

The Czech Republic: Where have all the voters gone?¹

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Twenty-one Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) representing the Czech Republic (one MEP less in comparison with the 2009 European Parliament [EP] election) were elected on 23–24 May. An electoral system of proportional representation with closed lists, one nationwide electoral district and 5% threshold is applied in the Czech Republic. The D'Hondt divisor is used for the allocation of seats amongst political parties (Chytilek et al., 2009).

Electoral campaign

The term *invisible* is perhaps the best descriptor for the campaign that preceded the election. It does not mean that the political parties (and the media) ignored the election at all but the intensity of electoral campaign (in terms of number of party billboards, posters and media coverage) was much lower in comparison with the early general election that had taken place in October 2013. Another important feature of the campaign was its Europeanisation. For the first time since the Czech Republic entered the European Union (EU), the vast majority of political parties focused on European issues and did not use the EP election as just another arena of national political contestation and an opportunity to attack the national government (as it was the case of the 2004 EP election in particular). This may have been related to the fact that the last general election was held just seven months before the European elec-

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tion and the national government consisting of ČSSD, ANO and KDU-ČSL was formed not earlier than in the end of January. Having been in the office just a few months, the government did not pass any controversial measures (actually hardly any at all). Therefore, there was only limited space for protest voting, which is usually seen as an important motivation for voting in so-called second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that according to an opinion poll conducted just before the election, the EP election was perceived as ‘meaningless’ by 50% of voters (Česká televize, 2014). Moreover, the presence of European issues in the campaign did not mean that the political parties presented complex and detailed visions of the European integration process.

ANO, a new successful populist party founded by the billionaire Andrej Babiš, the latter winner of the EP election, published a manifesto full of general valence statements best expressed by the main electoral slogan of the movement: ‘For Our Children to Have a Chance in Europe’. Similarly, the title of the ČSSD election manifesto in which the party emphasised especially social issues, was ‘Together in Europe’. In addition, the party wanted ‘to play the first fiddle in Europe’. KDU-ČSL, the old Christian democratic party, with the motto ‘We Protect the Czech Interests’, did not fall behind the other parties in this respect. Conservative TOP 09 tried to present themselves as a clearly pro-European party (a slogan ‘I am an European’ under the picture of the chairman of the party Karel Schwarzenberg clearly expresses the positive attitude of the party towards the EU) and persuaded the voters about the importance of the EU with the slogan ‘Don’t give up on Europe’. What got substantial media attention (even abroad) was the anti-immigration campaign ran by The Dawn of Direct Democracy, a populist political party chaired by a Czech Japanese businessman, Tomio Okamura. The party ‘borrowed’ a well-known sheep poster first used by the Swiss People’s Party. The Eurosceptic camp included liberal-conservative ODS and The Free. The main issue of the ODS campaign was the rejection of the entrance of the Czech Republic to the European Monetary Union. The party organised a petition against the euro during the campaign and managed to collect more than 40,000 signatures. The campaign of the libertarian Free party was also based on criticism of—in their words ‘Euro-nonsenses’ including not only the euro but also, for example, the regulation of bulbs or flushing of toilets; KSČM, usually labeled as a Eurosceptic party (Kopecký, 2004; Havlík, 2011), did not invest much effort and money into the campaign and relied on its usually very disciplined voters (Linek, 2006). All in all, the campaign preceding the election was hardly visible, lacking any contentious issues.

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Table 1. Results of the 2014 EP elections – the Czech Republic

Party	EP Group	Votes (%)	Seats	Votes (change from 2009)	Seats (change from 2009)
ANO 2011 (ANO)	ALDE	16.1	4	+16.1	+4
Coalition of TOP 09 and Mayors (TOP 09)	EPP	16	4	+16.0	+4
Czech Social Democratic Party (SSD)	S&D	14.2	4	-8.2	-3
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KS M)	GUE-N-GL	11	3	-3.2	-1
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU- SL)	EPP	10	3	+2.3	+1
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	ECR	7.7	2	-23.8	-7
Party of Free Citizens (The Free)		5.2	1	+3.9	+1
Tomio Okamura’s Dawn of Direct Democracy (The Dawn)	EFDD	3.1	0	+3.1	0
Others		16.7	0		
Total		100	21		-1
Turnout (%)		18.2		-10.1	
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)		5%			

EP group abbreviations: EPP, European People’s Party; S&D, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats; ALDE, Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe; G-EFA, The Greens–European Free Alliance; ECR, European Conservatives and Reformists; GUE-NGL, European United Left–Nordic Green Left; EFDD, Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy; NI, Non-Inscribers.

The results

The low intensity of the campaign and its unusually high level of Europeanisation may have been the main reasons for the lowest turnout in the history of the EP elections in the Czech Republic. The turnout record of 18.2% was more than 10 percentage points lower than that in 2009, which made the Czech Republic the country with the second lowest electoral turnout amongst all member states (see Table 1; for a detailed comparison with the 2009 EP election, see Hloušek and Kaniok, 2009).

The election brought a narrow victory for ANO with Pavel Telička, a former member of the EU Commission, on the top of the party list. TOP 09, led by a former vice governor of the Czech National Bank, Luděk Niedermayer, ended as the runner-up. Having taken into consideration the traditionally low discipline of social democratic voters, 14.2% of votes (and four seats) can be interpreted as a success for ČSSD led by a sociologist, Jan Keller. KSČM, with MP Kateřina Konečná as the leader of the party list, ended on the fourth place, closely followed by KDU-ČSL. Both the parties will be represented by three MEPs. Only 7.7% of voters cast their votes for ODS led by MEP Jan Zahradil, which meant a decrease of support of the party by more than 20 percentage points since the 2009 EP election. The Free, with 5.2% of votes and one seat for the leader of the party, Petr Mach, was the last political party that managed to pass the threshold. The Dawn did not win any seat in the EP and ended with 3.1% of votes.

Interpretation

The low electoral turnout made any substantial interpretation of the results hardly possible. Nevertheless, several subtle comments can be made. The result of just a little bit more than 16% of votes showed that the populist ANO was able to mobilise voters even after it entered the government. On the other hand, the result was disappointing for ANO, which was predicted to win up to 30% of votes. The pro-European campaign of TOP 09 may have played an important role in the success of the party, which may have been attractive to the mostly pro-European right-centre voters who did not agree with the Eurosceptic attitudes of ODS. Nevertheless, one should mention that the success of TOP 09 was probably also driven by the candidacy of Jiří Pospíšil, a former ODS minister of justice who joined TOP 09 just few months before the election. With more than 77,000 of preferential votes, Pospíšil became the most successful candidate in this respect. Almost 10% of votes and three seats for KDU-ČSL seem to be a big victory for the Christian Democrats. However, taking into account the level of turnout and traditionally high discipline of the KDU-ČSL voters, the result of the party could have been even better. After the fall of the cabinet led by the former chairman of ODS Petr Nečas in 2013, which was caused by Nečas's and his wife's corruption allegation, and after a huge slump of popularity of the party, almost 8% of votes for ODS signals that the party still has a small but stable electoral base. On the other hand, the success of the Free, who present themselves not only as a Eurosceptic party but also a subject "purifying" the right side of the Czech political space, limited the electoral renaissance of ODS. The success of the Free may be seen as another piece of puzzle of the undergoing transformation of the right-centre part of political space in the Czech Re-

public. The worst result of KSČM since the 2004 EP election means that even the communists should not take their electoral support for granted.

Conclusion

The lowest electoral turnout since 2004 was perhaps the most important part of the story of the 2014 election in the Czech Republic. The lack of additional stimulus to vote with the newly formed government limiting the possibility to cast protest votes and an almost invisible campaign full of valence “European” statements issued by almost all political parties were probably the most important reasons for the fact that less than one fifth of voters finally participated in the election. Therefore, one can make only a few basic observations concerning the results of political parties: the populist ANO was able to mobilise voters even after it entered the government, and ODS retained some ‘hard-core’ voters. ČSSD, usually having problems to mobilise voters in the EP elections, recorded an average result. A significant share of voters decided to vote for a more pro-European right-centre party (TOP 09) and also for a purifying right-centre Eurosceptic alternative (The Free). KSČM was not able to attract as many voters as it had in the past, and KDU-ČSL did not use the potential of a disciplined voter base.

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