Prague: Hundreds of thousands protest against right-wing government

Markus Salzmann
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Last Sunday, between 350,000 and 450,000 people gathered on Prague's Letná Plain, according to the organisers, to demonstrate against the right-wing government of Andrej Babiš. If these figures are even approximately accurate, it was one of the largest demonstrations in the Czech Republic since the so-called "Velvet Revolution" of 1989, the anniversary of which is marked on 17 November.

The crowds were so large that public transport partially broke down, with platforms and metro trains overcrowded. Many had travelled in from other cities by bus and train that morning.

The protest was triggered by a bill introduced by the governing coalition of Babiš's ANO and the far-right parties Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and the Motorists party (AUTO). The bill would abolish the licence fees for Czech Television (?T) and Czech Radio (?Ro) and fund both broadcasters directly from the state budget from next year. At the same time, their funding is to be cut by around 15 percent. The broadcasters have already stated that this would force them to dismiss hundreds of employees.

The coalition rushed the bill through its first reading in the Chamber of Deputies at 4:36 a.m. on 24 October under a fast-track procedure. The rally was therefore held under the slogan "Letná against 4:36."

Staff at both broadcasters had already gone on strike on 3 November. In the weeks before and after, tens of thousands demonstrated in Prague, Brno and other cities. The demonstrations coincided with protests by thousands of school and university students against cuts to higher education and research.

The outrage over the attack on public service media is justified: the attack is directed against freedom of expression and is a step towards authoritarian rule.

By massively cutting funding, the government is placing the broadcasters under further pressure and attempting to suppress any unwelcome reporting. Babiš and SPD leader Tomio Okamura, who is also speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, have repeatedly attacked critical media in public. Immediately after the rally, Babiš, Okamura and Foreign Minister Petr Macinka (AUTO) declared that they would stick to their plans.

The rally was organised by the initiative *Milion chvilek pro demokracii* (Million Moments for Democracy), chaired by Mikuláš Miná?. Founded in 2017, it organised the mass protests of 2019. In January of this year, it called a demonstration in support of President Petr Pavel after he refused to appoint Motorists politician Filip Turek as environment minister.

On 21 March, the initiative brought around 250,000 people onto Letná. Alongside Czech flags, EU, NATO and Ukrainian flags were waved. Speakers criticised the government for cutting defence spending and downplaying the "Russian threat". Miná? said the aim was to prevent the country from being dragged down the path of Hungary and Slovakia.

On Sunday, too, many of the speakers came from the opposition parties close to President Pavel, a former NATO general who supports the war against Russia in Ukraine. The demands raised were the withdrawal of the broadcasting bill and the removal of Okamura as speaker of parliament.

These demands are being raised by the very parties that were in government until a year ago and whose austerity policies paved the way for Babiš's return to power.

The organisers are seeking to channel the broad opposition to Babiš behind the pro-European, pro-NATO wing of the Czech elite. Their accusation against the government is not that it is slashing social spending, rearming and attacking democratic rights, but that it is not reliable enough in the conflict with Russia and does not cooperate closely enough with the EU.

Babiš owed his election victory in October 2025 above

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all to hatred of the previous government led by Petr Fiala. Its Spolu alliance had cut billions with its “Czechia in Shape” austerity programme, supplied Ukraine with millions of artillery shells and doubled arms exports to Israel between 2022 and 2024. Babiš exploited the widespread hostility to this government and the absence of any political alternative.

The Babiš government represents a semi-criminal oligarchy and relies on openly fascist forces. Babiš, a billionaire and founder of the Agrofert conglomerate, previously governed from 2017 to 2021. In June 2019, some 250,000 to 300,000 people demonstrated on Letná against his government, which was accused of corruption and the abuse of political power for business interests. Proceedings against him for subsidy fraud involving EU funds are still pending. In March, the Chamber of Deputies blocked the lifting of his immunity.

In the SPD, the government includes a party that agitates against migrants, denies the extermination of the Roma in the Holocaust and wants to ban Islam. The coalition agreement provides for a reduction in corporation tax from 21 to 19 percent, a deficit of below 3 percent and, in the medium term, a balanced budget. This can only be achieved through deep cuts to pensions, healthcare and education. The cuts to public service media are part of this programme.

The hundreds of thousands on Letná cannot be reduced to the political aims of the organisers. The mass turnout expresses deep discontent with social inequality, authoritarian methods of rule and the rise of the far right. It is part of a wave of protests sweeping across Europe.

On the same weekend, tens of thousands demonstrated in Portugal against a new rent law that abolishes rent caps and makes evictions easier—60,000 in Lisbon alone, according to the organisers. In France, 200,000 young people and “Yellow Vests” took to the streets on 15 November, according to the organisers. The authorities banned demonstrations in Marseille, Nantes and other cities, and the police reported 219 arrests. A nationwide strike against austerity has been called in France for 17 November, and a European youth strike in Germany, Britain, France, Italy, Spain and Greece for 20 November. On the same day, Italian trade unions and Portuguese public sector workers will strike.

However different the specific triggers may be—crumbling schools, unaffordable rents, the reintroduction of conscription or the attack on press freedom—what all the protests have in common is resistance to increasingly intolerable conditions.

Everywhere, the ruling elites are therefore responding to the protests by building up the state’s apparatus of repression and by using great brutality against the protesters. Whether in Prague, Paris or Lisbon, governments are pursuing essentially the same policies, regardless of whether they call themselves liberal, conservative or social democratic.

Press freedom and other democratic rights cannot be defended by lining up behind President Pavel and the pro-EU opposition parties. These forces oppose Babiš not because of his anti-working-class programme, which they essentially share, but because they regard him as an unreliable partner in the war policy of the EU and NATO.

Today’s developments raise fundamental historical questions. The “Velvet Revolution” of 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia did not lead to freedom and social equality. In the absence of an independent socialist perspective and leadership in the working class, it culminated in the restoration of capitalism by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Leon Trotsky had warned decades earlier that, without a political revolution by the working class, the Stalinist bureaucracy would restore capitalism. Social inequality, the rule of a corrupt oligarchy and the rise of the far right are the outcome of this development.

The lessons of this experience must be drawn. The fight against authoritarianism, social cuts and war requires an independent movement of the working class that links up with the growing struggles throughout Europe.

This requires building a Czech section of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI), which has defended the principles of international socialism against Stalinism and social democracy. We call for the formation of independent rank-and-file action committees in workplaces, schools and universities, uniting workers and young people across all borders and developing the struggle against capitalist rule on the basis of an international socialist programme. The perspective is not support for another bourgeois government, but the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the United Socialist States of Europe.

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