

# Czech legislative elections result in new political impasse

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The legislative elections held October 25 and 26 in the Czech Republic are not likely to resolve an intractable political crisis. They have, in fact, made the country virtually ungovernable.

Heavy losses were sustained by the parties that have dominated the political scene since the reintroduction of capitalism in the early 1990s. There is no prospect of a majority government being formed.

The Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) emerged as the strongest single party, gaining a shade more than 20 percent of the vote. However, this was the CSSD's worst result ever and fell far short of poll expectations. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), which hoped to be able to form a coalition government with the Social Democrats, received 15 percent, a 3 percent increase over its last showing in May 2010.

Billionaire Andrej Babis's Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), founded in 2011, increased its popular support to 19 percent, performing far better than surveys had predicted.

The previous governing parties were punished by the population. Former prime minister Petr Necas's Civic Democratic Party (ODS) collapsed to 8 percent of the vote total. It polled 20 percent in 2010 and as much as 35 percent in 2006. Its coalition partner, former foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg's TOP 09, dropped from 17 to 12 percent in the voting.

The outcome was even worse for the country's current president, Milos Zeman. His Party of Civic Rights-Zeman's People (SPOZ), which ran five incumbent ministers among its candidates, gained only 1.5 percent of the vote and thus failed to win any parliamentary seats. The Hold Your Head High party (HV) of Zeman's predecessor, Vaclav Klaus, promoted a nationalist and anti-European programme and

garnered a mere 0.4 percent.

However, the right-wing Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-CSL) and the ultra-right Dawn of Direct Democracy (UPD) managed to attain representation in parliament, each winning some 7 percent.

Behind the UPD stands the wealthy Czech-Japanese entrepreneur and senator, Tomio Okamura. During the election campaign, he attempted to whip up sentiment against the Roma minority. Okamura filed his candidacy for the presidential election in 2013, but was not allowed to proceed when it was discovered that many of the signatories supporting him were fictitious. The UPD consists of only nine members. The party will admit no additional members and is only based on a circle of sympathisers.

Political crisis has gathered strength in the Czech Republic in recent years. Four prime ministers have taken office in the last two years alone. The conservative Necas government (ODS) was brought down in mid-June in the wake of a spying and corruption scandal. Jiri Rusnok, his successor and confidant of President Zeman, formed a government of technocrats but lost a vote of confidence August 7, a few weeks after taking office.

Zeman had tried to form a broad alliance from "left" to right to continue implementing the austerity programme of the Necas government. However, the president's plan failed, because both the conservative ODS and the social democratic CSSD are largely discredited.

In the 1990s, the country was ruled by Klaus and the ODS. Under the slogan "a market economy without adjectives" (such as "social," for example—i.e., an unapologetic and ruthless market economy), Klaus refused to make social concessions to the population,

privatised the economy on a large scale and thus ensured a rapid rise in unemployment and poverty. The CSSD continued these policies after it secured a large majority in the 1998 election.

The governments led by Zeman and later Vladimir Spidla took the Czech Republic into the European Union (EU) and subjected the country to the “structural reforms” demanded by the EU. This resulted in wage cuts and a further erosion of social gains. During their term in office, the Social Democrats formed a coalition with the ultra-conservative KDU-CSL and the right-wing Freedom Union, a spin-off of the ODS.

Since 2008, each Czech government has sought to saddle the population with the burden of the global economic crisis. From the ODS to the Stalinist KSCM, each party supports a programme that meets the requirements of big business and the EU.

The election results expose the deep gulf between the majority of the population and the political elite. The turnout of 59 percent was extremely low. The ANO’s success is due less to support for its right-wing agenda than to widespread rejection of the entire established political system.

The ANO advocates liberal free-market positions and placed the fight against corruption at the centre of its campaign. It polled well in traditional Social Democratic and Communist strongholds. The ANO emerged as the strongest force in the districts of Usti nad Labem, Karlovy Vary and Liberec, as well as in the central Bohemian industrial area around Hradec Kralove.

According to surveys, the ANO’s rejection of any coalition with either the ODS, the Social Democrats or the KSCM was responsible in particular for its success. “We won’t support any left-wing government, or TOP 09 or the ODS, either, because we see them as synonyms for corruption”, declared Babis.

Babis, ANO’s founder, is the second richest man in the Czech Republic. *Forbes* business magazine revealed that the 59-year-old has a fortune of US\$2 billion. Before the fall of the Stalinist regime, he was a member of the Communist Party. He then used his contacts with the bureaucracy to build up his vast wealth. He owns the largest food company in the country, the second largest chemical concern and an influential media group. During the campaign, Babis declared he would run the state like a business.

Since initial indications of the likely results on election night, former finance minister and CSSD leader Bohuslav Sobotka has tried to assemble a minority cabinet that would be tolerated by the Communist Party. Such alliances have been formed at the local level for years. The KSCM declared during the election campaign that its programmatic demands, such as withdrawal from NATO, would not stand in the way of its availability as a coalition partner. It would have been the first time since 1989 that the Communist Party, or one of its outgrowths, had participated in a Czech government.

The poor election result threatens to plunge the CSSD into a sharp internal crisis. One day after the election, the party’s executive demanded that Sobotka resign from his position as chairman. His successor and thus the future prime minister could be the former party vice chairman, Michal Hasek. He belongs to the wing of the CSSD favoured by President Zeman.

Zeman, himself a former Social Democrat, announced he would support the CSSD. Following the defeat of his own party, he is dependent on support from parliament. A government that he calls into office, but is weak and lacks majority status, would suit him well. The Social Democrats and Stalinists together hold only 83 of the 200 seats.

Pavel Belobradek, chairman of the KDU-CSL, proposed a three-party coalition of the ANO, the Social Democrats and his party, which together would claim 111 seats.

Political commentators in Prague expect that the current impasse will lead to early elections. “The election result is tragic; a new election might have to be held in the spring”, remarked Greens leader Ondrej Liska.



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