The Czech Republic is becoming more and more dependent on exports to neighbouring countries while its current account deficit does not seem to be curtailed. The Government is sticking to the implementation of a neo-liberal non-sustainable model, which undermines social well-being, and is refusing to consider policy on a long-term basis. Currently, the country faces threats such as the impoverishment of middle-class and low-income groups, increasing unemployment and rampant gender inequality. Loss of biodiversity and radioactive pollution are among the environmental challenges that need to be assessed immediately. Increasing involvement in these issues by civic society gives some hope that the demand for change will be heeded.


3 See proposal of so-called social reform by Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.


Worsening conditions for immigrants

Dissatisfaction with the response to the crisis and the shift of its costs to the middle and lower classes has increased tensions in society. Maintaining the social contract is becoming ever harder while the growing income differentials leads to an increase in xenophobia, racism and the degradation of social solidarity. Thus, the economic crisis has also led to a more radically negative attitude towards migrants, especially undermining the situation of female migrants.

One example is the complications migrant parents are facing with their children’s health insurance. An employed foreigner is included in the public insurance system, but if neither the mother nor the father have permanent residence in the Czech Republic, their child cannot be insured before birth and the medical care provided in the maternity clinic must be paid for in cash. Should the newborn have medical problems, the insurance companies may even refuse to provide insurance. A woman foreign entrepreneur is limited to the system of commercial insurance from the very beginning; she has the chance to arrange insurance for the birth and immediate postnatal care for an additional fee (about double the average wage).

Environment: down with the trees, up with the malls

Protecting the environment is another crucial issue for the Czech Republic. In the beginning of 2010 a new law on the preservation of nature and the landscape came into force and reduced the protection of trees and other woody species. As it was no longer necessary to get the approval of the local authorities, this led to extensive logging in towns and cities. Throughout 2010, the Ministry of the Environment failed to publish a decree intended to reduce this effect. The Ministry of Agriculture, on the other hand, has tried – repeatedly and against the protests by ecological organizations and smaller wood-working companies – to push the concept of “forest tenders” on public forests (17% of the area) that favour large timber companies, pushing the public functions of State-administered forests (recreation, protection against erosion, water retention, home for plants and animals) towards wood production and profit generation.

Notwithstanding the enduring economic crisis the construction of large shopping centres has continued in the Czech Republic, which already has the highest per capita number of such centres in all of Central and Eastern Europe. In the last seven years, chain store outlets have expanded to an area of 900 football fields and have created 80,000 parking lots; 63% of these have been built on undeveloped areas (arable land, fields, pastures or orchards), and trees were cut down in 62% of the cases, while 25% have had some impact on protected elements of the environment (both to ensure ecological stability and protect animal biotopes). Other consequences of the unrestricted expansion of mainly international chain stores have been the liquidation of local grocery shops, the spill-over of shopping centres into open land, the depopulation of city centres and the increase in individual car traffic.

A U-turn on renewable energy sources

The importance of renewable energy sources is not properly addressed in the Strategic Framework for Sustainable Development ratified by the Government in 2010, although its importance is obvious when we consider that it links the principles of climate measures with the decrease in energy import and the decrease in external costs to the current energy system.

In 2010 the State declared a halt to the development of photovoltaic power plants. It seems likely that in the future only installations of up to 30 kW will be admitted, which means a substantial restriction in the development of photovoltaic energy generation.

On the other hand, new steps have been taken to finish construction of the Temelín nuclear power plant. This is now scheduled to finish in 2025 and the plant should be operative until 2070.

The last uranium mine in Central Europe, located in Rožná, still remains operative and thus will last until at least 2013. The mine was supposed to be closed several times already, but the Government has always decided to keep it operative. The situation of radon-infested houses in the areas of former uranium mines (e.g., Jáchnov), remains an unresolved problem.

Citizens’ reaction

In response to the anti-social politics of the Government, the ProAlt movement has emerged, a civic initiative criticizing the proposed reforms and supporting alternatives. This brings together people from every profession, generation and walk of life who are opposed to insensitive, across-the-board cuts. The “Alternativa zdola” movement supports the participation of citizens in the political as well as economic life of their communities through consultations, education, networking and political actions.

The “esko proti chudob” (Czech Republic against poverty) campaign constantly points out the necessity to increase the effectiveness of development cooperation and to criticize the country’s failure to make good on its pledge to increase Official Development Assistance (ODA) resources. A positive feature of the Czech Republic’s development cooperation is its gradual standardization and increasing transparency. One contribution of Czech ODA is its focus on renewable energy sources for poor regions.

Increasing political activity in civic society does give at least some hope that people will demand redressing policies and will not turn their anger against the poorest, whom the political elite already accuses of being the reason for State prodigality and of indebtedness. People’s involvement, focused on the corrupt political sphere financed by Mafiosi capital, is one of the last remaining possibilities to ensure formal democracy and a minimum of social standards.

8 See <chinhed.cz/c1-42049630-diskontum-a-hypermarketum-se-dari-i-v-kriz>.

6 One particular case is being handled with assistance from Inbáze Berkat, o. s. See <www.inbaze.cz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=185&catid=52>.