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## What can Czech politicians learn from Obama?

BY LOUIS PERRON / PRAGUE DAILY MONITOR / 20 JANUARY 2009

The world is fascinated as Barack Obama officially takes over power as president of the United States. Politicians and candidates around the globe carefully observed the campaign and quite a few want to be like him. However, one can easily look silly when copying American campaign techniques. So what tools, strategies and tactics out of the Obama toolkit would really work in the Czech Republic? How can Czech politicians convince, mobilize and sell like Obama?

Some observers think that the impressive thing about the Obama campaign is how it used the internet and other new technology. Eight thousand internet groups, 50,000 local events and 1.5 million internet volunteers are indeed impressive. But that's only one part of the story. Politicians often think that a campaign means to produce things such as TV spots, leaflets or websites. In reality, however, a campaign can and should be seen as a series of decisions regarding the message, the strategy, fundraising and products. The Obama campaign has reached these decisions early on and has implemented them with great discipline. That's the real secret of his success.

Politicians often think of a message as a slogan, in most cases nothing more than an empty motherhood statement. However, a good message is more than a slogan, yet less than a party program. It's the reason we give voters why to vote for one side and not for one of the other sides. In the case of Obama, this was the message: "Barack Obama will bring the change that America desperately needs. He will get the economy going again, not only the Wall Street

AMERICA desperately needs. He will get the economy going again, not only for Wall Street but also for Main Street. In concrete, this means tax cuts for 95% of Americans and expanded health-care. John McCain on the other hand will continue the failed policies of George W. Bush. It's time for a new hope and to leave the divisiveness behind us. Yes, we can!"

Every ad, every speech, everything that the campaign produced communicated that message. It was then summarized in a catchy slogan: change we can believe in and change we need. There was probably no one left in the country who did not know what Obama stood for.

This methodology can be translated everywhere in the world. Of course, in a multi-party system like the Czech Republic, the content of the message would be different, but the tool is the same. Everywhere in the world, a party or candidate needs to communicate to voters a reason that is short, believable, relevant and showing contrast. The Obama message as stated above is all of that.

In past elections, smear campaigns have become more prominent. Negative campaigns are also often misunderstood. The key is to show contrast and differences with the opponent. But that doesn't mean to be negative. That's one thing that I have learned when working in Asia: you can kill with a smile! Few people would think of Obama as negative. Yet, let's not forget that he was running 20% behind Hillary Clinton at the beginning. He was able to shake up the dynamics, take on the frontrunner and to show differences without sounding negative.

What Obama was saying is exactly what the targeted groups wanted to hear. It was a perfect and well researched match between the political demand and the political offer. The way the Obama campaign carefully targeted specific groups of voters and put together its coalition of voters is another thing that campaigners around the world can learn. From the very beginning, the Obama campaign wanted to expand its base by registering and turning out record numbers of young and black voters. And, it allocated the resources accordingly. The result: 96% of blacks voted for Obama; they made up 13% of the total electorate (+2% compared to 2004). 66% of the 18-29 year old voted for Obama. They formed 18% of the electorate (+1% compared to 2004). In my opinion, a party battling to pass the 5% threshold or a Senate candidate should get a lot of inspiration from this strategy. In both settings, few votes will be enough to win. Hence, regional and socio-demographic targeting, the

solidifying and expanding of a base will be crucial.

What's impressive in the case of Obama is the coherence, with which he defined himself and the discipline, with which the message was communicated. In my personal experience, European and Asian politicians focus too much on products and funds, and not enough about message, strategy and discipline. The people who blogged for Obama, or those who went on facebook for Obama, did it for the same reason as the people who simply voted for him: They wanted change.

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