

Right-wing opponent of European Union wins Czech parliamentary election

Markus Salzmann
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Following the elections in Germany and Austria, Sunday's parliamentary election in the Czech Republic also resulted in a sharp shift to the right. The Action for Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) of billionaire Andre Babiš, who is also referred to as the Czech Trump, secured a landslide victory with close to 30 percent of the vote.

In total, nine parties will have representation in the new parliament. Far behind in second place were the conservative Citizen Democrats (ODS) with 11.3 percent of the vote. The Social Democratic Party (CSSD) of current Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, which has dominated Czech politics with the ODS since 1990, was decimated and won just 7.3 percent.

The CSSD finished sixth, behind the newly formed Pirate Party (10.8 percent), the right-wing extremist Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) of Czech-Japanese businessman Tomio Okamura (10.6 percent), and the orthodox Stalinist Communist Party (7.8 percent). For the CSSD, which is divided into three factions, this could mean the end of their party.

The result expresses the vast gulf between the population and established parties. Like the last election, turnout was just 60 percent. 28 years after the so-called velvet revolution, which laid the basis for the reintroduction of capitalism, the overwhelming majority of the population has lost all confidence in the country's bourgeois democratic institutions. Almost 60 percent of voters backed populist or protest parties.

Western media outlets note that the country "is doing better than at any time in its recent past." According to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, unemployment is "at around 3 percent the lowest in the entire European Union, growth rates are among the highest, and wages continue to rise ever more strongly." Yet this only underscores how far removed the media and official politics are from social reality.

Although the Czech Republic directly borders Germany and Austria, average Czech wages are less than one third of the average in the neighbouring countries—with prices comparable to the levels in Western Europe. The minimum wage has been 66 crowns (€2.44) since January. In the textile industry, which has grown rapidly, wages are sometimes less than the legal monthly minimum of €407. Strikes have broken out in many sectors recently as a result.

However, the pent-up social anger finds no progressive outlet. The established parties are generally seen as corrupt due to a series of affairs. Focused above all on enriching themselves, wealthy oligarchs direct them behind the scenes. Many also blame the European Union for the poor social conditions. Just 29 percent of the population think the EU is a good thing. And although the Czech Republic has met all of the requirements, 85 percent oppose the introduction of the euro.

Under these conditions, right-wing parties were able to expand their influence with slogans against corruption, the EU, and, in a country where there are hardly any, against refugees.

Babiš, the election victor, polemicised against the EU and established parties. He claimed not to be a politician and said he would lead the country to success like a private corporation. He promised to cut taxes, chase corrupt politicians out of the country and seal off Europe's borders so that not a single refugee would be accepted in the Czech Republic.

Yet Babiš embodies more than anyone else the kleptocracy that has plundered the country since the reintroduction of capitalism. He is a billionaire and considered to be the Czech Republic's second richest man. A member of the Communist Party from 1978, he used his connections after the capitalist restoration to

privatise sections of state-owned property into his own hands.

Forbes Magazine estimated his total wealth at around \$4 billion. He owns a conglomerate of more than 250 firms in 18 countries with 34,000 employees in the chemicals, agricultural and food sectors. In addition, he owns a media empire that he deployed against his opponents in the election. He owns three daily newspapers, *Mladá fronta Dnes*, *Lidové noviny*, and *Metro*, the radio channel Radio Impuls, and weekly newspapers *Tema* and *5 plus 2*.

ANO already became the second-largest party four years ago with 18.7 percent of the vote, entering the government as the Social Democrats' junior partner. Babiš became deputy prime minister and finance minister, and continued to expand his wealth. He was forced to resign in May when he was accused of tax fraud. He has since been charged. It is also suspected that he was a spy for the communist intelligence service, which would prevent him from holding a senior government post.

The formation of a new government will be very difficult. It is practically impossible to do so without ANO, but ANO will also find it hard to find coalition partners. A continuation of the previous government with the Social Democrats and right-wing KDU-ČSL would be mathematically possible, but this time under ANO's leadership. However, this could prove problematic given the Social Democrats' crisis.

A coalition between ANO and the conservative ODS would also enjoy a small majority, but is considered politically unlikely.

A coalition between ANO and the right-wing extremist SPD is also being discussed. Such an alliance would hold only 100 of the 200 seats, but could be tolerated by the ultranationalist Communist Party.

The SPD, led by the former reality TV star Okamura, focused its entire campaign on slogans against refugees, Muslims and the EU. The 45-year-old called for a vote to leave the EU. He compared Islam with the Nazis, claimed it is not a religion, but an "evil ideology," and demanded it be banned. He called for "zero tolerance" towards foreigners, and urged people to stop buying döner kebabs. He walked provocatively in front of mosques with pigs and called for them to be torn down.

The Pirates, who received votes above all from younger people, are by contrast not seen as a potential

coalition partner. The party campaigned without any real programme, railed against rampant corruption and demanded the legalisation of marijuana.

All parties are agreed on the strengthening of the state apparatus at home and abroad. The Czech Republic plans to significantly expand its army. Over the next five to seven years, the number of military personnel will rise from 23,000 to 30,000, and the defence budget will increase to 1.4 percent of GDP, as outgoing Defence Minister Martin Stropnický announced in July. The army was already increased by 1,300 personnel in 2016. All parties want to meet the demand of the US and NATO that defence spending rise to 2 percent of GDP.

The rise of the right is symptomatic of a development across Europe and will intensify the contradictions within the EU. Far-right governments hold power in Poland and Hungary, and the People's Party, an openly fascist party, is expanding its influence in Slovakia and increasingly has Prime Minister Robert Fico under its control. Right-wing extremist parties thus have considerable influence in all of the Visegrád states.

Austria's incoming chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, who won the election with a xenophobic campaign and is seeking a coalition with the right-wing extremist Freedom Party (FPÖ), is heading in a similar direction. Babiš has already described him as an ally for a strict anti-refugee policy.



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