

Czech Republic: No country for old parties

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INTRODUCTION

Three contextual factors are important for understanding the results of the election in the Czech Republic. The party system has changed dramatically in the last decade, revealing the unprecedented decline of the old political parties and the emergence of different anti-establishment challengers after a series of corruption scandals, government instability coupled with the Great Recession (Balík and Hloušek, 2016). The EP election took place in times of exceptional economic prosperity. The Czech Republic has experienced a record increase in salaries and has been enjoying the lowest level of unemployment among the EU member states. Last but not least, the public has been characterised by a very low level of trust in the European Union, making Czechs one of the most Eurosceptic nations in the EU. The most important message of the election is confirmation of the dominance of the new political parties and the continued decline of the established political parties.

ELECTION CAMPAIGN

According to the polls, up to nine different political parties and electoral coalitions seemed to have a good chance of crossing the threshold, reflecting the increased level of party system fragmentation.

Various anti-establishment political parties (none of which had parliamentary representation before the 2013 national election) were predicted to be successful in the election: the technocratic populist ANO led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, the Czech Pirate Party, and the populist radical right Freedom and Direct Democracy. Not surprisingly, the support of the once stable established parties including the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia – KSCM (running under the label of the electoral coalition the United Czech Left), right-wing conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the centrist Christian Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU – ČSL) remained far below their electoral performance of the past. Also, the polls indicated possible success of the centrist liberal electoral coalition Allie for Europe formed by TOP 09 and Mayors and Independents (STAN).

Generally speaking, several intertwined issues dominated the electoral campaign which was far less visible than usual due to the limited effort (and limited financial investments) of political parties. Although the intensity of the refugee crisis did not reach the level of previous years (and the number of asylum-seekers and/or immigrant from non-European countries is very low in the Czech Republic), the issue strongly resonated in the campaign.

Rejection of immigration framed mostly as a potentially serious security and cultural threat for the Czech Republic was the dominant issue for the radical right SPD. The party also presented itself as part of the radical right Eurosceptic group Europe of Freedom and Democracy. The anti-immigration attitude of ANO was less nationalist but more nationalist and protectionist claiming the party to have succeeded in protection of the Czech Republic from immigration (e.g. by voting against the quotas that became a symbol of the discussion on immigration in the context of the EU). Not surprisingly, the EU and the European elites (alongside the “liberal”, “multi-culturalist”, “Prague café” and NGOs in the Czech Republic) were blamed for the immigration crisis.

The strong criticism of the EU, usually depicted as an external actor for the Czech Republic (and to a lesser extent the appraisal of the European integration), prevented the EP election from being labelled as a pure example of “second order national elections”. While the SPD called for Czexit, ANO and ODS stressed the need to defend Czech national interests by reinforcing the position of the member states in the institutional structure of the EU. The position of ANO towards the EU was symbolised by a red baseball cap with the slogan “strong Czechia” worn by Babiš and apparently copied from Donald Trump.

ODS abided by its long-term Euroscepticism, rejecting federalism on the EU level and proposing a multi-speed model of European integration. The notion of the national interest was also common for moderately pro-European political parties such as the Christian Democrats or ČSSD. One of the European issues that resonated in this context was the need to guarantee the same quality of products sold in the old and new members. Milka chocolate, Coca-Cola or detergents became symbols of the discussion. Clearly pro-European parties such as the Allies for Europe or the Pirates were the exception, stressing the inevitability of the Czech membership in the EU and the strategic and economic advantages of it.

Last but not least, national politics became an important part of the campaign reflecting the change in party politics related to the success of the populist parties in general and the formation of the government led by Babiš’s ANO in particular. To put it into the context, Babiš – sometimes called the Czech Berlusconi or Czech Trump – is one of the richest businessmen in the Czech Republic. Babiš’s agro-chemical business benefits a lot from both European and national subsidies, which places Babiš in a permanent conflict of interests (Štětka 2013). In addition, the leader of ANO owns important media outlets. On top of that, he is listed as a collaborator with the Secret Police during the communist regime, and at the time of the EP election, he was accused of EU-subsidy embezzlement.

Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the opposition parties (most visibly ODS and ČPS) presented the election as a tool to stand against Babiš's – as it was described elsewhere – “highly centralised, strongly majoritarian version of a democratic polity with little desire for either horizontal or vertical separations of power” (Havlík, 2019). On the other hand, ANO framed the EP election as another opportunity to reject the “corrupt”, “so-called democratic”, “incompetent” established political parties, also pointing to the extraordinary rise of the Czech economy under Babiš's premiership (he served as the Minister of Finance between 2013-2017).

RESULTS

The level of electoral turnout was one of the biggest questions of the elections and the crucial determinant of the electoral results with varying level of voters' identification with different political parties in the context of one of the lowest levels of public trust in EU and interest in EU-related affairs. The already-low turnout in 2004 and 2009 (in both cases 28%) reached another low in 2014: barely 18% of voters turned out (the second lowest turnout after Slovakia). Although the turnout of 28.7% in 2019 is the new record high, it can be in no way considered as good news for the legitimacy of the EU in general or for Czech MEPs in particular.

ANO got the best result, but 21% is far below its result in the last national election. This might be a consequence of the ongoing investigation of Babiš and of the lower level of party identification among ANO supporters. The greatest rise of support was recorded by the Pirates and SPD, while the result of ODS indicates that the party has undergone partial recovery after its catastrophic recent fall in electoral support. For the first time since 2004, ČSSD lost its representation in the EP, having suffered from the withdrawal of traditionally “warm” supporters, from government participation alongside ANO and from long-term internal ideological disputes between the traditionalists and the modernizers. The results obtained by traditional centre-right pro-European parties indicates the decline of their support, but also showed a way for possible future collaboration (such as the coalition of TOP 09 and STAN).

All in all, the election results seem to confirm the transformation of the Czech party system in the second decade of the 21st century. The established old political parties received only one-third of votes, the rest being cast for various political parties using populist or anti-establishment appeals and offering alternatives to the way in which politics was conducted by the old political parties. It is also clear that the vast majority of voters chose to support a political party representing some type of critical evaluation of the European integration process. On the other hand, it seems that there is little support for Czexit and voting for soft Eurosceptic parties is far more common.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult to determine the biggest winner of the election. However, it is clear that the established political parties that were the backbone of the party system since ear-

Table 1 - Results of the 2019 European Parliament elections – Czechia

PARTY	EP GROUP	VOTES (N)	VOTES (%)	SEATS	VOTES CHANGE FROM 2014 (%)	SEATS CHANGE FROM 2014
ANO 2011	ALDE	502,343	21.2	6	+5.1	+2
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	ECR	344,885	14.5	4	+6.9	+2
Czech Pirate Party (Piráti)	G-EFA	330,884	14	3	+9.2	+3
Allies for Europe (TOP 09 + STAN)	EPP	276,220	11.7	3	-4.3	-1
Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)	EFD	216,718	9.1	2	+6.0	+2
Christian and Democratic Union - Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL)	EPP	171,723	7.2	2	-2.7	-1
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM)	GUE-NGL	164,624	6.9	1	-4.0	-2
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	S&D	93,664	4		-10.2	-4
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	S&D	93,664	4		-10.2	-4
Voice (HLAS)	ALDE	56,449	2.4			
ANO, we will troll the Europarliament	Not affiliated	37,046	1.6			
Free (Svobodní)	EFD	15,492	0.7		-4.6	-1
Total		2,370,765	100	21		
Turnout (%)			28.7			
Legal threshold for obtaining MEPs (%)			5%			

ly 1990s have been losing ground. All the same, various anti-establishment actors seem to have become the most attractive option for an electorate disappointed by the performance of the old political establishment. Another possible reading of the electoral results shows that most of the votes were cast for political parties with critical attitudes towards the EU, either stressing the need to protect Czech national interests or calling for termination of the membership of the Czech Republic in the European Union. Finally, despite its increase, electoral turnout is still one of the lowest among all the member states of the EU, and there is little sign of any significant renewal of democratic processes.

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