Major Czech parties suffer massive election losses

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The conservative Citizens Party (ODS) and the Social Democratic Party (CSSD) have suffered massive losses in recent parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic.

Four years ago the ODS was still the largest party, with 35.4 percent of the vote, but its vote fell to just 20 percent in the general election held on May 28-29. The CSSD vote dropped from 32.3 percent to 22 percent. The election turnout was 62.2 percent, two percent lower than in 2006.

The Christian People's Party (KDU-CSL) and the Greens (SZ), which had formed a coalition government with the Conservatives after the 2006 elections, found little support among voters. Both parties failed to pass the five percent hurdle and neither is now represented in parliament.

Voters have turned their backs on the major parties, responding to the widespread corruption and unprincipled haggling of the political elite, which has involved not only the conservative parties, but also the Social Democrats and the Communist Party (KSCM). In the elections, the successors of the former Stalinist state party had campaigned for a coalition with the Social Democrats of the CSSD.

In the recent period there has not been a stable government in Prague. The conservative prime minister, Mirek Topolanek, resigned a year ago when his minority government, which was dependent on the votes of several defectors from the Social Democrats, lost its majority. Since then, a so-called non-partisan "cabinet of experts" has ruled under Jan Fischer. This situation has been characterized by paralysis and conflict between the various parliamentary factions.

The losses of the major parties have benefited two newly created right-wing parties: TOP 09 (the abbreviation stands for tradition, responsibility, prosperity) and VV (Public Affairs). Both have managed to enter parliament on their first attempt. With 16.8 percent, TOP 09 was the third-strongest party, pushing the Communist Party into fourth place with 11.3 percent. VV accounted for 10.9 percent of the vote.

TOP 09 is led by 72-year-old Karel Schwarzenberg, the head of an extended old Bohemian aristocratic family which owns many castles and forests in the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany. He is a multimillionaire and a practicing Catholic.

Before the so-called "Velvet Revolution" which resulted in the departure of the Stalinist regime, Schwarzenberg had spent 40 years in exile in Bavaria and Austria. In 1990, he was bureau chief for Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel. In 2007, the Green Party nominated him as foreign minister in the Green-Conservative coalition. In the recent election campaign, Schwarzenberg called for ruthless cost-cutting measures to close the state deficit.

VV (Vecie Verejné) is the creation of the populist television presenter Radek John, who has made a name for himself particularly through exposing cases of corruption. In the election campaign, like Schwarzenberg, he too called for more budgetary discipline and won many votes by promising to conduct a "fight against corruption."

The losses of the major parties have led to a series of resignations. The most prominent victim was Social Democratic Party leader Jiri Paroubek, whose sudden resignation has ushered in a new round of leadership struggles in the CSSD. The leaders of the Greens, Ondrej Liska, and the Christian People's Party, Cyril Svoboda, also announced their resignations after the election, as did former Social Democratic Prime Minister Milos Zeman, who had campaigned under a new party banner, Civil Rights (SPOZ), but failed to

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make any headway.

For the Communist Party, whose vote dropped slightly compared to 2006, the election could be a turning point. Their campaign was preceded by a violent internal conflict over the course the party should take, in which the right wing was able to push through collaboration with the CSSD. A breakup of the party is now quite possible.

Despite their heavy losses, the Social Democrats still emerged as the strongest party in the elections. But the result was not enough to form a government with the Communist Party.

It is now fairly certain that the conservative ODS will form a new government coalition with TOP 09 and VV, and ODS chairman Petr Necas began negotiations to this end last weekend. Together, the three parties hold 118 of the 200 seats in parliament. That would be the largest majority of any government since the founding of the Czech Republic in 1993.

The main task of the new government will be to overcome the previous weak leadership in the implementation of further "reforms." ODS, TOP 09 and VV have all called for economic reforms and austerity measures. Spending cuts will be implemented in order to balance the budget. Necas has said that under his leadership, the Czech Republic will not slip into crisis, like Greece.

In 2009, the Czech economy shrank by 4.1 percent and experts believe that the crisis is not over yet. In particular, the auto industry, which accounts for a large part of the Czech Republic's economic performance, faces further cutbacks in production. Rising unemployment would follow, pushing up spending on welfare.

The projected budget deficit for this year of 5.3 percent of GDP is to be considerably reduced. The same applies to the state debt, which by European standards is relatively low at 38 percent of GDP. The focus of the attacks is on the health care and pension schemes, which, unlike other Eastern European countries, have not been completely destroyed.

Representatives of big business expressed their satisfaction over the outcome of the poll. "These elections point to decisive action being taken on the budget and pension reforms," said analyst Timothy Ash of the Royal Bank of Scotland.

The German business daily *Handelsblatt* clearly expressed what is expected from the new government: "Given the crisis, the present situation is anything but rosy. Even the Czech Republic faces inevitable budget cuts—and that requires a government that dares to implement these changes in practice."

The massive loss of votes by the two major parties, which in the past two decades have dominated Czech politics and carried out essentially the same anti-social policies, and the short lifespan of the Greens make it clear how far advanced the political crisis is in the Czech Republic. A right-wing government in Prague carrying through social attacks will inevitably come into conflict with wide layers of the population.

Already the previous attacks of the non-partisan government leader Jan Fischer and his conservative predecessor led to considerable opposition and the growth of social and political tensions. In 2008, thousands of public service workers, teachers, truck drivers, pensioners, doctors and nurses took to the streets in protest against the cuts in social spending. In March this year, a public transport strike was prevented only by the efforts of the unions.

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