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Seán Hanley & Lubomír Kopeček

Published online: 19 Feb 2025.

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Death of the Dinosaurs? Organisational Resilience and the Survival of Older Mainstream Parties in Czechia

SEÁN HANLEY & LUBOMÍR KOPEČEK

Abstract

This article examines how organisational strength, leadership change and strategy enable traditional parties in postcommunist Central Europe to survive political and electoral crisis and new party challengers and unexpectedly re-emerge as nationally competitive actors. Case studies of two Czech parties, the Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*—ODS) and the People's Party (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie–Československá strana lidová*—KDU-ČSL), suggest that partial recovery can be achieved by a 'crisis leader' who manages risks through strategies of limited reform, focused on mobilising core members and voters in local politics and other second-order venues. The final part discusses how the two parties' participation in the anti-populist SPOLU alliance superseded their earlier anti-crisis strategies.

CZECHIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF MAY 2010 marked a watershed in the country's politics and—like 'earthquake elections' elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) in the wake of the 2008–2009 recession (Batory 2010; Haughton & Krašovec 2013)—signalled the death of a certain notion of democratic party government: the idea that, at least in some countries, political competition would be structured by a stable set of parties loosely emulating the identity and ideology of their Western European counterparts. Czechia's 2010 election saw not the resumption of competition between established parties of left and right following the interlude of a technocratic caretaker government (Brunclík 2016), but the breakthrough of new parties: both a new liberal reformist party, TOP 09, and a new anti-corruption grouping, Public Affairs (*Věci veřejné*—VV), whose well-pitched, well-funded campaign denounced older parties as

'political dinosaurs'. The election ushered in a more uncertain period characterised by the rise of more new parties, principally Andrej Babiš's populist ANO party ('Yes' in Czech), which first challenged the established parties of the Czech centre-right (in 2013) and then the centre-left (in 2017), calling into question the character and, according to some, the stability of Czech democracy (Hanley & Vachudova 2018; Buštíková & Guasti 2019). The Czech experience was in many ways typical of the breakdown of the early, brittle patterns of party system consolidation in CEE and the emergence of more fluid patterns of competition, often characterised by the rise and fall of new parties with loose political profiles (Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020).

Comparative literature (Enyedi & Casal Bértoa 2018; Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020) and work on national cases, including in Czechia (Hanley 2012; Cabada 2013; Charvát & Just 2016; Kopeček 2016; Havlík & Voda 2018; Balík & Hloušek 2019; Hloušek *et al*. 2020), has focused heavily on understanding the (cycles of) rapidly evolving new challenger parties and patterns of electoral volatility, populism, shifting issue dimensions, party system institutionalisation and the new party strategies that accelerate and bring these trends about. A smaller strand within the new party-oriented literature has expanded its focus to consider the subset of new parties which bucked the trend of rapid rise and fall and managed to endure longer, broadly concluding that success after the initial breakthrough typically requires a combination of well-rooted organisation, a clear (mainstream) programmatic identity tapping into enduring social and cultural divisions, and effective and appealing leadership (Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020; Engler 2023).[1]

However, the Czech case suggests another, little-researched issue: that of the resilience and adaption not of new challenger parties but of the mainstream parties first established in Central and Eastern Europe during the post-transition period of the early 1990s. Here, there is a visible gap in existing research. In the Czech case some such 'dinosaur parties', like their prehistoric counterparts in the natural world (Stone 2010), have not only survived political and electoral crisis but have proved resilient enough to adapt and return in different forms, averting party collapse and re-emerging as nationally competitive actors. Indeed, two of the most influential members of the current five-party governing coalition in Czechia (as of June 2024), the Civic Democrats (*Občanská demokratická strana*—ODS) and the People's Party (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie–Československá strana lidová*—KDU-ČSL),[2] are precisely such parties.

The dilemmas and choices facing such formations, we suggest, differ in important ways from those facing successful new challenger parties after their breakthrough, but also have little in common with the issues faced by these parties in the early post-1989 period of party-building when they initially established themselves. We explore this question through case studies of the patterns of survival, adaptation and resilience of two moderate right-of-centre groupings, ODS and KDU-ČSL. These parties first established themselves in the 1990s, experienced existential crises partly as a result of the new party breakthroughs in the 2010s, but survived, adapted and subsequently underwent (limited) electoral revival. Which factors contributed to their survival and recovery and what role did the party organisation play in this, specifically the party cadres and leader?

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[1]See also Bolleyer (2013).
[2]The KDU-ČSL currently uses its acronym as its official name.

Focusing on the immediate period following the 'crisis election' of 2010, we take as our starting point the literatures on new party endurance, early postcommunist party (trans)formation and party institutionalisation to argue that meaningful organisational structures and membership matter for post-crisis recovery. However, like recent scholarship on new party endurance, we find that organisation is necessarily combined with leadership, strategy and programmatic resources.

For our case study parties, however, we find that these factors matter in distinct ways: organisation matters when deployed in particular venues, such as local politics; and leadership matters if an appropriate 'crisis leader' with distinct qualities realises the potential for resilience. In contradistinction to the stress on turning to a clear programmatic profile in the literatures on both new party (trans)formation and established mainstream parties seeking resilience, we suggest older mainstream parties should avoid programmatic shifts or ideological re-invention and instead reaffirm their existing identity with a degree of innovation.

We structure the article as follows. After reviewing the literature on party crisis and party organisation, leadership and programme as survival factors, we outline a framework for the survival of older established mainstream parties. We then apply this framework to the two right-wing Czech case study parties and conclude by reflecting on how this approach may be developed, modified and extended to other cases.

Organisation, identity and party crisis

Defining party crisis

It is in the nature of party competition that parties suffer electoral and political reversals. However, some such reversals pose existential threats, which can result in a party's effective demise or disappearance as a politically relevant actor. This is commonly described in terms of 'party failure' (or 'party death'), typically conceptualised as loss of (parliamentary) representation or, more drastically, the termination, whether *de facto* or *de jure*, of a party as an organisation (Bakke & Sitter 2013, 2015; Beyens *et al.* 2016).[3] In this article, however, we prefer the broader notion of 'party crisis' which captures the suddenness of political change as party survival is called into question; the sense of emergency and urgency that political actors (elites and members) in parties experience; and the fact that party crises often take place against a background of broader social and political crisis, whether driven by slow-burning demographic, cultural and economic trends (Mudde 2016) or immediate shocks such as recession or war.

Following Cyr (2016, p. 125), however, we focus more narrowly on 'national-electoral crisis', 'a sudden and dramatic decline in … [a party's] national vote share'—often in a single election—and its political aftermath: electoral collapse may trigger disintegrative processes such as intensified factional struggles over party direction, role and identity; loss of resources (public funding and donations); or the exit of members and supporters, who may no longer view the party as effective or valuable as a source of identity

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[3]See also Lawson and Merkl (1988).

(Gunther & Hopkin 2002; Morgan 2011). Especially for longer-established parties, this may be viewed as a 'crisis of institutionalisation' or process of de-institutionalisation. We also follow Cyr in seeing the impact of party crisis—and of subsequent party survival—as a question of degree. Few parties in crisis collapse completely and lose political relevance overnight. Degrees of survival may, for example, entail competing successfully at subnational level, or retaining a voice in public debates. Such forms of limited survival provide the scope and space for political adaption to 'wait out the period of hostility that follows national-electoral crisis' (Cyr 2016, p. 126).[4]

Organisation, leadership and ideology as anti-crisis mechanisms

There is, however, nothing preordained about the outcome of even an existential crisis. Parties can come back from the political brink. The mechanisms through which parties in crisis, and especially mainstream parties, can mitigate decline or avert full collapse are not theoretically well-elaborated. However, there is a rich set of ideas developed in different contexts about the factors which promote party survival more broadly.

It is a commonplace in the literature, for example, that strong organisation helps parties overcome challenges in their environment and thus endure and succeed. However, the challenges faced, and the ways in which organisation helps mitigate them, vary. Classic (Western Europe-oriented) party literature highlights organisation-building as a vehicle for the institutionalisation of major parties through routinisation and the evolution of party identity as a goal in itself (Panebianco 1988). Similar ideas, usually stressing the scope and social rootedness of organisation, recur in later literature on party (re-)building as a form of 'democratic consolidation' in new(er) democracies in southern Europe, Latin America and CEE (Morlino 1995; Mainwaring & Scully 1997; Mainwaring & Torcal 2006). Organisation-building, undertaken in the right way or rooted in distinct social constituencies, has also been seen as a key element in the survival of new parties competing in existing party systems, whether in Western Europe (Bolleyer 2013) or in newer, more electorally volatile democracies in Eastern Europe (Deegan-Krause & Haughton 2018; Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020).[5]

Work on post-transition party-building in new Third Wave democracies (Gunther & Hopkin 2002; Cyr 2016; Lupu 2016) and the later endurance of new parties (Bolleyer 2013; Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020; Engler 2023) stresses two additional factors: first, broad programmatic identity going beyond the time-limited imperatives of regime change, anti-establishment protest or charismatic leadership and parties' previously accumulated stock of 'ideological resources' or party 'brand'; and second, (scope for) effective leadership, which can command sufficient support and legitimacy to make the right changes at the right time and the qualities and skills of party elites. As Bakke and Sitter (2015) note, while seeking to maintain an existing party organisation is by far the most common, attractive and—at least in the short term—effective choice for failed or failing party elites, it is a choice. Other options exist, such as alliance, merger or dissolution.

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[4]Another measure of party survival is retention of the minimum national vote share required for legal registration or state funding.
[5]For a dissenting view see Engler (2023).

The underlying logic across such literatures is that strong organisation—and associated patterns of voter/member identification—acts as a shock absorber, preventing electoral wipe-out and political disintegration, which allows parties to recover, generate new leaders and reconfigure to fight another day. Leadership translates resources into a recovery strategy, which despite differences of context, is based on some form of enduring programmatic appeal, typically relating to socio-economic and/or socio-cultural cleavages.

The way such factors can integrate is elegantly illustrated in Grzymała-Busse's (2002) comparison of the transformation of some former CEE ruling communist parties into important and credible centre-left players in postcommunist democratic politics after 1989. Such communist successor parties (CSPs) inherited organisational resources—core memberships, local associations, local and regional bodies, solid internal rules, parliamentary caucuses and a national headquarters with a support apparatus (Orenstein 1998; Grzymała-Busse 2002; Bozóki & Ishiyama 2002; Ziblatt & Biziouras 2002). However, it was the skills and culture of their new leadership elites and the pace and timing of the programmatic and organisational changes they made that determined whether recovery occurred and what form it took.[6]

The specificity of established mainstream parties

However, while the contribution of factors such as strong party organisation to party endurance is agreed in general terms, with partial exceptions (Tavits 2013; Bakke & Sitter 2015), there are few studies of how it might contribute to post-crisis adaptation by established mainstream parties. Nor is it clear whether the crises and challenges they face —and the elite strategies and programmatic adaptations needed to overcome them—will resemble those confronting successful new parties or post-1989 party builders in CEE working in the aftermath of regime change. It is doubtful that lessons learned from the dilemmas facing former ruling parties in the aftermath of regime change—arguably a historically unique critical juncture (Binev 2023)—transfer to those of parties experiencing crisis and collapse in the course of normal democratic party competition, even in turbulent electoral environments. Similarly, the skills of pragmatism, negotiation and organisation that allowed technocratic *nomenklatura* elites to transform CSPs in credible centre-left parties in the early 1990s (Grzymała-Busse 2002) are commonplace among professional politicians across almost all parties and so in themselves may have limited explanatory power.

The study of the post-crisis recovery of established mainstream CEE parties in contemporary settings allows us to think about the nature of party organisation, elites and ideology—and the causal links between them—in more nuanced ways. For example, claims that strong party organisation helps established parties overcome crisis often

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[6]For reforming CSPs, organisational change and centralisation, Grzymała-Busse (2002) suggests, preceded and enabled programmatic adaptation, creating moderate left-of-centre formations. Where elites differed in background or opted for programmatic radicalism, as with Czechia's Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*—KSČM), organisational inheritances translated into a different outcome.

feature incidentally as part of broader arguments and, while inherently plausible, are typically asserted without much empirical support. For example, Tavits, who examines (and confirms) the association between organisational strength and electoral success for (then) mainstream parties such as Hungary's Fidesz, the Czech ODS and the Estonian Centre Party (*Eesti Keskerakond*—EK), claims that:

> organizationally strong political parties are more effective … they can more credibly claim that they are stable entities whose existence is not threatened by environmental shocks … . Immediate, frequent, and organized contacts with the electorate, and competence, reliability, and accountability—made possible by grassroots presence, permanent structure, and professional management—can help parties with strong organizations shape voters' biases … and thereby mobilize support. (Tavits 2013, p. 25)

But Tavits provides limited direct evidence that such processes occur and does not examine parties in the context of crisis induced by environmental shocks (Hanley 2015). Deegan-Krause and Haughton (2018, p. 10, 14) argue more specifically that organisation —combined with programmatic clarity and effective leadership succession mechanisms— helps a party to 'weather the political storms associated with electoral setbacks and defeat' and 'recuperation and transition during political difficulties'. However, they elaborate only to a limited extent how this occurs, noting in broad terms, for example, that party organisation can be a source of elite regeneration allowing the possibility of 'opting for a new face', which personality-driven, top-down parties lack. With some exceptions, accounts of party resilience and recovery also underspecify the issue of temporal sequencing, neglecting the insight that the order in which processes play out matters for political outcomes (Pierson 2000).

While offering valuable methodological and measurement insights,[7] such studies of party organisation in CEE, such as that of Tavits (2013), tend to emphasise the formal structures and forms of participation such as membership and candidacy, assuming that these are underpinned by traditional forms of party activism and the associated development of organisational loyalties. This overlooks the fact that, while grassroots activism does exist in CEE parties, outwardly strong party organisations may be hollow structures captured by corrupt local interests (Klíma 2019). Indeed, as Grzymała-Busse (2018) observes, successful organisation-building and successful competition for national office often invites and precedes such capture.[8] Perceived corruption and corruption scandals, in turn, act as both slow-burn causes and short-term triggers of electoral collapse and crisis for established CEE parties (Haughton & Deegan-Krause 2020).

The fall and rise of the mainstream Czech right

Drawing these literatures together, we explore these issues through two parallel case studies of early established right and centre-right parties in Czechia: the ODS and the KDU-ČSL.

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[7]Tavits (2013), for example, notes that a party's ability to field candidates in local elections is—in the CEE context—an effective measure of party membership.
[8]See also Kopecký (2006), Tavits (2013).

Czechia exemplifies the regional dynamics of early post-1989 party consolidation giving way to cycles of new party rise and fall (Deegan-Krause & Haughton 2010, 2018; Charvát 2014) and, subsequently, of polarised competition between populist and anti-populist blocs (Havlík & Kluknavská 2022; Lysek & Macků 2022) in which (some) traditional parties, nevertheless, showed recovery and resilience. We focus on parties of the post-1989 Czech right and centre-right because their cycle of formation, crises and (partial) recovery is most well-developed and has gone significantly further than similar developments affecting the established parties of the Czech left. While the electoral collapse and eventual departure from the Czech parliament (in 2021) of the Czech Social Democratic Party (*Česká strana sociálně demokratická*—ČSSD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*—KSČM) is highly significant and has striking parallels with the experiences of the right-wing parties discussed in this article, it is currently too early to say if these are failed or variant cases of post-crisis party resilience—a point we will return to in the conclusion.

In-depth case studies, we believe, can both offset some of the limitations of broader comparative work and develop the beginnings of a refined, testable, generalisable conceptual framework of crises and post-crisis recovery of established parties in postcommunist Central Europe. The framework we elaborate stresses temporal sequencing and breaks down into several phases. The first is the initial entry into the crisis—described in the literature as a party suffering a sharp and sudden loss of voters, often to the point where it drops out of parliament or narrowly avoids it, often preceded and/or accompanied by internal splits—characterised by the exit of groups of disaffected party members, rivalries and debates over party identity and brand (Gunther & Hopkin 2002; Cyr 2016; Lupu 2016). It is sometimes impossible to identify the precise start of this phase, given that party problems may accumulate over a long timescale. Conversely, the final breaking point (and at the same time the beginning of the next phase) is usually easily identifiable given its association with first-order (parliamentary) crisis elections.

Phase two is that of crisis management and avoiding collapse when the harshest effects of the crisis are manifested, external and internal threats/pressures are the greatest and when it is uncertain whether the party will make it or not. This entails leadership change and an initial political realignment and identity reappraisal and the management of internal divisions. In this phase it becomes clear how loyal and committed partisans are; whether they are willing to stay in the party and run for it, publicly associating their name with the party at a time when it may be unpopular and beleaguered.

This phase also includes the emergence of a new 'crisis leader', whose organisational and communication skills are crucial for managing crisis and averting full party destruction. The 'crisis leader' must win the trust of the members and elites to push sometimes painful crisis-management solutions (which may mean limiting the influence of key groups of officials) while externally restoring a damaged public image.

The third phase is that of recovery and (at least partial) consolidation, which is associated with efforts to avoid falling back into the earlier deep crisis, to secure the already achieved position and, as much as possible, to restore the party's pre-crisis relevance. The beginning of this phase is usually linked to a parliamentary election in which the party achieves a result showing that the threat of marginalisation has passed and, for extra-parliamentary parties, is associated with a return to parliament. Internal party processes are stabilised and, similarly,

the perceived relevance of the party in the eyes of other parties is restored, with the revitalised party seen as a possible ally or adversary rather than a formation threatened with imminent collapse.

This situation is characterised by efforts to durably restore the party's former political significance, innovating older strategies to adapt to a changing environment. Here we may discuss whether the 2021 entry of ODS and KDU-ČSL into a centre-right electoral alliance, Together (SPOLU), as Bakke and Sitter (2015, p. 15) hint in their study of (generally small) failed CEE parties, constitutes a fourth stage, reflecting the inherent limitations of organisationally based resilience.

The Civic Democrats: reviving a party of postcommunist transformation

The right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS), a major political actor for the first two decades of Czech postcommunist politics, emerged from the Civic Forum (*Občanské fórum*—OF) movement, which was the main driver of the Czech democratic transition in 1989. The key figure in building ODS was the finance minister and leader of the OF Václav Klaus, who skilfully combined his charisma with the idea of building 'standard' party structures with individual membership, hierarchy and accountable elected leaders (Hadjiisky 2001; Hanley 2007). ODS won the 1992 elections with about 30% of the vote and dominated government and politics in the following years. Despite Klaus's strong personal leadership, ODS created a relatively solid grassroots membership and a network of local and district branches. The party had almost 19,000 members in 1991, the year of its founding, growing to about 23,000 and almost 1,500 local branches by 1996 (Mrklas 2021, pp. 132–33).

Branches retained considerable decision-making freedom in local affairs, with professional politicians and paid managers (officials) running the party's headquarters. Despite an outwardly 'electoral-professional' structure (Panebianco 1988), power relationships in ODS were more complex: the position of regional and local elites inside the party remained important and was subsequently boosted by the creation of new self-governing regions in 2000, which offered many attractive paid positions and led to an adaptation in ODS party structure.

From the late 1990s onwards ODS experienced decline and periodic crises in office caused by economic downturns, disputes with junior coalition partners and party financing scandals. Problems of this kind, which erupted in 1997–1998, led to the fall of Klaus's government. A breakaway group opposed Klaus, and the party suffered a sharp drop in support, which in March 1998 stood at only 10%, the lowest in ODS history (Pšeja 2005). However, the party ultimately survived and quickly revived electorally, averting a descent into full crisis in Cyr's sense. By the summer of 1998, the party had already achieved almost the same result in the parliamentary elections as two years earlier. The recovery was a testament to Klaus's charisma and campaigning skill and the weakness of the new Freedom Union (*Unie Svobody*—US), but also to ODS's organisational resilience: the departure of about one quarter of party members and the disappearance of one fifth of its local branches did not have fatal consequences.

The party's relatively sizeable nationwide organisation did, however, leave it vulnerable to corruption. By the early- to mid-2000s, many regional and municipal party organisations

were, to a lesser or greater degree, captured by corruption through devices such as the recruitment of large numbers of paid rank-and-file party members (popularly known as 'dead souls', *mrtvé duše*). This allowed informal actors ('regional godfathers', *krajští kmotři*) to corruptly manipulate policy (Klíma 2019).[9] The peak ODS membership in 2009 of almost 34,000 was thus partly a sign of corrupt party capture. Membership decline, as Table 1 shows, as well as voter losses across all types of elections—the party won only 20% of the vote in the 2010 general elections—had already become major problems in this first phase of the new party crisis.

The culmination of ODS's loss of credibility, triggering the fall of the ODS-led government of Petr Nečas and the party's descent into full political crisis, came in summer 2013. Police raided the Office of the Government, arresting Nečas's chief of staff and several former ODS MPs in connection with investigations into suspected corruption and misuse of office. In the October 2013 early general elections, ODS collapsed and won only 7.7% of the vote. The new ANO party of billionaire Andrej Babiš won almost 20% of the votes, which, with its anti-corruption campaign and technocratic profile, gained support mainly from right-of-centre parties.

With the critical 2013 election, ODS entered the second phase of the crisis: trying to avoid collapse and marginalisation. The party's misdemeanours remained fresh in the public memory for several years. Moreover, with only 16 deputies in a 200-member chamber, ODS lacked visibility compared to the new government which was dominated by the ČSSD and ANO. The party was also disadvantaged within the opposition by another right-wing competitor, TOP 09 (discussed below), which had almost twice as many MPs in the 2013 election, and was formed by two well-known politicians unaffiliated with ODS.

In line with the framework of party crisis and collapse outlined earlier, ODS membership numbers showed a rapid downturn just before and shortly after the critical election. However, by 2015, the number of members dropped only slightly and thereafter, as Table 1 shows, the party sustained a more or less stable level of membership. The same can be said of local branches, the only difference being that the downward trend was less rapid, even during the critical 2013 elections. This probably explains why many branches survived the departure of a large number of members.

We can, however, observe the relatively strong loyalty of a significant portion of the party membership and the loss mainly of less committed ODS members. Despite the absence of a charismatic founder leader after 2013, this pattern echoes the reaction of the party base in the crisis of 1997–1998. Indeed, interviews show that loyalty to the party was strengthened by a nostalgic link to the 1990s era of regime change and political transformation, a time when the Civic Democrats had 'changed the country', and to 'the ethos of the Civic Forum, the euphoria after the end of socialism, the restoration of democracy and freedom', and 'a strong feeling that we must not lose our way'.[10] For such members, the idea of enduring and surviving resonated. As one of

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[9]'Přehledně: sedm kmotrů ODS a všechny jejich hříchy', *Lidové noviny*, 25 April 2012, available at: https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/prehledne-7-kmotru-ods-a-vsechny-jejich-hrichy.A120425_100943_ln_domov_spa, accessed 20 December 2024.
[10]Lubomír Kopeček's interview with Petr Fiala, ODS leader, Brno, 16 December 2022.

TABLE 1
EVOLUTION OF ODS ORGANISATION 2010–2020

Year	Number of party members	Number of local branches	Number of candidates nominated by the party in local elections (party members in brackets)	Number of paid staff
2010	31,000	1,475	18,275 (8,874)	145
2011	27,800	1,401		137
2012	25,200	1,365		137
2013	21,500	1,263		121
2014	17,900	1,147	11,447 (5,733)	109
2015	14,600	1,023		46
2016	14,100	998		42
2017	13,900	979		44
2018	13,400	967	10,735 (4,820)	47
2019	12,700	936		48
2020	12,200	928		49

Note: The number of party members as reported at year end and rounded to the nearest hundred. The number of local associations is based on data in ODS annual financial reports. Local elections do not include candidates for municipal districts (*městské části*).
Sources: Mrklas (2021, p. 132); ODS annual financial reports, 2010–2020; *Výsledky voleb a referend*, Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.

them remembered, 'there were enemies around, and we defended the party like Masada' surrounded by the Romans.[11]

The data from the local elections presented in Table 1 are illustrative of members' enduring loyalty but additionally highlight the resilience of the party and its ability to persuade non-members to associate their names with the ODS brand at local level. (In local elections it is common for Czech parties to nominate non-party members to their electoral lists—party (non-)membership must be noted on ballot papers).

In the pre-crisis 2010 local elections ODS had been able to nominate about 18,000 candidates, of which around half were party members. In the next local elections in 2014, at the time of the deepest party crisis, the number of candidates nominated was more than a third lower. However, we should read this number rather backwards: that is, the Civic Democrats managed to retain almost two-thirds of their slate of candidates (again, half were party members) at a time when, polls suggested, their electoral support oscillated around only 7%, about one third of its 2010 vote share. Maintaining its position at local level strengthened both the organisation and internal cohesion, reducing the attractiveness of exit and voice (factionalism) options for members, and boosting support for the party's new post-crisis leadership.

The loyalty of hardcore members and activists correlated with the loyalty of core voters, often entrepreneurs and businesspeople, mostly middle-aged, who had supported and identified with the party since the 1990s. This was concisely summed up in one survey for the 2017 election, which found the strongest characteristic that ODS voters associated with the party was not 'competence', 'trust' or 'socially sensitivity' but 'our party'.[12] The

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[11]Lubomír Kopeček's interview with Jiří Hanuš, a local member of ODS in Brno, Brno, 16 December 2022.
[12]'Výzkum pro volební studio ČT', *Median*, 22 October 2017, available at: https://www.median.eu/cs/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Vyzkum_pro_volebni_studio.pdf, accessed 22 June 2023.

combination of voter loyalty and popular local personalities also worked for elections to the upper house of parliament (elected in single member districts), where ODS defended several seats in 2014 and 2016, maintaining a residual presence. It also secured a presence in the European Parliament in 2014 (winning over 7% of the vote, filling two MEP seats) and in the 2016 regional assemblies (averaging over 9%). Shortly before the 2017 election to the Chamber of Deputies (lower house), ODS support started to grow, and the party gained 11.3% of the vote. ODS's recovery was helped by—and in turn helped—the ANO party's shift to the left during its 2013–2017 coalition government with ČSSD and by Babiš's controversial Electronic Record of Sales (EET) reform (Chytilek 2018).

Crisis leadership and crisis strategies

The party's ongoing recovery was, however, more than just the result of residual organisational resilience and the loyalty of core members and voters; it also reflected the strategic choices of an effective 'crisis leader'. The role of crisis leader was played by Petr Fiala, who was elected at the party congress of January 2014. The choice of Fiala was seen by the broader party elite, in the words of one senator and mayor speaking before the 2014 ODS congress, as a 'last rescue'[13]—with other considerations such as experience set aside, facilitating unity. All the regional organisation leaders expressed their support for his candidacy before the congress.

Although not a charismatic leader like ODS's founder, Klaus, the somewhat formal Fiala had some attributes which suited him to the role. A political scientist by profession and, later, the rector of a large university, Fiala was a relatively new political face, but not a complete outsider. He had joined ODS only shortly before the 2013 elections when he ran for parliament for the first time, having served briefly as education minister, as an ODS-appointed independent nominee, since May 2012. He was thus untainted by the party's long-running scandals or the collapse of the Nečas government in 2013. Fiala had been part of the party's wider *milieu* since the 1990s, a leading voice in the liberal-conservative intelligentsia supportive of ODS and had a good understanding of its structures and internal politics. He also possessed excellent consensus-building skills, which proved crucial during the party crisis for negotiating sensitive issues with central and local party elites. One of Fiala's first steps in office was to visit all the regional organisations to meet with leaders and smooth relationships with defeated rivals such as Miroslava Němcová, ODS's 'election leader' in 2013, and unsuccessful candidate for leader at the 2014 congress, who had expressed great bitterness after her congress defeat.[14]

In political terms Fiala stressed credibility, clarity and continuity, rather than seeking drastic transformation. He stressed that the party was in crisis, needed to change and 'must renew itself morally and … be credible and have self-confidence' (Fiala 2015,

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[13]'Za normální situace by Fiala předsedou nebyl', *Aktualne.cz*, 17 January 2014, available at: https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/politika/stalice-ods-za-normalni-situace-by-fiala-sefem-nebyl/r~3e2b6bd07f5f11e38b0c0025900fea04/, accessed 22 June 2023.

[14]'Miroslava Němcová: Ráda bych zpět do vedení ODS', *Euro.cz*, 7 January 2016, available at: https://www.euro.cz/clanky/miroslava-nemcova-rada-bych-zpet-do-vedeni-ods-strana-si-to-ale-nepreje-1260236/, accessed 22 June 2023.

p. 40) and offered delegates to the 2014 party congress a programme titled 'Seven Steps to Renewal'. However, there was nothing ground-breaking in this programme or the subsequent '14 Theses' document adopted by the party in September 2014. Instead, the emphasis was on clearly and consistently presenting the party's traditional 'liberal conservative' ideology and agenda (for example, less bureaucracy, reform of the pension system, maintaining strong transatlantic ties) but avoiding the missteps of previous ODS-led governments, such as raising taxes (Fiala 2015).

Despite the (perceived) problem of local party capture by 'regional godfathers', Fiala did not see party grassroots membership and local organisation as a problem to be 'solved' by streamlining the national organisation—the model followed by the crisis leaders of the reforming communist successor parties in the 1990s (Grzymała-Busse 2002). Instead, he emphasised the political advantage of 'thousands of local representatives and many successful mayors, which the party does not use enough' (Fiala 2015, p. 38), and understood that, for many Civic Democrats, maintaining their party's position in local politics strengthened a belief that 'we are going in the right direction',[15] adding to party cohesion and morale.

Some streamlining and organisational centralisation did occur, but this was a forced move due to reduced state funding and the legacy of ongoing reforms and focused on management and leadership structures. Fiala thus oversaw the decision, already taken, to shrink ODS's unwieldy executive council, which had large numbers of regional representatives. He also pushed through a drastic reduction of paid party employees by more than two-thirds (see Table 1). This move was also forced due to reduced state funding, mainly because of the loss of deputy and senatorial seats, and the departure of most private donors. Party revenue fell by more than half in 2013 compared to 2010 (from €25 to €11 million) and donations dropped by about one-third. To pay off debt the new leadership drastically restricted the previously wide autonomy of finances and property management of regional branches.[16]

From crisis to full recovery?

In the 2017 general elections ODS polled 11.32% and won 25 seats, which the party presented as a sign that the 2013 crisis had been overcome. Fiala pointed out that the party had finished second behind ANO and could thus claim to be the leading opposition party.[17] In our framework, this represents the end of the second phase of the party crisis and the beginning of a recovery phase which was, however, by no means rapid or smooth.

In 2017–2018 the party plateaued with no significant new revival beyond its earlier consolidation of organisational and electoral strength. ANO won almost 30% of the vote in 2017, almost three times the support of ODS, and this difference was maintained in

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[15]Lubomír Kopeček's interview with Petr Fiala, ODS leader, Brno, 16 December 2022.
[16]'ODS si dělá pořádek v dluzích', *Idnes.cz*, 16 October 2014, available at: https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/ods-se-dela-poradek-v-penezich-regiony-musely-poslat-penize-do-prahy.A141016_113245_domaci_jpl, accessed 20 December 2024.
[17]'Ne, zaznělo jasně od předsedy ODS Fialy. Spolupráci s ANO si neumí představit', *Denik.cz*, 6 February 2018, available at: https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/ne-zaznelo-jasne-od-predsedy-ods-fialy-spolupraci-s-ano-si-neumi-predstavit-20180206.html, accessed 20 December 2024.

opinion polls in subsequent years. Progress at the local level was also limited. Although ODS overtook ANO and the now declining ČSSD and KSČM in the 2018 local elections, the number of seats won was almost the same as in 2014 and the number of party candidates did not return to its pre-crisis level. The same was true for the numbers of party members, local branches and paid staff, as noted in Table 1.

This reflected not only the rise of the populist challenge of ANO, but also the emergence and competitiveness of new rivals closer to the political centre, such as the Pirate Party (*Pirátská strana*), which was culturally liberal but not economically on the left (Pink & Folvarčný 2020). These new conditions were significantly different from the ODS crisis of 1997–1998. The 1998 elections, in which ODS had faced weaker competitors and deployed powerful slogans with echoes of wartime, urging 'mobilisation' against the left and centring on charismatic ODS leader Klaus, had marked a clear turning point of consolidation. In 2017–2018, however, this was much harder given the changed nature of political competition, which had shifted towards divisions over culture and identity (Rovny 2017). Research in localities where ODS had historically been particularly successful, such as large cities and the Prague metropolitan area, suggests that the party failed to appeal to young people in the 2017 elections (Voda 2019; Maškarinec 2020). Put simply, while older voters who had experienced the mobilising ethos of the 1990s, when ODS had formed as a party of transformation, stuck with the traditional party brand, younger voters took a new path.

As we discuss below, this problem of limited recovery and voter support was only solved by ODS forming a coalition with two smaller centre-right parties, KDU-ČSL and TOP 09, for the 2021 parliamentary elections around a new mobilising issue: anti-populism and the defence of democracy. The SPOLU alliance, which narrowly edged out ANO, won the elections and became the core of a new government.

The People's Party: crisis and recovery of a 'historic' party in decline

Our second case, that of the People's Party (KDU-ČSL), differs from that of ODS in several crucial respects. It was a slowly disappearing, smaller 'historic' mass party based on Christian identity with local bastions, which never matched the size or political dominance of ODS in post-1989 Czech politics but served rather as a junior partner in both mainstream right (1992–1997, 2006–2009) and left (2002–2006, 2013–2017) coalition governments. The crisis of the People's Party and its (limited) recovery played out somewhat earlier than—and somewhat differently to—that of ODS. The party's pattern of crisis and rebound is notable because it was the only Czech parliamentary party ever to have independently re-entered parliament (in 2013) after having previously lost all its seats (in the crisis election of 2010).

While ODS was shaped by the politics of postcommunist transformation, KDU-ČSL has roots going back to the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) and predecessor organisations in the nineteenth century. In the pre-communist era, when it was known as the Czechoslovak People's Party (*Československá strana lidová*—ČSL), it was a mass party whose organisational electoral strength closely correlated with religiosity, which was—and still is—highest in the Catholic eastern and southern regions of the Czech lands (Trapl 2005). The mostly confessional party was restored after the Nazi occupation, but

with the onset of communist one-party rule in 1948 was relegated to the status of a 'satellite party' with a restricted membership.

After 1989, the party revived and added the label 'Christian and Democratic Union' (*Křesťanská a demokratická unie*—KDU) to its original name to demonstrate a profile broader than that of a Catholic confessional party. Despite largely failing to appeal broadly electorally—in elections to the Czech parliament it polled at 8.4% in 1990—it did succeed in quickly rebuilding a mass organisation of sorts, doubling its membership to 95,000 in the course of 1990 (about half of what it had been in the interwar period) and even managed a minor restoration of the collateral organisations that had disappeared in the communist era. Such organisational density was important for winning votes, although the strategy corresponded to that of a 'niche' or 'subcultural' party (whether religious, agrarian or leftist) which drew on narrow but deep identities to create a mass party in miniature (Enyedi 1996; Hanley 2001; Szczerbiak 2001). Thus, in the 1992 parliamentary elections, KDU-ČSL won about four times as many votes as it had members (Fiala 1995; Fiala & Suchý 2005).

The early 1990s was an organisational peak for the party, after which a long-term gradual decline in both membership and numbers of local branches set in (see Table 2), driven primarily by the high age of many members and the failure of the party to replace these losses through recruitment from younger age groups or more secular, urban localities. Such unfavourable membership trends were reflected in electoral stagnation.

The party offset this problem by forming broader coalitions with independents and minor parties in some second-order elections from the late 1990s, and nationally in the 2002 Chamber of Deputies elections, when it allied with the liberal Freedom Union party, in some respects prefiguring the SPOLU coalition. KDU-ČSL also benefitted from the uneven and territorial nature of its organisational and electoral support: the party had a dense concentrated network of branches and members in a few traditional, less secularised regions in the east and south of Czechia. This environment enabled the formation—and maintenance—of a strong, concentrated, self-conscious subculture and gave the party extensive representation in local and regional government in these areas.

As with ODS, the party's crisis was preceded by a period of sharp intra-party disputes (with roots stretching back to the late 1990s) over its disappointing 7.2% result in the 2006 parliamentary elections and, later, the performance of the 2007–2009 ODS-led coalition government which KDU-ČSL opted to join. This period marks the initial crisis phase, which in turn influenced the economically liberal former leader Miroslav

TABLE 2
ORGANISATIONAL DECLINE OF KDU-ČSL 1992–2005

	Number of party members	Number of local branches
1992	88,800	2,437
1998	60,500	2,635
2002	50,700	2,218
2005	44,300	2,176

Note: The number of members is rounded to the nearest hundred.
Source: Linek and Pecháček (2006, pp. 14, 16).

Kalousek to leave KDU-ČSL with part of the party's elite to co-found the liberal TOP 09 grouping. Although this new rival party did not strongly appeal to the small KDU-ČSL electorate,[18] oscillating around the 5% threshold, the newly competitive environment on the centre-right arguably pushed KDU-ČSL below the threshold for parliamentary representation in the 2010 elections, with a result of 4.4%.[19] Viewed in terms of our framework, the party had thus entered the second (and most dangerous) crisis phase.

As shown in Table 3, as with ODS, neither ongoing internal splits and divisions nor the crisis election of 2010 had a fundamental, immediate impact on party organisation. Most members responded to the shocks of the exit of TOP 09 founders and the critical elections of 2010 by remaining in their 'mother party'. Similarly, there was no great acceleration in the demise of local branches. The long-term decline of KDU-ČSL's organisational strength, discussed above, intensified only slightly. The loyalty of Christian Democratic voters during the crisis was higher than that of the Civic Democrats, and the falling away of peripheral, less committed members was minimal. Indeed, as with ODS, elite-level splits and loss of office may, paradoxically, have acted as safety valves and purifying mechanisms. The departure of part of the party elite for TOP 09 led to a radical reduction of internal tensions and greater elite cohesion.[20]

Even more clearly than with ODS, the value of loyalty and cohesiveness during the deepest phase of the crisis was demonstrated in the 2010 local elections, several months after the party's exit from the Chamber of Deputies. The number of candidates KDU-ČSL nominated, compared with previous local elections in 2006, did not fundamentally deviate

TABLE 3
DEVELOPMENT OF KDU-ČSL PARTY ORGANISATION 2006–2015

Year	Number of party members	Number of local branches	Number of candidates nominated by the party in local elections (party members in brackets)	Number of paid staff
2006	42,500	1,945	19,914 (6,847)	100
2007	41,400	1,935		90
2008	39,900	1,920		87
2009	37,400	1,880		80
2010	35,300	1,860	16,900 (5,349)	52
2011	34,000	1,832		31
2012	32,100	1,799		31
2013	30,700	1,765		31
2014	28,700	1,707	16,466 (4,714)	35
2015	27,600	1,650		34

Notes: For the data on members and branches as of 1 January each year, numbers are rounded to the nearest hundred. The number of employees is the average per year according to annual reports. The local election data exclude candidates for municipal districts (*městské části*).
Sources: KDU-ČSL Central Office; KDU-ČSL annual financial reports, 2006–2015; *Výsledky voleb a referend*, Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.

[18]*Exit Poll SC&C and SPSS CR for Czech Television*, 1 June 2010.
[19]'Výsledky voleb a referend', Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.
[20]Lubomír Kopeček's online interviews with: Pavel Bělobrádek, former KDU-ČSL leader, 6 January 2023; Daniel Drápala, a local KDU-ČSL politician in Rožnov pod Radhoštěm, 4 January 2023.

from the previous trend of steady, demographically driven decline. This stability is also documented in the proportion of partisans and non-partisans on candidate lists, which was similar in both sets of elections. In terms of electoral results, KDU-ČSL secured around 3,800 councillors, 'only' a one-fifth decrease compared to 2006 and remained among the top four best-represented parties in local government.[21]

High loyalty and resilience in the deepest phase of the crisis was also visible in voter behaviour, as illustrated in the 2012 regional elections, which saw an extension of the party's previous strategy of forming broader electoral coalitions with independents and minor parties. Indeed, thanks to this strategy and the loyalty of its voters, KDU-ČSL won even more seats (61 rather than 56) than in the previous regional elections and retained roughly one-tenth of the seats it held.[22]

Such high party loyalty stems from identification with Christian values, the rootedness of local communities and multi-generational family traditions of party identification. This concentrated party subculture was found especially in traditionally Catholic eastern and southeastern areas with higher church attendance (Fiala 1995, pp. 238–40; Linek & Pecháček 2006, pp. 23–35). The party also retained some patronage appeal due to its continuing hold on local office in some cities and regions, which gave it a say in the distribution of attractive paid political and administrative posts. Such footholds in subnational institutions and countervailing institutions such as the Senate, where KDU-ČSL had six representatives, as well as in supra-national bodies such as the European parliament (two MEPs), provided both public visibility and public financing. Although the votes won by KDU-ČSL's presidential candidate, Zuzana Roithová, in the first direct presidential elections in 2013 did not exceed the party's general support of around 5%, the campaign and signature drive to nominate her proved to be an important way to raise the party's profile and re-enter public debate,[23] an avenue for mitigating party crisis, as noted by Cyr.

Crisis leadership and crisis management

Despite the two parties' different origins, political roles and organisational development, KDU-ČSL's 'crisis leader' and crisis management strategy were similar to those of ODS in important respects. Like Fiala, the crisis leader of KDU-ČSL elected at a party congress in late 2010, Pavel Bělobrádek, was a relative outsider from top-level national politics who, like Fiala, defeated a seasoned political insider, the incumbent vice-chairwoman Michaela Šojdrová, to become leader. Bělobrádek was young (born in 1976) and relatively new to the party, having joined only in 2004. He thus had the advantage of not having been in the national party elite until 2010 and was not burdened by the years of intra-party disputes or responsibility for the party's departure from the Chamber of Deputies.

[21]'Výsledky voleb a referend', Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.
[22]'Výsledky voleb a referend', Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.
[23]Lubomír Kopeček's online interview with Pavel Bělobrádek, former KDU-ČSL leader, 6 January 2023.

Like Fiala, Bělobrádek had a strong background at a lower level which gave him credibility, experience and an understanding of the party's internal politics. He had risen rapidly in the regional party structures to become a paid party manager in a region midway between the party's traditional bastions in the east and southeast and its weaker presence in the west. His small-town background (he was a veterinarian by profession), which was typical of the party at the grassroots, helped him understand and mediate the often regionally based, intra-party differences.[24]

Again, like Fiala, Bělobrádek mainly played the role of a consensus-builder within the party and adopted a similar consensus-building political persona centring on established party traditions and identity, rather than realignment or organisational streamlining as a political goal in itself. As with ODS, and for identical financial reasons, KDU-ČSL was forced to make drastic cuts in paid staff, retaining about a third of its former professional staff. Party financial reports show that KDU-ČSL's income fell by 40% between 2008 and 2011.[25] This was, however, sufficient for the administrative functioning of the party in Prague and the regional level. Moreover, as a 'historic' party, KDU-ČSL enjoyed the advantage over ODS of owning a large amount of real estate which it could rent out for income (Fiala & Suchý 2005).

Nevertheless, Bělobrádek's initial strategy was based on the idea of consolidating the party organisationally and politically under the premise that 'the core of the party is threatened, so it is necessary first to convince our members … and families that it is good to vote for KDU-ČSL' (Bělobrádek 2017, pp. 46–7). These convinced members would then become instruments of persuasion not only for churchgoers, but also for non-practising believers for whom 'some of the Ten Commandments are not important, but who know not to lie, not to steal, not to cheat, not to be unfaithful' (Bělobrádek 2017, p. 49). The essence of the strategy was to consolidate and as much as possible to activate the traditional party *milieu*.

The new leader's programme offered no radical innovations but confirmed the party's emphasis on the traditional family and the social market economy while strengthening its pro-social welfare stance to distance itself from its recent (2006–2009) period of cooperation with ODS. This was most visibly reflected in its sharp rejection of the pension reform promoted by the 2010–2013 Nečas government, which Bělobrádek described as 'pension deformation'.[26] This slight shift to the left also reflected the party's internal political balance following the departure of the economically liberal wing to TOP 09. The influence of intellectuals was less than that in ODS, but Bělobrádek (2017, p. 50) organised regular debate seminars at the party headquarters with the participation of partisans and non-partisans.

KDU-ČSL's 2013 return to the Chamber of Deputies, having slightly exceeded the 5% electoral threshold (6.8%), ended the second (and deepest) phase of the crisis and initiated the recovery stage. The party's main campaign message relied on its traditional image as a 'calm force' in contrast to both the compromised right and the new populist

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[24]Lubomír Kopeček's online interview with Pavel Bělobrádek, former KDU-ČSL leader, 6 January 2023.
[25]KDU-ČSL annual financial reports, 2008–2011.
[26]'Vládou navrhovaná důchodová reforma je nepřijatelná', *Nový Hlas, zpravodaj KDU-ČSL*, February 2011.

parties. It also benefitted from the distinctiveness of its culturally conservative position in the political space (Linek *et al.* 2016). The party was able to use members and supporters rooted in the subculture to persuade and attract voters, for example by posting party election posters on the fences of their homes or communicating on Facebook; the party even provided special training for them (Gregor & Macková 2014; Komínek 2014).

However, as with ODS, the following years showed the limits of party consolidation and recovery. The long-term negative trend of organisational decline slowed but did not reverse. The party lost about 1,000–1,500 members each year from 2016 to 2021, and numbers of local branches declined.[27] This trend was matched by a declining ability to nominate candidates for local elections (in 2018 the party nominated just under 15,000 candidates, 4,000 fewer than in the crisis year of 2010).[28] After the 2013 election the party resumed its typical post-1989 role as a junior partner in a coalition government, on this occasion working with the Social Democrats and Babiš's ANO, gaining new benefits, satisfying party members. However, opinion polls confirmed the party's enduring problem of building sufficient support to assure a permanent presence in the Chamber of Deputies. In the 2017 general elections, the last in which it ran independently, the party again narrowly avoided exiting the Chamber with 5.8% of the vote.[29]

A tool for restoring political position? The SPOLU coalition

The slow recovery of both ODS and KDU-ČSL was crosscut by the rise of ANO and the polarisation of Czech politics around its leader Andrej Babiš. Babiš's indictment on corruption charges in October 2017 led KDU-ČSL, emphasising the party's traditional stress on morality, to rule out continuing in government with ANO, pushing the party into the same opposition position as ODS, which at the time rejected overtures from ANO to join it in coalition. In the following years mass civic protests took to the streets targeting Babiš and his ally, then president Miloš Zeman, as a threat to democracy and the rule of law and urging mainstream forces to set aside political differences to oppose them. At the end of 2020 ODS, KDU-ČSL and a much-diminished TOP 09 formed a three-party alliance with a common programme, SPOLU, to contest the 2021 parliamentary elections on joint electoral lists. In October 2021 SPOLU narrowly emerged as the largest political bloc and formed a government led by Fiala in which SPOLU allied with the smaller Pirates and Mayors (PIRSTAN) alliance,[30] displacing Babiš from office.[31]

The formation of SPOLU and the new polarised context of populist and anti-populist politics marked the end of single-party recovery strategies and the beginning of a fourth phase marked by political and organisational innovation rather than simple party recovery.

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[27]Information provided by the KDU-ČSL Central Office.

[28]'Výsledky voleb a referend', Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.

[29]'Výsledky voleb a referend', Czech Statistical Office, available at: https://www.volby.cz, accessed 22 June 2023.

[30]PIRSTAN: an electoral alliance of the Czech Pirate Party (*Česká pirátská strana*) and the Mayors and Independents (*Starostové a nezávislí*).

[31]'Jak se rodil výsledek sněmovních voleb 2021', *STEM*, 22 October 2021, available at: https://www.stem.cz/jak-se-rodil-vysledek-snemovnich-voleb-2021, accessed 22 June 2023.

National-level electoral coalitions were far from unknown in Czech politics—small left-wing and centrist/centre-right parties had occasionally formed them in the 1990s.[32] Nor was it unknown for parties of the established right to polarise the political field by claiming that democracy was under threat, as SPOLU did in relation to Babiš. There is a partial parallel in ODS's 'mobilisation' against the left in 1998, when emotions about a threat to the future of the country ran high, as they had in 2021. SPOLU was, nevertheless, a new departure for ODS, which as a large dominant party, with the exception of a joint list with the tiny Christian Democratic Party (*Křesťansko-demokratická strana*—KDS) in 1992, had always resisted national-level coalitions.

KDU-ČSL had more experience with electoral coalitions, both locally and nationally. However, for general elections a coalition was a risky undertaking as the electoral system required a minimum of 10% for a coalition of two parties to win seats. Fear of missing the threshold had caused the breakup of an agreed coalition between KDU-ČSL and the small, locally oriented centrist party, the Mayors and Independents (*Starostové a nezávislí*—STAN), shortly before the 2017 election. KDU-ČSL's previous experience of a national electoral coalition, the so-called Quad Coalition (*Čtyřkoalice*) of 1998–2002, proved problematic for similar reasons.

However, the continuing dominance of ANO smoothed the parties' path into an alliance centring on ODS, whose support was large enough to ensure that the higher electoral threshold for the coalition would be crossed, and which also brought other benefits. For ODS, SPOLU was a tool to regain its former importance as a major party in government, including (from 2021) the premiership and key portfolios such as finance, while for KDU-ČSL it was a guarantee against another party crisis. A further factor enabling the two to converge in a coalition—in line with Bakke and Sitter's (2015) view of alliance-building as ideology-driven—was that ODS was now led by a socially conservative practising Catholic (Fiala), an argument KDU politicians used to persuade party members who disliked the Civic Democrats.[33]

Discussion and conclusion

This article has examined the recovery of two established parties in Czechia following crisis elections in an environment of growing electoral volatility and challenges from both new mainstream parties and populist groupings. Building on the general insight that party organisation—and institutionalisation through organisation—matters for competitiveness and endurance, we show how and why very different established mainstream parties in crisis could recover and rebound.

A key initial element of resilience through party organisation was expressed in the loyalty of a party's members—at least to the extent of their remaining in the party, rather than seeking exit—and maintaining the network of local associations. Our article also broadly confirms Cyr's view that sources of party resilience in a crisis lie not only in organisation

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[32]For example, the Liberal Social Union (*Liberálně sociální unie*) (1992) and the Quad Coalition (*Čtyřkoalice*) (1998–2002).
[33]Lubomír Kopeček's online interview with Pavel Bělobrádek, former KDU-ČSL leader, 6 January 2023.

per se, but in organisation in subnational politics and the second-order political arena. Members and activists in our two case studies demonstrated loyalty despite their party's damaged image, not just by remaining members but by publicly associating themselves as election candidates. Our analysis also confirms how important it is for a party to retain representation and visibility at other political levels, for example, in the upper house of the national parliament, the European Parliament, regional government or presidential elections. In contrast to some of Cyr's Latin American cases, however, neither of our case study parties opted for a longer-term focus on subnational politics, seeing this arena instead as a springboard for a return to (a major role in) national politics. We also find that party-oriented intellectual *milieus* contributed to survival, although our cases differ in the degree of such influence. All these arenas and factors can be sources of (residual) strength and resources, which, as Cyr argues, ensures public visibility and provides a background facilitating party revitalisation.

Secondly, we reflected on the choice of 'crisis leader' and the crisis management strategies through which established parties can realise the potential for organisational and political resilience. Our case studies suggest the importance of choosing a crisis leader, who is a relative, but not a total, outsider, likely emerging from a lower-level party *milieu*—a conclusion echoing findings on the survival of communist successor parties and radical right-wing parties (Arter 2016; Harmel *et al*. 2018). Such a leader need not be charismatic—indeed, for the maintenance of party organisation, it may be better that they are not—but this leader needs basic skills to manage a crisis, both internally (addressing financial problems and building consensus) and externally (overhauling the party brand and communicating with broader audiences).

However, in contrast to the transformation of former ruling parties after regime change, optimum adaptation strategies consist not in rapidly shedding members or radical realignment but in retaining (far more limited) membership and organisation and reasserting traditional party loyalties and identity in a detoxified form. This also contrasts with recipes for the post-breakthrough consolidation of new anti-establishment parties, which typically stress the need to build programmatic appeals and organisation.

While realising the potential for internal unity and cohesion, reasserting identity without major innovation keeps parties in a political space where, despite the appeal of anti-corruption and other valence issues, there is proven electoral demand (Rovny & Polk 2017). This may be significantly modulated if a given space has since been captured by competitors (Deegan-Krause & Haughton 2018). However, other things being equal, a party in crisis maintaining a distinctive political offer or brand, typically associated with its ideology and history, increases its chances of survival.

Overall, it appears that, if politically managed appropriately, a party crisis that inflicts a damaging sudden loss of voters, members and resources may also contain the seeds of later recovery and reconstruction. Perceived threats to a beleaguered party, as both cases demonstrate, can act as an engine of mobilisation for its partisans, increasing party cohesion and capacity for action. Similarly, splits and defections among the party elite—whether in the run-up to or aftermath of a crisis election and loss of office—can act as safety valves and purifying mechanisms: the departure of some politicians can reduce internal strife and/or allow a party to distance itself from scandals or negative legacies of time in government.

The recoveries made by our case study parties were, however, limited. In the period observed neither was able to return to its peak electoral performances of the 1990s, suggesting that strategies that focus on mobilising an organisational and electoral core may sacrifice breadth of appeal over the longer-term and that longer-term issues undermining parties—the passing of the era of transformation politics in the case of ODS, demographic and social change for KDU-ČSL—cannot be fully compensated for by organisation-based resilience mechanisms of the kind discussed here.

It is, however, difficult to reach a firm judgement about the limitations of successful post-crisis recovery given the cross-cutting rise to political dominance of Andrej Babiš's populist ANO party (markedly from 2017) and the consequent emergence—spurred by civic protest—of a new politics of anti-populism triggering the formation of the SPOLU coalition, which superseded earlier party (re-)building strategies. It is particularly difficult to assess whether the eruption of new populist challengers into Czech politics is best seen as a contingent development or as the 'backwash' of a longer wave of new party populism, which first demolishes established parties but then offers opportunities for their rebuilding and reconfiguration as anti-populist formations. In any case, the formation of a political alliance can be thought of in the broader context of party survival as a next step following the previous basic post-crisis consolidation, acting as a new tool for adaptation in a changed landscape of political competition.

The framework we have developed through our case studies can, however, be extended to other cases. The most obvious extension concerns Czech parties of the traditional left: the Social Democrats, renamed Social Democracy (*Sociální demokracie*—SOCDEM) in 2023 and the Communists, who dropped out of the Chamber of Deputies in 2021 after three decades of parliamentary representation. In the Social Democrats, once a major player and the main alternative to the mainstream right, we see a crisis trajectory resembling that of ODS, especially in terms of organisational decline, which accelerated just before the critical 2021 elections. After the elections, SOCDEM has chosen a new leader, Michal Šmarda, a local politician from a small town with a strong track record in the party but limited ties to the outgoing party elite, which has certain similarities with the situation in the centre-right parties. A key difference for SOCDEM, however, has been that in the second (and most important) phase after the crisis election, organisation acceleration has continued, both in terms of the decline in membership, local organisations and willingness to stand for the party in various types of second-order elections.

This may reflect the strategic choices of the party's elite. Although the SOCDEM can claim a historical tradition going back to the nineteenth century, and the social democratic brand is still well-established in European terms, Šmarda obscured the party's brand when defending his own local office in the 2022 municipal elections and many other social democratic politicians took a similar 'disloyal' attitude. The wider competitive configuration has also proved highly unfavourable for the party, as most of the economically left space it used to occupy is now filled by Babiš's ANO. At the time of writing this key phase of the social democratic crisis is not yet over. However, a preliminary assessment suggests that this once major force on the Czech left already has weak prospects for successfully overcoming the crisis as ODS did on the right.

The framework has applications to other cases in the CEE region, allowing for the examination of sometimes previously neglected patterns of resilience (and failures of

resilience) from a perspective integrating organisation, leadership and programmatic resources, and sensitive to political choices and chronological sequencing. For example, despite the general turbulence of party politics in Slovakia, one party founded in the 1990s, the organisationally strong and deeply rooted Christian Democratic Movement (*Kresťanskodemokratické hnutie*—KDH), managed to return to parliament two terms after losing all its seats (Rybář & Spáč 2020) under conditions with similar dynamics to the cases analysed here. Conversely, the framework may also be applied to reflect on the weaker patterns of resilience and recovery of, for example, the Polish left, which has commonalities with the experiences of mainstream Czech parties of both the right and left.

SEÁN HANLEY, UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK. *Email*: s.hanley@ucl.ac.uk

LUBOMÍR KOPEČEK, Faculty of Social Studies, Department of Political Science, Masaryk University, Jostova 10, 602 00 Brno, Czechia. *Email*: kopecek@fss.muni.cz
  http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2987-3035

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