

# Political crisis in Czech Republic following parliamentary elections

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The Czech Republic is in the midst of a political crisis following parliamentary elections on October 8 and 9.

After the election results shook up the political landscape of the EU member state, President Milos Zeman, without whom no new government can be appointed, apparently fell seriously ill. Preparations are now underway for his removal from office and the transfer of his powers. At the same time, a massive increase in coronavirus numbers overshadows the political power struggles.

The right-wing conservative alliance Spolu (Together) emerged from the election as a very narrow winner. With 27.8 percent of the vote, the three-party alliance was marginally ahead of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's ANO party (27.1 percent). The alliance of the Pirate Party and the STAN mayoral party scored 15.6 percent, followed by the radical right-wing Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD) with 9.6 percent.

The Social Democrats (CSSD) and the Communist Party (KSCM), both of which emerged from the former Stalinist state party, failed to clear the 4 percent hurdle and are no longer represented in parliament for the first time since the collapse of the Eastern European regimes 30 years ago. Party leaders Jan Hamáček and Vojtěch Filip announced their resignations on the eve of the election. Both had previously either formed a coalition or supported Prime Minister Babiš's government. As both parties have been worn down by internal trench warfare for years, the bitter defeat could spell their political end.

The governing coalition was deeply hated in the population. Mass protests against the government occurred several times. Babiš, a businessman and multibillionaire, pursued a program that was directed

against the vast majority of working people. This was most evident in its coronavirus policies. Of the country's 10.7 million inhabitants, more than 1.7 million have been infected and 30,600 have died from COVID-19. Following recent relaxations of protective measures, the numbers are again skyrocketing.

There are currently 771 coronavirus patients in hospitals across the country, 60 percent more than a week ago. The reproduction number, which had been below 1 for months, has skyrocketed to 1.8. Within a week, the seven-day incidence rate increased from 90 to more than 150 per 100,000. The number of new daily infections was recently around 3,600, up 2,100 from a week ago.

The dramatic increase is due in part to the low vaccination rate of 56 percent, but more importantly to the near-total abandonment of any protective measures. Although the third wave has brutally gripped the country and driven hospitals towards collapse, the ruling parties decided in the summer to lift all measures, even the wearing of face masks in the workplace and in public spaces.

The KSCM, in particular, acted as a right-wing rabble-rouser in this regard. At the height of the last wave, it demanded that all measures be lifted and threatened to stop supporting Babiš if they were not.

Eventually, the Pandora Papers revealed that Babiš had acquired a mansion and three hectares of land on the French Côte d'Azur in 2009 with the help of an opaque offshore construction company and three shell companies. These are not the first accusations of this kind against the businessman, who had become one of the richest people in the country as a result of privatizations in the early 1990s.

Regardless, President Zeman declared that he would again entrust Babiš with forming a government despite

the election defeat. Zeman was then admitted to the University Hospital in Prague on October 10 and may not be fit to hold office for the foreseeable future.

The transfer of the powers of the president, who is directly elected by the people, to another person is possible only with the approval of both houses of parliament. In the Senate, the centre-right parties that could form a new government already have a majority. In the Chamber of Deputies, this will not be the case until after the constituent session on November 8. Until then, it is still functioning with the old majority of ANO, Social Democrats and Communists.

However, it is also possible that Zeman will become fit for office again by then and propose a head of government. Because of a lack of support, Babiš has announced he will go into opposition. This gives the leader of the right-wing conservative electoral alliance Spolu, Petr Fiala, the best chance of becoming the new head of government.

Spolu consists of the three parties ODS, TOP 09 and KDU-CSL. All three were involved in previous governments in different constellations.

Under its founder Václav Klaus, the ODS (Civic Democratic Party) had been the dominant force in the Czech Republic alongside the social democratic CSSD since the 1990s. But its radical free market policies, which led to poverty and unemployment, brought the party ever higher losses. Fiala was education minister in 2013 and has led the party since early 2014. TOP 09 and the arch-conservative Christian Democrats have also moved further and further to the right in recent years and do not have a broad base.

Fiala can only achieve a majority together with the electoral alliance of the Pirates and STAN (Mayors and Independents). These two parties also stand far to the right. The Pirate Party was established in the Czech Republic years ago and member Zdeněk Hřib is mayor in the capital Prague. Hřib is implementing a program there that is completely tailored to the upper middle class and the super-rich.

Since the beginning of his term in office, rents have continued to rise massively, with Prague now one of the European cities with the highest rents, increasingly forcing working-class families to move outside the city or to outlying areas. Cynically, the two-party alliance campaigned with a slogan for “affordable housing for a decent life.”

Pirate Party leader Ivan Bartoš personifies the deeply cynical and repugnant character of this reactionary organisation. While the Pirates posed as a liberal, open party during the election campaign and railed against the “oligarchs” and their right-wing policies, Bartoš himself stands for such policies.

In the Chamber of Deputies, he worked with Tomio Okamura’s ultra-right SPD. “We don’t make any distinctions when we have to push something through in parliament,” is how Bartoš justifies the alliance with fascists. It was also necessary to talk to people who are “racist or populist” or “make hate speeches and divide society,” Bartoš said. “But in parliament, you have to be pragmatic. In the end it’s the votes that count.”

The STAN mayoral party is also on the right, recruiting its members largely from disaffected former members of other conservative parties. It advocates backward regionalism and is open to any alliances if the prospect of posts and offices beckons.

Regardless of who will form the future government, the current situation shows one thing very clearly. The working class in the Czech Republic and all of Eastern Europe is confronted with fundamental questions. Thirty years of capitalist rule have not led to democracy and a better standard of living for the working class, as was promised at the time by all the defenders of restoring capitalism. Instead, parliaments have become the rallying point of right-wing and reactionary elements that have no base in the broader population.



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