain rather detached from national politics. Second, although the involvement of the party in regional politics allowed it to detoxify to some extent its pariah image across the country (Interview E, 2017), an regional party cadre

assesses its government experience as a problem for KSČM, as it has to carry the responsibility for the effects of national and regional politics on the regions where they are or were on power (Interview F, 2017). Hence, despite its involvement in regional politics, the party does not seem capable to build up electoral support across the country given its government record and the relative detachment between regional and national politics.

Similarly, the party remains rather isolated in its relations with potential non-party organisations. The interviews reveal that KSČM maintains a network of front organisations that, however, have limited social influence. Beyond these the most effective organisation, affiliated with the party, remains the Club of Czech Border Areas (*Klub českého pohraničí*) that according to independent researchers still is an important source for electoral mobilisation in the Czech peripheries due to the lack of mobility in these places (e.g. Interview D, 2017). Furthermore, despite the emergence of a relatively young, yet hardly influential radical left milieu of social movements in the country, the party has limited connections to it. Main reason for this is ideological differences: '[...] many of these organisations remain very anti-communist and suspicious for associating with the communists. Some of them are even more radical than KSČM, so it is difficult to find a common ground' (Interview B, 2017) states an independent researcher in this respect. Similarly, linkages to mass organisations are also rather marginal for two reasons. First, trade unions maintain rather closer links to the major social democratic competitor of the party, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), particularly in Moravia, which prevents KSČM from expanding its electoral potential (Interview D 2017; Interview E, 2017). Second, even when KSČM may enjoy some good relations with trade unions, these are rather geographically restricted: 'It depends where any trade union sees it feasible to work with the communists. For example, in Ostrava they work very well, because of the huge mining business there, but across the country trade unions are reluctant in having something in common with them' (Interview D, 2017). Overall, it seems that the party could not compensate for its organisational passivity through its linkages to non-party organisations.

The result of the limited relevance of the involvement in regional politics of KSČM and its limited linkages to non-party organisations is the lack of competitive advantages for the party vis-à-vis its direct electoral opponents. According to the interviews, the territorial distribution of electoral performance depends to very large extent on the competition with

ČSSD, described by an independent researcher as a 'zero-sum game' (Interview H, 2017). This is due to the fact that the two left-wing parties are perceived as very similar entities by the public. One party cadre explains in this respect that 'people don't see major differences between us [and ČSSD]; the more they don't see a difference, it is dangerous for us because of [the parliamentary] influence [of the social democrats] after the elections' (Interview G, 2017). Another party cadre emphasises that such danger is more accelerated by their differences in financial resources: 'We cannot compete with financially healthy parties, such as the ČSSD' (Interview F, 2017). Hence, while KSČM cannot present a distinctively different ideological profile to the social democrats, its financial disadvantage could not be overcome through its organisational capabilities.

Furthermore, given the similar ideological profiles of the two parties, they also compete for similar social groups, described by one independent researcher as 'natural unity of [their voters] and the [current] closeness of both parties' (Interview H, 2017), especially at regional level (Interview H, 2017; Interview D, 2017). In such context the intensity of their competition offers a potential advantage for KSČM following a period in government for the social democrats: 'When [ČSSD] are in power, then the communists benefit, as they can criticise the government from left-wing positions, but if the social democrats are in opposition as well, then the communists are in trouble' (Interview H, 2017). Yet, the past decade saw ČSSD government participation only since 2013, suggesting that KSČM was not able to benefit from this advantage due to their similar status of parliamentary opposition. Only in the 2017 elections KSČM benefited from the government participation of ČSSD, overcoming its social democratic opponents for the first time since 1992. Therefore, rather than the role of its party organisation, it is the different political status of KSČM that allows it to compete with the social democrats.

Yet, when the party faces electoral competition from parties of similar political status, particularly from other anti-political establishment opponents, it rather fails to respond properly. A party cadre was clear that KSČM fails to maximise its electoral potential among protest voters, as other parties 'offer [them] more options to choose' (Interview E, 2017). Particular competition in this respect is seen in the centrist populist ANO 2011 and the radical right Freedom and Direct Democracy (Interview D, 2017; Interview A, 2017), mentioned regularly as direct challengers in communist strongholds. According to party

cadres, the direct access to mainstream media outlets for these two parties (Interview E, 2017; Interview G, 2017) is a major reason for the inability of KSČM to respond to that challenge. Hence, whereas its anti-political establishment competitors have the competitive advantage of media presence, KSČM could not compensate this organisationally, highlighting a rather limited contribution of its party organisation to its electoral performance and territorial distribution.

4.3. Centralised disorganisation

The organisational impasse of the party is mostly visible in its limited abilities to transpose its organisational presence and engagement across communities into source for mobilisation at national elections. This is particularly the case regarding its candidate selection process. According to the party status candidates for national positions are subject of selection through primaries among party members (KSČM 2016). Yet, the same party status also indicates that these selections are mere nomination and may be altered at local and regional level, while the Central Committee of the party has final say on the list order (KSČM 2016). This suggests a slightly centralised decision-making process that potentially prevents the party from fielding candidates with local credibility on electable places. More importantly, the way the candidate selection process is conducted suggests a limited interest of regional and local organisations in it. For example, a party cadre at regional level described their involvement the following way: ‘well, we make our recommendation to the Central Committee and then they confirm it and that’s it’ (Interview F, 2017). This suggests that sub-national party organisations have limited involvement and, hence, contribution to the electoral performance of the party at national elections.

The limited involvement of regional and local party organisations is also noticeable in the way the party campaigns during elections. The interviews reveal that KSČM is mainly focused at distributing a common message without much experimentation and innovation. A party cadre states that ‘we don’t have different campaigns, we make meetings with our members across the country and that’s it’ (Interview E, 2017). Reason for the lack of experimentation is previous failed attempts to do so: ‘[KSČM] tried in 2010 to do a modern campaign, with billboards and TV spots, but they haven’t got any better in terms of electoral support, so that’s why they stopped doing it’ (Interview H, 2017). Furthermore, the campaign seems to have rather limited goals, concentrated solely on ‘informing the party

members and supporters about the elections, nothing else. That's why they don't require a more sophisticated campaign' (Interview I, 2017). In such context, the regional and local party structures at national ones are involved as much as they facilitate the electoral campaign in their region devised by the national headquarters (Interview F, 2017). Therefore, while the party maintains a rather centralised campaign effort, it is rather hollowed out due to the limited, rather technical involvement of its sub-national structures in it.

An important reason for such limited involvement is an apparent mismatch between the party goals at regional and at national levels. An independent researcher hints at such mismatch the following way: 'regional party [representatives] are very distanced from national politics and very pragmatic in their work in the region. Certainly communism gives them some value orientation for their choices, but generally they don't really differ from any other politicians on regional levels' (Interview H, 2017). This suggests that the political expertise and behaviour of regional KSČM politicians is qualitatively different from that of national ones. Such difference in goals and behaviour is particularly at the core at the inability of the party to transpose its government involvement at regional level into an electoral asset at national elections. As one regional representative explains:

'The party at national level should present what it has achieved; we have mayors in towns and municipalities and we have achieved lots of things at regional and local levels, so they can use the achievements of [our region] to do that. But if the general policy [in the central headquarters] in Prague is to play the role of the opposition, they will not be willing to point these things' (Interview F, 2017).

This suggests that the party organisation purposefully chooses not to transpose its involvement in regional politics due to an apparent incongruence between the office-oriented regional party branches and the rather anti-political establishment and policy-oriented national headquarters.

Overall, in the past decade KSČM has considerable organisational capabilities in the three elements of party organisation, as well as its lack in them (Table 1). It maintains a rather passive presence across the country, which enables the party to mobilise its core supporters, but prevents it from building up a stable electoral support across the country.

Furthermore, while the party is engaged with communities by providing them with political representation at regional and national levels, KSČM remains rather isolated entity, particularly given its limited linkages to non-party organisations. Furthermore, the party is unable to transpose its organisational presence and involvement across communities mainly due to its highly centralised candidate selections procedures despite its centralised campaign effort. As the previous sections, however, highlighted the majority of its positive aspects seemed rather hollowed out. This is particularly visible in the inability of the party to use its involvement in regional politics due to the detachment between regional and national politics, as well as the mismatch of party goals between its regional and national party organisation. Furthermore, although the party has centralised campaign strategy, it lacks innovation and fails to involve significantly its sub-national structures. Therefore, while its party organisation provides KSČM with sufficient resources to sustain its parliamentary presence at national level, the party fails to use them to expand its electoral potential visible in a rather stable electoral geography and volatile electoral performance. In light of the two hypotheses of this article, it seems that neither of them can be confirmed due to the organisational impasse of the party.

5. Conclusion

The party organisation still matters for the electoral performance of communist successor parties even almost three decades since the end of the authoritarian communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. As this article revealed a party needs to be present across a country, engaged with communities and able to use this presence and engagement for its goals. In the particular case of KSČM this was not entirely the case. While the party was electorally volatile in the past decade, its territorial distribution remained stable. The evidence from series of semi-structured interviews reveals that this is due to an organisational impasse within the party. While on the one hand KSČM remains present across communities and, thus, is able to mobilise its core voters, its declining engagement and reluctance to use its local legitimacy for electoral purposes on national elections prevent the party to manage the volatile influences of the external socio-economic and political environment. Hence, while its organisational presence secures a certain level of electoral support, the party is unable to expand electorally. In this context, party

organisation indeed still matters for the electoral performance of communist successors, but it also highlights major challenges.

These insights have important implications in three main directions. First, the case of KSČM reveals an important caveat for the contribution of party organisation to electoral performance. While the article confirms the relevance of organisational strength for political parties in CEE, this should be understood in relative terms. Particularly, the evidence of this article reveals that the party organisation is strong not because of its numbers, but because of how it uses its resources and opportunities. Second, this article highlighted the continuous relevance of communist successor origins for the majority of left-wing parties in CEE. On the one hand it may seem odd to still refer to these parties as communist successors, given that in the past almost thirty years they came in terms with their authoritarian past. On the other hand, however, these parties still remain organisationally strong through their main organisational inheritance from their communist predecessors, a comprehensive party network and large membership. This suggests that while these parties changed ideologically towards a catch-all profile, their legacy of being a mass party still has implications for their functioning within the party systems in CEE. Therefore, future studies may need to recognise the influence of their party origins even after the substantial ideological and organisation change these parties went through.

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Table 1. Organisational capabilities of KSČM since 2010

Analytical dimension	Empirical indicator	Capability level
Presence	Territorial outreach	High
	Active members	Low
Engagement	Regional representation	High
	Relations with non-party organisations	Low
Transposition	Candidate selection procedures	Low
	Electoral campaign	High

Table 2. List of cited interviews

Interview A	Independent researcher, 26 May 2017, Brno CZ
Interview B	Independent researcher, 23 May 2017, Prague CZ
Interview C	Independent researcher, 23 May 2017, Prague CZ
Interview D	Independent researcher, 25 May 2017, Brno CZ
Interview E	Party cadre at regional level, 22 May 2017, Prague CZ
Interview F	Party cadre at regional level, 24 May 2017, Ústí nad Labem CZ
Interview G	Party cadre at national level, 23 May 2017, Prague CZ
Interview H	Independent researcher, 23 May 2017, Prague CZ
Interview I	Independent researcher, 25 May 2017, Brno CZ