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A digital party organisation? Evolution of the Czech Pirates

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ABSTRACT

We examine the digital party model using the Czech Pirates as a case study. The party was initially organised through an online platform and characterised by ad-hoc, informal decision-making. However, an election breakthrough and institutionalisation were secured only by a shift towards the offline sphere and organisational adaptation involving investment in structures, paid facilities and partial professionalisation, and by adopting detailed internal rules. The effect was a significant move away from the digital model, which increased the party's organisational resilience and reduced the risks of disintegration. Simultaneously, these measures strengthened the power of the party's politicians in public office.

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Introduction

The information and communication technology (ICT) boom has brought about a major change in the organisation of political parties, which use these technologies extensively in campaigns and communication. Since the mid-2010s, there has also been a debate on a new party model – the digital or cyber party (Barberà et al. 2021; Deseriis 2020; Gerbaudo 2019; Hartleb 2013; Margetts 2006) – and whether this represents a new model alongside the established: a cadre, mass, catch-all, cartel or business-firm party (Duverger 1954; Hopkin and Paolucci 1999; Katz and Mair 1995; Kirchheimer 1966). This is linked with research on a small number of cases, most notably Spain's Podemos and the Five Star Movement in Italy, parties that have become significant in national politics. At first, pirate parties seemed the most promising pioneers of the new digital party trend, as they appeared in almost every country in the Western world. The pirates' strong promotion of the idea of freedom based on technological development and the post-material values associated with e-democracy (liquid democracy) based on political participation influenced their identity. They might also be seen as a response to dissatisfaction with politics, as they reject classification on the left-right axis, promoting a different political agenda (e.g. Brunclík 2010; Demker 2014; Khutkyy 2019).

Nevertheless, pirate parties have remained a fringe phenomenon, which has only made significant gains in first-order elections in two small countries, Iceland and Luxembourg, and further in Czechia. The Czech Pirates are thus the only long-term successful,

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now even ruling, party in a large European country and present a unique case study of the development of a political organisation and new digital model in a relevant (in Giovanni Sartori's sense) established pirate party. It is also interesting that they adopt the basic ideas and general branding (the pirate flag logo) of pirate parties and libertarian positions on cultural issues, but differ in some of the policy priorities – they are more centrist on economic issues and have been electorally successful mainly in municipalities where centre-right parties have dominated in the past, thus partly diverging from the common perception of pirates as “young leftists” (Maškarinec 2020; Maškarinec and Naxera 2022; Novotný and Šárovec 2021). Without noting this characteristic, it would be difficult to understand the Pirates' actions, especially their participation in government with the conservative-liberal ODS and centre-right TOP after the elections of 2021. Their election coalition with the centrist Mayors and Independents (STAN) also played a role here, and assumed a joint approach to negotiating a new government. (The joint approach was then applied regardless of the fact that Pirate MPs were not necessary to secure a parliamentary majority for the new government.)

In this article, we analyse how the organisation of the Czech Pirate Party has changed over the years as it shifted from a marginal to a mainstream political force and its institutionalisation advanced. Panebianco (1988) pioneered the view of organisation as a means of institutionalising parties, that is, transforming them into permanent and durable political actors. This view has become common in the literature, and organisation building, done in the right way, has tended to be seen as very important factor for the survival of new parties entering existing party systems, whether in older democracies (Bolleyer 2013; Harmel, Svåsand, and Mjelde 2018) or in newer, more electorally unstable ones, like Czechia at the time of the Pirates' breakthrough (Deegan-Krause and Haughton 2018). Within this framework, we examine the importance to the party of the online (internet) and traditional offline spheres. We ask how their roles have changed and how this has impacted the shape of the party itself. The paper covers mainly internal party organisation; the external organisation associated with relations with voters is given less attention, as it is dealt with in other papers (Jääsaari and Šárovec 2021; Maškarinec 2020; Naxera 2023). Our findings contribute not only to the study of one political party, but also to the discussion of a new party organisation model.

The article is structured as follows: after first reviewing the literature on digital politics and parties, we conceptualise our research as a framework consisting of several key elements that, after a brief introduction to the Czech Pirates, we use to analyse their evolution.

Digital politics and digital parties

The phenomenon of politics in the digital world has been the subject of much recent research. In particular, attention has tended to be focused on the use of online communication tools by mainstream parties and new party challengers, the effects this has on voters and party competition (and more broadly on citizens and their trust in democracy) and the phenomenon of personalisation, for which the online world is highly favourable (e.g. Lilleker and Jackson 2011; Norris 2001; Rahat and Kenig 2018; Römmele 2003, 2012).

A key topic for this study is the organisation of new online-based parties. A pioneer here is Margetts (2006, 530–533), whose visionary study identified the influence of

modern technologies combined with new trends in political participation. This combination provided the potential for a new form of organisation for which well-designed websites formed a core connection with the electorate, and the party's communications via its intranet, email, etc. had the potential to involve a wider audience in party decision-making. The costs were low and the changes had big implications for traditional membership. Other authors identify the emergence of new alternative forms of membership, such as social media followers and friends, which go beyond the debate on digital parties (Scarrow 2015, 30–31; Kosiara-Pedersen 2017, 238–245).

Margetts is not able to draw on suitable empirical party cases, but she identifies an emerging organisational hybridity (Barberà et al. 2021, 5). Chadwick (2007, 284) describes this hybridity in established parties as an effort to adapt to a digital world by combining offline and online approaches and making rapid “repertoire switches” between them, which is crucial for political mobilisation.

Hartleb (2013), unlike Margetts, takes into account the rise of the first protest cyberparties, especially Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement in Italy and the German Pirates. Of his observations on such parties – for example, on the importance of social media and the risks of transparency for easy credit damage – special mention should be made of the insight that, alongside a new style of participation and organisation, there may also be a variant with a strictly authoritarian form of leadership. Deseriis (2020) offers a distinction between the platform party and the networked party – the former highly centralised and led by a charismatic leader, the latter decentralised (see also Deseriis and Vittori 2019). This contrast between top-down plebiscitarian and participatory bottom-up decision-making systems is now common in the literature, although the terminology varies, e.g. the terms “personalist-authoritarian” and “connective” parties are used (Bennett, Segerberg, and Knüpfner 2018; Correa et al. 2021).

Differences within digital parties explain why cases such as the Five Star Movement are sometimes conceptualised in studies as movement parties (Della Porta et al. 2017) or associated with the concept of a business-firm party run by a political entrepreneur (Hartleb, Tsutsumi, and Chen 2021). Similarly, pirate parties are sometimes defined as a specific phenomenon related to their origins and programmatic outlook. They were initially perceived purely through their most fundamental characteristic: their pro-internet, single-issue orientation (Almquist 2016; Demker 2014). Then the approach changed and authors noted the increasing scope of their manifestos (Haunss 2013). Pirates are to be taken as part of a wider, cross-border movement – referencing the global on-line movement that emerged around the Pirate Bay trial – and compared with previous forms of environmental grass-roots movements in the 1970s and 1980s (Jääsaari and Hildén 2015; Khutkyy 2019; Thuermer 2016). The origins of the pirates are linked to popular opposition to the trial of people behind The Pirate Bay, a website used (illegally) to collect and share files on the internet, which was cracked down on by the Swedish authorities in 2006; several organisers were prosecuted. This led to social dissent, which became the first strong impetus for the formation of the pirates as a political movement. Opposition to the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), which regulated intellectual property, later provided further momentum (Burkart 2014; Crespy and Parks 2017; Jääsaari and Šárovec 2021).

Gerbaudo's (2019) classic work analyses the structure of the digital party model, for which he synonymously uses the term “platform party”, indicating the importance of

adopting the platform logic of social media. According to Gerbaudo (2019, 4–5), this party type

integrates within itself the new form of communication and organisation introduced by the Big Data oligopolies, by exploiting the devices, services [and] applications [...] from social media to messaging apps, channels on which people can follow any sort of political event.

These parties use digital platforms to gain support and to carry out activities in the party, and thus are much more user-friendly than traditional parties, as they provide a constant and direct connection to their supporters.

This approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of an organisation based on an online form, although the features identified sometimes overlap slightly (see below) and the model also has the disadvantage of being somewhat static. More recently, some authors, including Gerbaudo, have questioned whether “pure” digital parties are sustainable, considering their need to change as they respond to new challenges. Firstly, their emergence is conditioned by the institutional and social context (political and party systems, economic crises, etc.), and secondly, when attempting to operate in the long term, their organisational structure tends to fail, causing a political identity crisis – the Five Star Movement is an illustrative example (Gerbaudo 2021; Peña and Gold 2022). Capano and Pavan (2019) note instances where technological innovation was only apparent and rarely supported by anything real in areas such as social processes and digital culture. Nadal (2022) points out that in most cases, only the initial phase of a party’s development is observed, when the full impact of its approach has not yet been felt. The internet provides a suitable forum at the beginning and facilitates competition with established parties. Problems arise when the initial enthusiasm wanes, as in the case of Podemos, which professionalised to some extent and built elementary structures (Lisi 2018; Raniolo and Tarditi 2020).

The case of the Czech Pirates, with their emergence in almost purely online form, therefore offers a good opportunity to test the party’s ability to maintain a digital character and to grasp the challenges it faces in the relatively new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe. In this environment, discussion of the digital party concept has so far been rare – unlike in Western Europe. The contribution of our analysis is further enhanced by our emphasis on the internal party organisation of the Czech Pirates, which has not yet been analysed elsewhere. This is in contrast to other aspects, such as their political development, voters and external communication that have been covered in several studies (Jääsaari and Šárovec 2021; Lucarelli, Fuschillo, and Chytkova 2020; Maškarinec 2020; Naxera 2023; Pink and Folvarčný 2020; Šárovec 2019; Vodová and Voda 2020).

Research design, method and data

Among recent research approaches, it is worth noting Fitzpatrick (2021) who has formed a robust pillar model of parties’ “migration” into the digital sphere. Important for using this model is the shift of parties from the offline background towards the digital world – i.e. they depart from a different starting point from the Czech Pirates. In this paper, we, therefore, work with the key features of Gerbaudo’s concept despite the aforementioned minor limitations, because the concept provides a good initial framework for analysing how an originally online party can change over time. We also take into account the findings of

other authors on the specifics of pirate parties and especially the roles of their leaders. This approach stems from the fact that Gerbaudo works with a broad sample of parties, but is most inspired by the leader-based Podemos and the Five Star Movement.

First, party virtualisation (Gerbaudo 2019, 66–80) is the aspect that creates space for changes in organisation and the possibility of direct relations between representatives and voters/supporters. The effort is made easier by various social media and applications. The parties use digital and online tools, which are essential for the functioning of the party and its communications. This reduces their costs, makes them more flexible and expands their reach within the population.

The second feature is that of weak party structures and the “death of the party cadre” (Gerbaudo 2019, 92–104); offline presence is minimal, usually without a party office, administration, buildings or other facilities. The classical party structure is replaced mostly by some form of forum, which is sufficient for efficient internal coordination. Internal investments are small, e.g. with few or no paid staff. Traditional membership is irrelevant; the structures are understood as unnecessary and undemocratic, appear only as a by-product and remain quite weak. Digital assets become a substitute for physical infrastructure. Emphasis moves away from content and towards process – the party becomes process-oriented as an unfinished product with an ever-changing dynamic.

The third feature, active participation, is an important aspect of mobilising people and allows those who have not been involved in political activities to be influenced. This reflects criticism of representative democracy and also creates new possibilities for involvement in decision-making. Participation has a value in itself and has a normative character with a positive influence on the legitimacy of the party and its leaders. Participatory platforms become the party’s heart and in this new online version, participation is a mass engagement. Gerbaudo (2019, 81–91) conceptualises participation mainly as an ideological issue, but one that also plays a major role in the organisational life of the party, especially as regards the activities of members, whose status is sometimes vague (supporters/followers).

The fourth feature is the hyperleader. According to Gerbaudo (2019, 144–161), the leader is the key person for the party’s functioning. Such charismatic leadership represents the whole movement and has a crucial role both outside and inside the party. His or her role is made more important by the missing classical party structure: the hyperleader replaces the structure and represents a direct link between members/supporters and the party itself. In the case of the pirates, however, such strong dominance is uncommon.

The fifth feature is ad hoc decision making: informality is perceived as an advantage and official party mechanisms are mostly absent. Decisions are influenced by the character of the internet platforms – democracy is realised directly online via applications or polling. Patterns of decision-making remain fluid because intra-party institutionalisation is minimal. This form should represent transparency and a direct relationship between supporters and the party leadership. Direct democracy is presented as a solution but often only affirms the decisions or positions introduced by the party elite, having a top-down bias and giving the impression of legitimacy.

This paper is a longitudinal case study that analyses internal organisational principles. The design of the study allowed for an extensive, contextualised and holistic analysis, with an emphasis on particular aspects of the functioning of a political party (Noor 2008). We

drew on qualitative data – mainly a series of semi-structured interviews with party officials and party staff at various levels – party documents, an internet Pirate Forum and media sources. The method allowed an in-depth reflection on internal party changes, with a flexible approach to the different respondents – the basic set of questions (those selected are listed in the Appendix) was supplemented with further questions according to the party position they held. Blee and Taylor (2002) suggest that this is a suitable method of data collection for organisations with a loose structure or those that have only been partially mapped.

The selection of respondents was made with reference to the phenomena under study; crucial for us was the wealth and authenticity of the data provided for the party features analysed, not statistical representativeness (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey 2011). The interviews were divided into broad sections by issue, covering for example forms of personal contact, perceptions of the leader's persona, forms of member participation in party life and intra-party mechanisms. The final phase involved a systematic reflection of Gerbaudo's features while including other sources (party documents and so on; Wesley 2014). The approach described could not avoid a certain degree of subjectivity, which is a small limitation of our research.

A short history of the Czech Pirates

The Czech Pirates were founded in 2009 and at first, were particularly concerned with internet freedom and copyright reform. A turning point in the development of the party was its opposition to ACTA in 2012, when it successfully mobilised people to act against it. Thereafter, their electoral support in second-order elections grew steadily, and they made a major breakthrough in the 2017 general election by winning 10 percent of the vote (Table 1). The party capitalised on general dissatisfaction with politics and politicians, those of both the government and opposition (for example, one of the main slogans of the campaign was "Let us get them out"), and offered a broad manifesto that covered, besides the original internet-related agenda, issues such as environmental protection, simplifying state administration with technology, protecting citizens from bullying and defending freedom and democracy (Eibl and Gregor 2018a, 78–79; Jääsaari and Šárovec 2021, 213). The Pirates thus profiled themselves as an anti-establishment social liberal alternative, led by a group of young politicians and appealing mainly to urban voters.

Between 2017 and 2021, the Pirates formed an active opposition to the government led by the billionaire and leader of the technocratic-populist ANO party Andrej Babiš, which brought them closer to other opposition parties and pushed them towards the

Table 1. Election results of the pirates.

Year	Chamber of deputies				Regional elections			European elections	
	2010	2013	2017	2021*	2012	2016	2020	2014	2019
Per cent of votes	0.80	2.66	10.79	15.62	2.19	1.74	12.02	4.78	13.95
Seats	0	0	22	4	0	5	99	0	3

Source: Czech Statistical Office.

*Electoral coalition with STAN.

political mainstream. In the 2021 elections, they ran in a coalition with STAN, but the result fell short of their goal of winning the elections (Table 1). Due to the preferential votes, the Pirates won only four seats, although the electoral coalition won 37 (Balík and Hruška 2022). Despite this result, considered a failure within the party, the aim to push Babiš into opposition was successful, and the Pirates joined an ideologically broad government coalition led by Petr Fiala from the centre-right ODS, in which they took control of three government ministries (Havlík and Lysek 2022).

Is the internet still our sea?

The founding of the Pirates was an example of a party originating online. The first impulse in April 2009 was when Czech IT specialist Jiří Kadeřávek, inspired by the Pirate Bay and the Swedish Pirates, suggested the idea on a website (Kadeřávek 2009). Then, even before the party was officially registered, the Pirates' main tool of communication and coordination was the online Pirate Party Forum (PPF), which was the only place used by the Preparatory Committee to meet (Profant 2021). The incoming participants, mostly drawn from the IT professions, hardly knew each other before the first official party meeting. All that linked them were the online discussions they'd had on the PPF and Facebook (PPF 2009a).

The party found it had the IT expertise to create systems of online voting, communication platforms and party websites, but less so for other organisational tasks. When it came to the official registration of the party, not only did the process of collecting the necessary signatures prove to be chaotic, the first application was rejected by the Ministry of the Interior on formal grounds (PPF 2009b).

For more than two months, the PPF was the only "body" of the party. The official party organs (National Forum, Republic Committee) were established in June 2009 during a constitutive "offline" forum in Prague, at which the party fulfilled the necessary legal requirements. Nevertheless, the real role of the PPF remained crucial because the bodies at the national level met in person very rarely, and most issues were dealt with through an online platform (Facebook was also important, and a number of closed groups were created for intra-party communication); the PPF remained the key tool for contact among members for the first few years because regional branches and offices were non-existent. The PPF was where most policy discussions moved forward, including programmatic issues (PPF 2009c). This underlines the PPF's vital importance for the party, as it served as a parallel structure to the official bodies. This illustrates well the initial weak party institutionalisation associated with ad hoc activities and close-to-random decision making. However, the PPF, although fully accessible by anyone, did not become the main tool of external communication, although even this was initially dominated by an online approach (the party devised its own Pirateleaks;¹ members sent e-mails to MPs protesting against copyright law, etc.).

The fact that the party organisation remained superficial and depended only on the enthusiasm of a handful of activists was a problem, especially when the mobilisation potential of the Pirate Bay trial faded. This is illustrated in Table 1 by the near-zero result in the 2010 parliamentary elections (the party's campaign was conducted almost entirely online, with Facebook being the main platform).

The proposal of the ACTA treaty changed the situation at the beginning of 2012. The Pirates clearly adopted a strident, critical position against the treaty and also against the centre-right government, which was prepared to accept it. On this topic, the Pirates dominated the media discourse, gave several interviews, appeared on TV, and mobilised mainly young people. They organised or co-organised petitions against the treaty and held several demonstrations, not just in Prague but in several regional cities (Euractiv 2012; Pirátské listy 2012). So the party was able successfully to present the ACTA as a threat to society and the first step in the regulation of the internet. The Pirates took advantage of a clear political position on the matter, while other parties were caught napping and hardly dealt with this specific issue. The Pirate approach was a combination of online communication and protests in the streets, which meant a shift of the party towards offline tools.

One of the co-founders (and later party vice-chair and MP) characterised this situation and its effects as follows: “We had a meeting with the minister [...] and we recruited a large number of members” (Ferjenčík 2021). The party gained some support and visibility mainly among young people, made better connections with the open-source community, and also acquired familiarity with the wider public. The ACTA protests helped the party organisation to become stronger and brought the first noticeable electoral results in the autumn of 2012, when the Pirates won one seat in the Senate elections (upper house of parliament); the rise was also noticeable in regional elections (Table 1), although they did not exceed the 5% electoral threshold in any region.

These election results brought the party its first money from the state, and they secured even more in the 2013 parliamentary elections (the party received a one-off subsidy of over half a million euros for its votes), creating the conditions for expanding its offline activities and structures. This process was boosted by the introduction of a new, technocratically-oriented leadership in 2014 and accelerated by the major electoral success of 2017, coupled with a large and steady inflow of state funding (Černohorský 2021; Pink and Folvarčný 2020). It was symptomatic of external communication that the 2017 parliamentary election campaign was newly dominated by offline issues, and similarly some of the most effective campaign tools had a “material” substance that was only subsequently transferred to social media. The best example is the party’s use of an old bus festooned with cartoons of some of the best-known political figures associated with corruption (Eibl and Gregor 2018b, 134–135).

The Pirates increased their offline presence further when they created centres (rented at first, and later owned by the party) in big cities for meetings with the public, administered by local members. This strengthened the party on the ground by giving it a more institutionalised character. Sometimes the centres were tied with regional headquarters and later with MPs’ regional offices; they became part of the backbone of the organisation. The party’s development, featuring a symbiosis of internal and external relations, reached a stage that could be described as “Pirates becoming office-based”.

The PPF kept its importance during this process but was used mainly for intra-party communication and decision-making processes, to which we will return in the section on participation. One of the representatives of the regional elites described the role of PPF in these words: “In the beginning it was crucial; it was an open platform, it facilitated the closeness of people” (Klusová 2021). However, most of its functionality became very complicated and non-user-friendly. The PPF became insufficiently interactive; it covered

hundreds of discussions, polling and decisions, became more procedure-oriented and made some (administrative) processes quicker and easier. That made the forum less attractive to some non-IT-skilled members (PPF 2020b) who were sceptical about its future, which the quoted politician summed up as: “We all know that one day it will need a make-over; it’s old-fashioned” (Klusová 2021).

The role of the PPF changed, and the agenda moved much more into the regional and local centres and, later, into the parliamentary party group and also a team of experts around the MPs and, after 2021, around the ministers (Nezhyba 2023; Svobodová 2021). The most important issues were debated more inside the party in the public office (Katz and Mair 1993) than in the publicly visible online discussions. In addition to this informal dimension, this new stage of the Pirates’ development saw the stabilisation of the role of the party’s highest official body under the statutes, the National Forum, in which all members can directly participate and vote. For example, the Forum has the power to elect and remove the party’s Republic Board (executive body), approve the statutes, and, on the basis of a so-called member initiative, review the decisions of any party body. The Forum meets in person once a year, but online it operates *de facto* continuously through various party polls and referendums, and is “serving as a kind of virtual party congress” (Pink and Folvarčný 2020, 181). The PPF’s political essence has thus been weakened, leaving an administrative purpose important for its intra-party processes (see next section).

In short, in the early days of the party when it had few members, the “classic” party bodies were weak or inoperative and a crucial role was played by the online PPF. The ACTA protests started a change, which with the party’s electoral rise led to the PPF becoming gradually more of an instrument for management and discussion, and it ceased to be the defining characteristic of the party. The centre of key decision-making and communication shifted elsewhere. As the lower-level structures were built up, the Pirates came closer to “classic” parties based on meetings rather than on impersonal online discussions. The importance of visualisation, in Gerbaudo’s sense, for the internal and external organisation thus declined, even though the party retained its main slogan: “The internet is our sea”.

Party structures under construction?

“I wrote to the headquarters and they agreed that I would be the coordinator in Pardubice” (Ferjenčík 2021). These words of one of the party’s first members, who became key to its establishment in one regional capital, reflect the improvised process of the birth of the first Pirate branches in 2009. The party centre in Prague coordinated the creation of the regional and local branches; however, the main role was played by local initiative.

The largely spontaneous, ad-hoc, bottom-up process of building the party meant that most members were located in and around the two largest cities, Prague and Brno. The number of members given in Table 2 shows that in the early years, it was a handful of people. They were not professional politicians and had no positions even in local politics. The fact that in 2010 regional party organisations already existed in all 14 Czech regions had little significance, as some of them did not really function. A more realistic picture of the party’s organisation is given by the fact that the party did not have any local

Table 2. Development of pirate party membership.

Month/year	2/ 2010	12/ 2010	1/ 2013	1/ 2014	5/ 2015	4/ 2016	5/ 2018	1/ 2019	1/ 2020	1/ 2022	3/ 2023
Number of members	146	164	275	340	428	436	704	1023	1114	1231	1193

Source: Pirate Party 2023.

organisations in that year and in 2013 there were only nine (ČPS 2023). The Pirates lacked a broad social base and connections with other organisations and interest groups (Profant 2021). Registered supporters, who were formally envisaged in the party's constitution and to whom Gerbaudo's concept attaches great importance, did not play a major role in the party's early days (details below).

A party administrative staff were almost entirely lacking and there is evidence of improvisation, for example in the contents of the press releases that were discussed on the PPF forum. The party headquarters did not really exist; its address was for a long time the same as the chair's home. Organisational development led to the strong decentralisation of the party, the regions became relatively independent of the party centre and had their own budgets.

Generally, the ACTA treaty protest cannot be seen as a complete breaking point; yet following the protest, local branches were gradually established from 2012 to 2013. However, the building of the party structure was not extensive. The party had only 39 local organisations in 2017, 84 in 2021 and two years later only one more. To this day there are considerable differences in the numbers of local branches across regions (ČPS 2023; Pikal 2021). The internal geographical structure was finally stabilised in 2021 (with a clear division into regional and local organisations), which contributed to the institutionalisation of the party (ČPS 2021).

The statutes of the Pirates from the beginning mentioned specialised "departments" in addition to classic party bodies. The departments (e.g. administrative and financial) have existed since 2010 and formed a rudimentary base for the party. However, they were mostly provided by volunteer party members (or supporters) and had a very low level of professionalisation, at least until 2014. The creation of paid positions was hampered not only by a lack of finance but also by the resistance of some members to this approach (ČPS 2021; Vileta 2021).

One of the biggest changes in this regard was the establishment of regional centres, as noted above. They became official spaces for meetings, gatherings, negotiations and relaxation and had some community character. Their link with MPs' offices (in some cases), following the 2017 electoral success, underlined their importance. For the first time, paid staff were recruited – another step towards the professionalisation of the party and the creation of a stable setting. The reactivity of this process is illustrated well by a comment from one of the regional coordinators: "The professionalisation responded to demand, to do what was needed" (Svobodová 2021).

The trend to professionalisation was continued with the creation of salaried managers in each region (2017) and the establishment of the central Party Office where several professional staff were working on a regular basis by 2019. The Party Office replaced the semi-amateur Financial Department and was not just the new financial centre of the party (with supervision of the budget and property management) but also a classic office, managing

the growing administrative tasks such as membership applications (ČPS 2016; ČPS 2017; ČPS 2019).

The party's large parliamentary group (2017–2021) working mostly on the team principle was a great asset for the transition from a fluid organisation to a much more professional and robust one. The group included people from different policy areas, reflected in the proactive approach of the Pirate MPs in the legislature. During the parliamentary term, they became the most active of all parliamentary groups regarding parliamentary questions with an average of almost 15 per MP and legislative proposals with an average of almost 40 per MP.² Despite some naivety at the beginning, the MPs did not perform like amateurs or unpredictable actors. The parliamentary group remained cohesive without any MPs leaving, which might have been due to their similar professional backgrounds in IT technologies (Bakke 2022; Černošský 2021; Nečas 2021). The importance of the MPs grew rapidly inside the party because they garnered most of the focus and public attention (Kopřiva 2021; Vileta 2021). Another aspect of the ongoing party structuring has been the emergence of policy teams, which were originally established as ad hoc support for MPs, but quickly evolved into permanent intra-party institutions providing expertise in individual policies (Nezhyba 2023).

After the 2021 elections, there was a significant change as the party won only four MPs' seats and the major centre of influence shifted to the government, in which the party had three ministers, a number of high-level civil servant positions as deputy ministers and (paid) consultancy positions. There was a notably interesting side effect, in the form of the scepticism of some Pirate politicians in parliament and government towards the openness of online communication mainly on the PPF forum, where people questioned the often hard-negotiated compromises within the governing coalition and undermined the party's public image. For example, according to Michálek, the leader of the parliamentary group, "some vocal debaters from the online forum have been disproportionately influential" (Doubravová 2024). This showed how the thinking of some in the party elite had shifted since the foundation.

In short, the number of party members and local branches has remained limited over the years, organisational development is not yet complete and there are internal disputes about further professionalisation. However, the Pirates have taken huge steps to strengthen the party organisation in terms of regional presence, administrative staff and policy background. They are no longer a fluid movement with unclear online structures, and their institutionalisation has progressed. Although the internet remains an important working and communication tool, the party has clearly shifted towards the offline world and its existence has become much more "material". This is certainly not the "death of the party cadre" in Gerbaudo's sense. Another visible symptom is the transfer of some power within the party to the politicians in parliament and government.

Participation as a goal

The party was built up by a group of active members, which was strongly reflected in its functions (as described above) and internal rules. The first version of the party statutes already declared support for the "maximum involvement of the public in decision-making", giving members extensive rights, including participation in discussion of the party's internal affairs and in shaping party policy (ČPS 2009).

In the first years, participation was implemented mostly on the PPF, where members expressed their opinions and voted for various decisions or policy positions. The role and influence of any single member were quite strong. The role of individuals was enhanced not only by the value of participation but also by the fact that almost all the members knew each other. This was vividly described by the party's vice-chairman in this period: "There was a Pirate meeting, then an after-party; we had a lot of fun [...] The main effect was that we were all friends" (Vašíček 2021). Online discussions also often resembled friendly chats and the party was built around close personal ties (Klusová 2021; Witosz 2022). However, with expansion of the party membership and the increasingly complex agenda and expert specialisation often heading into the offline environment (local campaigns, participating in expert policy teams, etc.), it became more difficult for any one member to influence the direction of the party.

Although, according to the statutes, any member can still protest against any decision by a party body at any level, he (or she) has to gain a precisely determined level of member support (a so-called member's initiative) to overturn it, i.e. the decision can be overturned by an online vote including all members. Occasionally, such a procedure can be successful, but most fail (ČPS 2017; PPF 2020a; Vileta 2021).

To this day, the activity and participation of members are required and expected, however, with significantly increased offline engagement, such as involvement in election campaigns (handing out leaflets, organising rallies in town squares), meetings of party bodies, etc. The PPF serves as an active discussion and deliberation base together with special online voting platform Helios. (Helios is technologically advanced with specific functions such as ensuring the secrecy of the election, counting and recounting the voters to ensure there is a quorum according to party rules. In contrast, the PPF does not allow secrecy, for example.) Both offer voting opportunities to all party members. The PPF is also used for the nomination of candidates for parliamentary elections, which also offers wide scope for participation. Initially, the selection process was improvised and ad hoc, because with the small number of members, the party struggled to fill all the slots on the ballot papers. Over time, this process has become established at the level of the regions, which coincide with constituency boundaries in parliamentary elections and where intra-party primaries take place. In 2013, some candidate selection was already done explicitly by voting on the PPF, but the process was not uniform given the decentralisation of the party, and different procedures were applied in different regions. It was only from 2017 that the process became more institutionalised and took place on the PPFs of the individual regions (Bakke 2022).³ The leader of the region's candidate and other front-runners were selected by vote; a block vote was then taken on the other half of the ticket. The candidate had to receive the nomination from the party members (they were free to nominate) and the members of each regional association then decided on the slate of candidates. The process was thus quite inclusive, while there was little control exercised from the centre, since the broader executive leadership (the Republic Committee) could only intervene in the candidate lists in the "last instance", which rarely happened in practice.

From the beginning, the party has offered non-members a chance to participate if they register as a supporter or a user on PPF, which shows some vagueness in the membership base and its "multilevel" character. Registered supporters are expected to be actively involved in the local branch and election campaigns, but realistically cannot exert

much influence as they only have an advisory voice on some issues in internal party life. As time went by, tighter conditions for registration influenced the number of supporters, and these decreased, according to party data, from around 10,000 soon after the establishment of the party to around 4000 in 2017 and around 1200 in 2023 (information supplied by the Pirate Party 2023).

The attractiveness of registered supporter status is enhanced by the fact that it is a prerequisite for becoming a full member. According to internal party regulations, active participation in at least one election campaign is expected of applicants who wish to become a member, and there is a “waiting period” of three months before an applicant is accepted (in some regions a six-month period is even informally applied). This is presented by the party as a protective mechanism to discourage “opportunists” and “careerists”. Applicants must also present themselves on the PPF and can be questioned (ČPS 2020; Čuma 2021; Svobodová 2021).

The Pirates have established relatively high entry barriers and they prefer active, committed and hard-working people. Online activity is insufficient; participation in offline activities is necessary. The relatively onerous entry procedure explains why the party has had so few members to date. Most new parties, including Andrej Babiš’s ANO, have similar barriers to new membership to the Pirates, so this is common practice in Czechia, not an exception (Hloušek and Kopeček 2017).

The participation so much emphasised by Gerbaudo (2019) is indeed essential for the Czech Pirates, but as time has passed, its conception has changed for pragmatic reasons, among others. The party’s original online character has not disappeared completely, for basic communication purposes it is still essential, but its significance has declined. Today’s Pirates can be summed up simply: communicate online but act more offline.

Leader: *primus inter pares*

The position of the Pirates’ leader and chair in one person is not defined by the party’s statutes as something unique. The leader is not a specific party body, but one of five members of the Republic Board, which is the party’s collective executive body which makes majority decisions. The statutes do not define any special powers of the leader within the party; *de jure* the leader is therefore “*primus inter pares*”. The exceptions are only that the leader chairs the meetings of the Republic Board and represents this body (not formally the party) externally. He (or she) is elected for a term of two years (without term limits) and the party uses (as with other voting) a very participatory selection system, in which all members vote in the leader. The weak position of the leader in the statutes has existed since the party’s early days and despite discussions it has never been officially strengthened, but there has nevertheless been some personalisation of the party in the figure of the leader over time.

The Pirates did not originate as the project of a political entrepreneur. The party’s main founder Kadeřávek refused to be the leader and to this day has the role of mentor, corrector and “ambassador” with some authority behind the scenes. His opinions are taken into account, but he has never ruled the party despite being called its “founding father” (Kopřiva 2021). The first party chair Kamil Horký lacked charisma and leadership skills, and led the party for only half a year. The reason for this quick end was an ideological clash: Horký leaned strongly towards libertarianism, the majority refused to follow his

course and he left the party (Charvát 2015). Since then (with a short break) the party has been led by Ivan Bartoš, who had a certain specific charisma, as well as communication and organisational skills and considerable informally-based intra-party authority.

Bartoš was almost the only Pirate politician visible before the party's success in 2017 and attracted the attention of the media and public (for example, the aforementioned campaign bus tour before the elections), partly thanks to his atypical dreadlock haircut. He personifies the Pirates for the public and the degree of this personification has only strengthened over time. For example, in the 2013 and 2017 elections 17% of Pirate voters gave Bartoš their preferential vote in his constituency, in 2021 over 27% did so (ČSÚ 2023). He is to this day the best-known Pirate politician, which is due to his long-term leadership of the party and its visible representation in the media, his frequent appearances in parliament between the 2017 and 2021 elections, and the fact that he became deputy prime minister and minister for digitalisation in 2021.

Bartoš is a hugely respected figure within the party due to his contributions to the party's rise, helped by the fact that many members know him personally. As characterised by a former party deputy chairman and MP, "In terms of representing the spirit of the party, he is irreplaceable" (Pikal 2021). In the internal life of the party, he has not been a key driver in building organisational structures, but he has often played the role of a moderator and compromise-maker, e.g. he often visited the sessions of the local branches to resolve conflicts. For many members, he is the authentic embodiment of Pirate ideology and the main figure responsible for party politics (Ferjenčík 2021; Pikal 2021; Witosz 2022). The weakness of the leader's powers in the statutes does not prevent Bartoš from exerting a strong informal influence in ad hoc important decisions, such as his strongly preferred (and unsupported by a part of the members) electoral coalition with STAN for the 2021 elections (Holomčík 2021).

His brief break from office in 2014–2016 occurred after his voluntary decision not to seek the position (justified mainly by private reasons), but he then returned to the party leadership smoothly. Bartoš had no serious competition in the chairmanship elections and his position was not fundamentally threatened even after the 2021 parliamentary elections, perceived as a setback compared to the previous elections. Despite criticism from the disaffected, no strong opposing candidate emerged and the incumbent leader defended his position.

The Pirates' leadership is based on unofficial personal authority and (less so) on charisma, which is not backed by official party rules. In practice, this leads to the leader's informal decision-making influence, but his position is far from the idea of a hyperleader controlling the party. The power to make decisions is quite diffuse within the party. The weak dependence on the leader is undoubtedly a favourable factor for the institutionalisation of the Pirates, as it reduces the risks associated with leader replacement in the future (although it does not completely eliminate them) and increases the chances of the party's survival.

Technocratism

The initial improvisation and unstructured inner life of the Pirates, described above, that reduced their efficiency over time, led to the pursuit of more concrete and specific patterns of behaviour and decision-making. This was hampered by various factors, including

substantial internal democracy and the strong decentralisation of the party coupled with the autonomy of the regional branches, which have their own budgets and often different rules (for example, the various waiting periods for new members described above).

Yet the Pirates have created many documents that form party life in detail and set up precise procedural documents, e.g. Organisational Rules, Rules of Procedure of the National Forum, etc. These documents set out approaches to many situations that may occur, serving as guides to the quite complicated procedures – for example, to decision-making on the PPF forum on time limits, requests, debates, etc. Thus, the internal system of rules creates a technocratic background and puts stress on the procedural aspects of each decision (Pikal 2021; Witosz 2022). In combination with substantial intra-party democracy this generates a breeding ground for questioning the process and endless discussions. This situation can give the impression of a self-centred party where politics and ideas are somewhat lost or secondary and much overshadowed by the all-encompassing transparency and precision of the process. Unbridled “piracy” has been at least partly replaced by technocracy, regularity, perfectionism and formalism.

This state stems partly from the complexity of the platforms the party uses. This naturally places high demands on their management, but also requires a certain degree of understanding and adequate behaviour on the part of their users. It is necessary to mention the essence of the internet, where the element of personal contact is missing. Hyperbolically speaking, the background of the computer community and the need for systematisation and precision are reflected here (Klusová 2021).

The primacy of technocracy might seem surprising, but beyond the IT origin of the Pirates it can be linked with a particular Czech tradition. The main centre-right party, the ODS, was established in the early 1990s not only by its founder, Václav Klaus, local activists and MPs who favoured a liberal economic ideology, but also by a network of local managers, who wanted solid structures and mechanisms instead of the fluidity of the Civic Forum from which the party emerged. The effect was the technocratisation of part of the party elite (Hadjiisky 2001; Hanley 2007). Two decades later, this element appeared even more strongly in Andrej Babiš’s ANO party, whose leader lifted corporate principles into the party’s organisation and identity (Buštková and Guasti 2019; Cirhan and Kopecký 2019; Havlík and Stojarová 2018). Unlike these two parties, the Pirates’ technocracy had a different origin and was not much influenced by business thinking. However, there are some similar features, such as an emphasis on clear procedures, individual responsibility for tasks and expert orientation.

Technocratic systematisation and emphasis on party procedures are inconsistent with Gerbaudo’s idea of a digital party based on ad hoc improvisations. Pirate leadership have to rely heavily on well-defined principles to be able effectively to manage the party without constant opposition and the need to deal with (perceived as unnecessary) member initiatives against the formal procedures, which represents one of the most prolific means of grass-roots activity. However, this does not preclude ad hoc (e.g. authority-based) actions and behaviour in some situations.

Discussion and conclusions

Gerbaudo’s concept presumes a dominant digital form as leading to a promising future because of lower costs, facilitating the internal and external communications of the

party and so on. Our findings about the Czech Pirates suggest some uncertainty about the long-term success of such a party and confirm the postulates stemming from an observation of parties in Western Europe such as Podemos and the Five Star Movement.

We identified an almost purely online platform form in the early days of the Czech Pirates. The internet was a key domain for their organisation both internally and externally, and the same was true of the party agenda. However, the party's identity changed over time because the Pirates discovered that the online environment was not potent enough to create a broad base in society, for effective political mobilisation and for an electoral breakthrough. This situation was probably related to the reality of economic crisis and social problems around the turn of the first and second decades of the twenty-first century which favoured different offline alternatives, such as the populist ANO party.

At the same time, however, this is not surprising in the comparative perspective of pirate parties in Western Europe, whose electoral successes have been rare and mostly only episodic. After a wave of interest in this new phenomenon, the initial rise in second-order elections in 2009 in Sweden and afterwards in Germany etc., pirates have managed to establish as a parliamentary party only exceptionally in specific conditions. The best illustration is the case of Iceland, where the party system almost collapsed during the financial and economic crisis and the party elites lost trust – this especially affected the traditional left. The Icelandic Pirates seized the opportunity for breakthrough, which was facilitated by the popularity of several of their personalities and their ability to offer radical new concepts; in a country of about half a million people, they did not need a bigger base (Ómarsdóttir and Valgarðsson 2020; Sigurdarson 2021). Quite similar is the case of the comparably populous Luxembourg, where the shattering of trust in mainstream parties and domestic and international scandals related to the misuse and leakage of digital data have greatly contributed to the Pirates' visibility and success since 2018 (Kies, Schmit, and Dumont 2019; Novotný and Šárovec 2021).

The Czech Pirates found that an internet-only background and issues did not have long-lasting resonance in society and could not ensure their success. The party then flexibly shifted towards a more significant offline presence, leading to organisational hybridity in a similar sense to that discussed by Chadwick. The party's online platforms remained important for its internal discussions, but not for achieving public recognition, in which domain offline tools began to emerge, allowing for the 2017 electoral breakthrough. This success was accompanied by a gradual adaptation of the internal organisation, with investments in the structures and people including a "physical" presence at the regional and local levels and partial professionalisation.

This progress in the institutionalisation process was accompanied by the routinisation and coordination of internal procedures. The Czech Pirates started as a project of a small group of political amateurs from IT backgrounds, who often made decisions in an improvised and ad hoc manner with the help of an online platform. However, even at this early stage of party building, a territorial-based structure (common in Czechia) began to emerge and technocratic procedures gradually replaced improvisation. Although the original Pirate informality continues in some respects, the party has created a very detailed set of internal rules, making its functioning more predictable and stable. This set neatly underlines the party's procedural accent and reflects the value of correctness in internal processes. Online decision-making continues throughout the party but is

guided by a set of principles and the Pirates have lost their fluidity and ad hoc improvisation. Again, the influence of the environment can be seen here. Technocracy has its roots in the Pirates' origins in IT and is also a common part of the Czech party tradition. Overall, from an organisational perspective, there has been a clear shift from a virtual (platform) party to a more robust party structure with greater strengths, which has allowed the Pirates to be effective in political campaigns. The party's resilience has also increased, reducing the risks of disintegration.

The party managed to introduce not only internal but also external institutionalisation. In the first years, patterns of behaviour towards other political actors were almost completely lacking. However, change came when it entered parliament in 2017 and the Pirates were quickly recognised by other parties as a relevant actor; this was definitively confirmed by their involvement in the coalition government in 2021.

Compared to the common level of Czech parties, the digitisation of the Pirates is still significant, which is particularly visible in their communication infrastructure. No other party uses a tool similar to the internet Pirate Forum or the Helios voting platform. The Pirate set-up of online platforms for internal functioning is the most advanced in the Czech context.

Similarly, participation has remained one of the defining normative characteristics of the party which makes it to some extent unusual. Online platforms allow members to be closely involved, as evidenced, for example, by the vote on joining the government in 2021, which was attended by over 90% of members. But the party's approach cannot be understood simply as online engagement today. It involves offline activity in campaigns, meetings at local branches, etc. On the other hand, participation has never been the absolute value – just as in Germany, where the Pirates introduced the possibility for members to delegate their powers via liquid democracy (Kling 2015).

The transformation of the Pirates included a change in the distribution of power within the party. In comparison with other Czech parties, the possibilities of intra-party, online-based democracy remain high, especially in contrast to the parties of political entrepreneurs based on the leader, such as Babiš's ANO. There is, however, a visible decline in the significance of the online Pirate Forum over time and, on the contrary, an increase in the importance of the party's other main functions and especially of politicians in public offices. After the 2017 election, this phenomenon was connected with the informal power of the parliamentary party group, which underwent some correction after the following elections in 2021, when the party gained a stronghold in government but lost a number of seats in parliament.

In these shifts of power within the party, the party leader Ivan Bartoš did not have a decisive role, although he was the party's best-known politician with huge authority. The leader's powers are limited by intra-party regulations and Bartoš's influence stems from his consensual personality, long-term leadership and connections with the majority of core members. A strengthening of the leader's position is unlikely in the future, even for Bartoš's successor, due to intra-party rules.

The evolution of the Czech Pirates can be seen as an illustrative case of a party with relatively strong dynamics and great adaptability, which has been strongly influenced by the surrounding environment. While it is likely that a pirate party will show greater embeddedness in and penetration of the online sphere than other more "traditional" parties, its partial convergence towards offline realities is evident.

Generally, the internet is definitely a useful instrument for parties, helping them to lower transactional costs and attract the attention of a broader public mainly thanks to the nature of social media. It may help to mobilise people around a particular issue – but this does not come as a matter of course. In the long term, reliance on the internet does not ensure a strong and suitable party organisation. It facilitates a particular form of participation, but also creates challenges in the transition from the online world to traditional politics. The internet, used as a platform, does not guarantee political success and survival.

Notes

1. This tool was similar to the Julian Assange Wikileaks project, aimed at anonymous disclosure of information, mostly from the government.
2. The authors' calculations based on parliament data.
3. In 2021, the situation was repeated, but with a modification caused by the allocation of seats on the candidate list due to the electoral coalition with STAN.

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Vašíček, Ivo. 2021. May 13: regional MP, former deputy chair.

Vileta, Petr. 2021. May 6: the party's former financial and administrative director.

Witosz, David. 2022. February 17: local MP, candidate for leader in 2022.

Appendix. Examples of questions asked in semi-structured interviews

What was the impulse to found the party?

- a. Where did you get inspired?
- b. Can we talk about broader contacts/networks during the formation?
- c. Were/are there links to any social groups in society outside the party?

How has the internal organisation of the party changed since its foundation?

- a. What are these changes?
- b. What are the strengths/weaknesses of the current structure?
- c. Is the structure at all hierarchical?

How can you characterise the role and influence of the online internet Pirate Forum on the functioning of the party (in the past and today)?

- a. What are the strengths (weaknesses) of the Pirate Forum?
- b. Is the participation of non-members problematic?
- c. Is the online forum still a key (defining) element of the party today?

What is the current role of the party leadership?

- a. How important is Ivan Bartoš as party chairman and leader of the party?
- b. To what extent is the Pirates' success built on him?
- c. Can the leadership afford to completely ignore the opinion of the members and impose its own?