

Government crisis in the Czech Republic

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Over a dozen protests took place last Monday, April 9, in the Czech Republic against Prime Minister Andrej Babis, including in the capital city of Prague, where between 5,000 and 10,000 people demonstrated at Wenceslas Square, demanding the withdrawal of Babis and new elections.

The protests are the latest climax of an ongoing crisis in the Czech government. Babis's right-liberal ANO won a strong victory in October of last year, taking 78 of 200 seats in parliament. Since then, however, he has failed to form a stable government.

After the elections, ANO tried to form a minority government, with ministers from its own party and independent experts. But this attempt failed in January, after a loss in a vote of confidence. Over a week ago coalition talks between Babis's right-liberal party and the social democrats (CSSD) ended unsuccessfully. To this point, Babis has received the backing of the notoriously right-wing president Milos Zeman, but it remains to be seen how long this will last.

The CSSD dissolved the talks under the pretense of judicial problems in regard to the prime minister. Babis lost his position as finance minister in May 2017 due to a suspected subsidy fraud. He is accused of having diverted €1.6 million in European Union subsidies to a wellness resort while he worked in the private sector. Babis denies any involvement and claims that the accusation is politically motivated.

The millionaire businessman is renewing efforts to form an alliance with the radical right-wing party of the businessman Tomio Okamura, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and the Communist Party (KSCM). Babis stated at the beginning of last week, "The president requested that I continue negotiations with the KSCM and the SPD." Previous attempts to build an alliance at the end of last year had proven unsuccessful.

The realization of Zeman's request would inevitably create heavy tensions within the ANO. Transport

Minister Daniel Tok has already declared that he would have no part in a government with radical right-wing elements.

To combat the lasting crisis, the social democrats, the conservative right-wing parties ODS and KDU-CSL, the Pirates, and two smaller Pro-EU parties are currently discussing the formation of a minority government.

In the event of new elections, it is believed that ANO would reach again a strong plurality. After the most recent polls, Babis's party stood at the front with roughly 30 percent support. These results are strongly influenced by the current hatred of both the conservatives and social democrats.

Although many demonstrators are enraged by the corruption of the ruling elite, the organizers of last week's protests have very different goals. Their demands for an "honest government" hide their hysterical anticommunism and their fear that Babis's government will distance itself too far from the EU. Politically, they stand close to the conservatives and social democrats.

It is not acceptable that a head of government "has been registered as an agent of the communist secret police," it says on the Facebook page of the protest organizers. They are specifically enraged by Babis's attempts to form an alliance with the former Stalinist state party, which, in their eyes, represents socialism.

The organizers of the movement "A Million Moments for Democracy," led by student Mikulas Minar, advocate for a pro-European government that is stable enough to enforce austerity policies against the working class. Under the title "Five Minutes Before Twelve," the group warns of the dangers to the "independent police." An important aspect of the protests was the appearance of the mezzo-soprano Dagmar Peckova, who sang the Czech national anthem with the demonstrators under dozens of Czech and

European flags.

It is hardly surprising that the demonstrations began when Babis suggested a popular vote on the withdrawal of the Czech Republic from the EU, which was also supported by President Zeman. This suggestion alarmed many proponents of the EU.

The “Czexit Debate” has become “part of a political game,” explained Matthias Barner, leader of the German Christian Democratic Union (CDU)-aligned Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung to the newspaper *Handelsblatt*. “Babis is still lacking a majority in the parliament and is now dealing with elements critical of the EU.”

The organizers of the protests are also worried about a continuing political crisis, which prevents the government from suppressing growing discontent among the working class.

Following protests by public servants in February, the workers of the auto manufacturer Skoda made preparations for strike action. In the face of the heated political situation, business leaders and politicians were ready to pay any price to avoid a strike, which could quickly expand to the entire auto industry in the Czech Republic, and thus the trade union, Kovo, was able to reach a deal providing employees of Skoda with a 12 percent raise starting in April.



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