

No Country for Progressive Women: European Elections in Czechia

Article by **Petra Dvořáková**

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In the campaign for the European elections, leading female politicians of progressive and centrist forces are trying to bring a breath of fresh air into the male-dominated Czech political scene. But challenging the hegemony of the Right is a difficult task.

Commentators across the EU are predicting a sharp turn to the right for the continent in the upcoming European elections. While in many countries this would mark a change in fortunes for conservative and far-right parties, in the Czech Republic, it would continue the longstanding dominance of the Right. The Czech political “centre” has been skewed to the right for all of its post-communist history, and in recent years, this has become even more pronounced. But the political sphere has also been skewed in another way – towards male domination.

The centre-right populist ANO party, led by billionaire oligarch Andrej Babiš, is sure to win big in the June elections. Based on polling, it is also highly likely that conservative right and far-right coalitions will achieve substantial gains.

At the same time, Czech politics remains a male club. In the current right-wing Petr Fiala-led government there are only three female members out of 24. In the Lower Chamber, female representation stands at 25 per cent, more than six per cent below the OECD average; in the Upper Chamber, it is just 18.5 per cent.

The political institution with the “fairest” representation of women is the European Parliament, where one in every three Czech members is female. But this is deceptive: the old political generation considers the European Parliament nothing more than a “dumping ground” for second-rate politicians.

Meanwhile, the Czech Left – among whose parties female representation tends to be higher – struggles to make gains. In national elections in 2021, neither Social Democrats nor Communists, whose integrity was damaged through their support to the previous ANO-led government, made it into parliament. The coalition Stačilo! (“Enough!”), led by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, may gain a seat or two in the European Parliament this year, but this isn’t good news for progressives. The Communist Party is culturally conservative, Islamophobic, and anti-EU, with many pro-Russian and openly far-right personalities in its ranks.

The Czech Greens for their part have never managed to enter the European Parliament. And they have been elected only once to the Czech Parliament, in 2006. But after entering into a coalition with the grossly unpopular right-wing austerity government of Mirek Topolánek, they lost their credibility, and have never recovered.

Voters who “dare to risk”

In light of this, the Greens put together a candidate list for the upcoming European elections led by a “new generation of politicians” – among them young and prominent faces of civil society.

Third on the list is 33-year-old lawyer Zuzana Pavelková, from the Organisation for Aid to Refugees, while second is Petr Doubravský, 22, co-founder of the Czech branch of Fridays for Future. The first, meanwhile, is 33-year-old Johanna Nejedlová, who is among the best-known Czech civil society activists. As well as having two women among the party's three leading EU election candidates, the Greens are the only Czech party that uses the "zipper system", whereby candidates on a list alternate between men and women, thereby giving each equal representation when seats are won.

In 2016 Nejedlová read a survey on sexual violence by Amnesty International and was shocked to learn that 63 per cent of Czechs considered rape survivors to be partially responsible for the crime. Subsequently, she co-founded an organisation called Konsent to debunk rape myths and spread sex education.

Within six years, the number of Czechs believing in the co-responsibility of survivors of rape dropped to 40 per cent, partly on the back of Konsent's advocacy work. Nejedlová became a go-to person for journalists writing on the subject, and won not only the respect of some liberal right-leaning Czech voters, but a place on the coveted Forbes' 30 Under 30 ranking and a Women of Europe award.

Nejedlová's experience with a campaign to revise the legal definition of rape to "sex without consent" – which was approved in April, albeit with the definition watered down to "sex despite the expressed disagreement of one of the participants" – led to her accepting the Green's offer and entering politics. Part of the party's mission now is to increase Czechs' engagement in European politics. In the last elections, less than 30 per cent of voters cast a ballot – one of the lowest turnouts in Europe.

As well as capitalising on the declining popularity of the Petr Fiala-led government, the Greens are now daring voters to risk "a lost vote" in the June elections – to vote for them even if they might not make the 5 per cent threshold necessary to enter the European Parliament.

"I am so disappointed about people constantly voting for the 'lesser evil'," Nejedlová says. "We want to show to the voters who have very good reasons to be disappointed by the government that there is an alternative which adheres to social and liberal politics, to the values of the youth."

The campaign for a redefinition of rape was "extremely difficult," she says, and if elected, she will push for legislation in Europe for greater gender equality. This would include ensuring that the right to safe abortion is legislated in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, that gender violence is recognised as a crime among member states, and to guarantee sufficient preschool care across the EU.

Despite Nejedlová having won the support of some centre-right voters, Greens still poll below 3 per cent, and they are not considered relevant by the mainstream, mostly right-wing Czech media, which denies them equal access to televised debates. Even on subjects she holds expertise in, Nejedlová is seldom approached by Czech media for comment. "The politicians who already hold a mandate are getting the space in the media, which I, as an aspiring politician, am not getting."

Rise and fall of the Czech Pirates

As some Green supporters regularly lament, voters too scared to risk a "lost vote" often opt for the Czech Pirate Party, three of whose MEPs are members of the Greens/European Free Alliance group within the European Parliament.

Eight years ago, the Pirates – a liberal centrist party – used to poll as low as the Greens. As a result, the two parties regularly collaborated, even convincing Czech television to provide them space at the

biggest pre-2016 election debate despite their low polling numbers. In some regions, they even ran as a coalition in several local elections.

After pledging to enhance transparency of public administration and oppose the cronyism of mainstream parties, the Pirates in 2017 managed to win 22 out of 200 seats in the Czech Parliament, making them by far the strongest Pirate party in the EU.

Before elections in 2021, where it was felt party leader Ivan Bartoš might even become prime minister, the Pirates entered into a coalition with the centre-right STAN (Mayors and Independents). The Greens' request to join the coalition was refused by both parties. But after a vitriolic campaign by media outlets owned by ANO's Babiš, and after the STAN party successfully capitalised on the preferential voting system to take the majority of mandates, the Pirates lost 18 seats, making them the most marginal party in parliament.

Their subsequent engagement in the government did not pass without controversy. In the context of high inflation and significant decline in real wages, the government enacted 1990s-style austerity, and pushed anti-social and conservative policies on the Czech population. Yet the Pirates had neither enough power to push back against the government, nor the courage to leave it. Three widely respected Pirate members of the European Parliament – Markéta Gregorová, Marcel Kolaja, and Mikuláš Peksa – have been particularly vocal critics of their party's engagement in Prague's unpopular government.

Roofs not tables

But there is a new face among the Pirates: 38-year-old Zuzana Klusová. During a hot April day, I met with her at the party headquarters in Prague. "I used to support Greenpeace, even as a student through the allowance I got from my parents, and I dreamed of moving abroad and saving animals or something of that sort," she recalls. "But then I realised that the contribution which makes the most sense in my case is to support my hometown."

Klusová has bucked the trend of politicians moving to Prague or another major city, and instead remained in her hometown of Karviná, which lies on the periphery of the Moravian-Silesian region in the east of the country. Karviná is considered a socially excluded territory. The backbone of the local economy used to be coal mining, which devastated large parts of the town. Today, the average hourly wage there is below seven euros. Karviná's unemployment rate of over 8 per cent, a product of coal mining being scaled down and the high number of former miners with work-related injuries, remains the highest in the Czech Republic.

When Klusová returned to Karviná after studying in Brno, yet another mining project was about to start. She founded the civil society organisation SOS Karviná, which managed to stop the project. Her brother, already a Pirate member, then encouraged her to attend a meeting of the party, where, as she recalls, she was the only woman in the room. She became the most active and visible Pirate in the Moravian-Silesian region, and in 2018 was elected to the Karviná council.

Ecology shouldn't be a luxury. The Green Deal is meant not only to save the environment but also to make people's lives better and healthier.

For the most part, Klusová has dedicated herself to pushing for a just transition in the coal region. That's also her focus for the European Parliament. "When you say 'just transition' in Karviná, people roll their eyes. 'Transition? Just? Sure, like privatisation was!'"

"They don't believe EU funds could change their lives – and I am not surprised about that," Klusová admits, given the region's mismanaged transition, and the fact that EU funds are rarely used to support public-oriented projects and people in need.

Klusová has been widely critical of the region's approach to the transition, which has been characterised mostly by investments in projects such as the industrial zone Podolupark, or the research and education park Eden. "We should invest the money in people and not in concrete," says Klusová. "It is as if our roof was leaking, and we bought a luxurious table. People keep complaining about the 'dictate from Brussels', but above all, it is the Karviná city council that doesn't work well."

Klusová believes the just transition has to be participatory: based on the engagement of active local people and regional needs. "Ecology shouldn't be a luxury. The Green Deal is meant not only to save the environment but also to make people's lives better and healthier."

Egalitarian myths

After moving back to Karviná, Klusová first worked as a media consultant but later switched to social work with socially excluded Roma children. "People keep joking that I am committing political suicide: dedicating myself to the end of coal mining and the Romas," Klusová laughs. "But it's been the most fulfilling job I've ever had. If I cannot help enough on the structural level, at least I can help people physically. However, as a social worker, you keep bouncing [up against] the structural obstacles, so I ended up trying to achieve change on higher levels anyway – to combine both approaches."

Just like the three current Pirate MEPs, Klusová is aware of how government policy impacts citizens in times of economic crisis. "I am not a fan of the coalitions where Pirates don't have enough power," she says. "On the other hand, if we hadn't been in the government, many laws would have looked different – or wouldn't have passed at all."

She laments that while the Pirates' influence over policies is visible, people continue to get poorer, and especially so in Karviná. "The myth of egalitarian Czechia is false: wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few rich ones; society is getting oligarchic – and when you point that out, you get labelled as a communist or neo-Marxist."

Green investment

The EU election candidate list of the Pirates' coalition partner STAN is also headed by a woman whose entry into national-level politics only came about recently. A former rector of Mendel University in Brno, 45-year-old Danuše Nerudová gained prominence in the 2023 presidential elections with a personal brand that emphasised her womanhood and motherhood. As the only female candidate out of nine, she gave herself the moniker DanuSHE, engaged her two sons in the campaign, and represented a liberal feminist worldview. For some time, she was second in the polls, eventually coming in third.

"To run for the European elections was a logical continuation of my presidential candidacy," she told me during a video call. "For years, the Czech Republic has been having one of the lowest voter turnouts in the European elections – even though 70 per cent of the approved legislation [in the country] originates in the EU. Instead of complaining about it, we should use our opportunity to influence it."

She courted several parties but chose STAN due to its more local-regional roots (STAN started as a party consisting primarily of mayors and municipal politicians). Although STAN runs with the Pirates in the Czech elections, in the European Parliament it is part of the centre-right European People's Party (EPP) Group. Nerudová says the party's priorities for Europe centre on EU cohesion policies, the green transition, and the democratic engagement of younger generations.

While both Nejedlová of the Greens and the Pirates' Klusová criticise the current form of the Green Deal for failing to centre ordinary people's needs, Nerudová sees it as lacking the financial element it needs to be achievable. "In the USA, Biden's approach to ecology is tied to investment opportunities," she says. "The European Green Deal should support private entrepreneurship and become an opportunity for innovation."

Also unlike Klusová and Nejedlová, Nerudová does not consider the current Czech government to be "anti-social". "The government is financially responsible and it takes unpopular measures to keep a balanced budget," she argues. "In some cases, they do well, in some cases they do a bit worse. Generally, I mind that the tax burden [falls] mostly on the middle class, while austerity measures help mostly the rich."

Out of the three female candidates, Nerudová is the only one who is almost sure to become an MEP in June – a scenario that illustrates how skewed to the right the Czech political "centre" has become. And while the presence of these, as well as other strong women voices, marks some progress in a male-dominated Czech political arena, it may be the only thing worth cheering right now. The fact that hopes for real progressive gains in the upcoming European elections are slim shows how long the route to achieving a substantially better political reality is.



Petra Dvořáková is a journalist at Deník Referendum. Most of her work focuses on gender, mental health, foreign affairs, and social inequalities. She studied journalism and global studies.

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