

Czech Greens: Campaigning to Win the Argument

Article by Michal Berg

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In a challenging political landscape where the Right dominates and potential allies are in short supply, the Czech Greens have decided to go their own way. With elections around the corner, party co-chair Michal Berg explains how the Greens hope to shape the debate and shift public opinion in the longer term by standing up for Europe, women's rights, and the fight against climate change.

This interview is part of a series that we are publishing in partnership with [Le Grand Continent](#) on green parties in Europe.

Green European Journal: Czechia will have national elections in October. What is at stake?

Michal Berg: The main story is whether the current government of the populist oligarch Andrej Babiš and his political bloc will stay in power. Around this story, five opposition parties have formed coalition blocs: a conservative bloc and a liberal bloc led by the Pirates. At this moment, all three blocs have a similar chance of winning the election and are polling between 20 and 25 per cent. Whether Babiš can remain in office is 50-50. It's a very tight race. This question is dominating issues such as the climate, Covid-19, and the recovery, which should be more prominent.

Another question is if there are going to be any left-wing parties left in the parliament after the election. The Communists and Social Democrats are both polling around the threshold of 5 per cent. If they were to drop out of parliament, the Pirates would be the most left-wing force left, even though they consider themselves centrist.

What is the place of the Czech Greens in this landscape and what are their main objectives?

At first, we tried to cooperate with other parties to focus on getting rid of Babiš. However, our negotiations with the Pirates did not reach an agreement. The Greens also had talks with the Social Democrats, but they decided to take a more conservative and anti-liberal route. The more progressive Social Democrats have stepped down from their lists.

The Greens, therefore, opted to run by ourselves and concentrate on getting climate and green issues and gender equality onto the political agenda. No other parties, including the progressive ones, put women's rights and the socio-economic situation of women high on their list of priorities. Our chances of getting elected are slim so our approach is to focus on these two issues and position ourselves as the ones asking the important questions.

You've said that environmental and climate issues do not feature much in the

campaign. What is the debate like when they are discussed?

The populists especially like to use the climate as an anti-European agenda. Czech industry is very dependent on car manufacturing and many people are employed in the supply chains of German car producers. So the narrative from Babiš's party is to say "don't worry, we'll protect the industry" as part of a wider culture war that includes cars, meat consumption, and Europe. Of course, that the car industry is increasingly favouring electric mobility doesn't matter to this narrative. The industry is probably more progressive than most conservative and populist politicians on this point.

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So a distant Europe becomes associated with cultural change linked to environmental policy?

The discourse is around how environmental policies are "socialist-style experiments" to force the Czechs to change against their will. It brings up the bad memories of Czechia's experience with socialism. They argue that environmental measures will make Czechs even poorer and leave people without jobs.

Some points are relevant though. For example, many Czech towns and cities have central heating systems. The current EU proposals for the expansion of the Emissions Trading System in the [Fit for 55 package](#) will increase the price of energy for these heating systems. It is important that the proposals from the European Commission do not endanger our central heating systems. But still, we're not having a proper debate about how to adjust these policies for the Czech context.

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The Czech Greens advocate environmental action as well as being pro-European. How do you manage not to get drawn into taking a side in this culture war?

We try to avoid it. A [recent study by Brno university](#) showed that people are much more willing to accept climate policies than it would appear from the media and political parties. It found that the general public is open to climate policies and debate about the climate, but that people often lack knowledge and information. So the Czech Greens are trying to position ourselves as experts who can bring the right topics to the table.

Climate policies should not be considered as a danger to our jobs but as a strategic opportunity to become a country whose economy generates more added value and that goes beyond being a supplier to Germany. Pushing the debate towards this more forward-facing narrative is a difficult fight though. Many people say that “we don’t need the Greens, the Pirates are close enough”. But the Pirates lack the expertise on climate issues and it’s not a priority for them. If one day they made it a priority, then indeed you might not need the Greens, but that’s not the case right now.

So the Pirates haven’t taken the green agenda on board?

To some extent they have, but, on the other hand, the very DNA of the Pirates is about the fight for freedom. The Pirates want to avoid restrictions and telling people what to do. Their narrative is that they do “ecology without ideology”. But ultimately, environmental policies do require some restrictions.

The Pirates have somewhat lost their subversive roots based on copyright reform and drug legalisation. Now they have positioned themselves as a catch-all party who are pro-European and liberal but also very pro-free market. For that reason, the climate issue can be problematic and they approach it differently to the Greens. The same goes for gender equality. There are policy differences too, starting with the Pirates’ support for nuclear power and their preference for basing action on personal choices.

Where do you see Czechia sitting currently in the wider European political scene? You’ve mentioned the close ties to German industry. The country’s current politics is also often associated with the other Visegrád countries (Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). Is this accurate?

Czech foreign policy has two faces. Our European policies try to align with the other Visegrád countries but, at the end of the day, Prime Minister Babiš usually agrees to everything in Brussels. Internally, Brussels is often blamed for decisions, but Czechia is not stubborn or independent like Hungary and Poland are. Looking at Europe as a whole, Czechia struggles to build strategic alliances around Europe on specific issues. It sticks to the Visegrád countries when often aligning with the Scandinavians, the Baltics, or other countries would better serve our interests.

From a Green perspective, without European pressure and a common approach to climate policies, as a country, we would do nothing. The European Greens and the Greens in the European Parliament often criticise the final proposals on matters like EU agricultural policy or the EU climate law for lacking ambition, and of course, they should. But from the position of the Czech Republic, we Czech Greens find ourselves in a difficult position where we need to defend the European policies that are being criticised by the European Greens.

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How closely do you work with Greens in neighbouring countries and across Europe?

We have quite personal contacts with the Polish Greens who are in a comparable situation to us. Historically, we have strong cooperation with the Austrian Greens, mostly on the local level. People from Brno go to Vienna, people from Prague have partners in Innsbruck. We also have good contacts with the Greens from Saxony in Germany, who operate on a similar scale. They are in regional government and the Green ministers travel to Prague quite regularly. We try to cooperate on issues like coal mines on the Czech-German border and they've also helped us with campaigning.

Whether from Green parties or the trends towards progressive urban politics in the region, do the politics of your neighbours affect Czech politics?

In all the Visegrád capitals- and now in Zagreb too - the mayors are liberal but it doesn't shape the politics of the country so much. The Czech government sometimes mimics Orbán's policies but, to be honest, the nationalistic approach doesn't go down as well in Czechia. Nor do I see too much influence from the Polish side.

We hope that the eventual success of the German Greens will help shape Czech politics. Czech and German industry are highly interconnected and so changes there will influence Czechia. The German elections are two weeks before the Czech ones and we, as the Czech Greens, want to make use of the Green rise in Germany. It can sometimes backfire when journalists compare our difficulties with their successes, but it's still a good mirror for us. Germany and Czechia are very different as societies, so it makes sense that the parties are in different places.

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Looking at global politics, how is the debate on Europe's place in the world seen from a Czech perspective?

The question of China has been prominent in recent years because the Czech Social Democrats are quite connected to China's influence in Europe. Many companies have received Chinese investment, including breweries and manufacturers. This investment came with the promise of new opportunities and markets that did not materialise, and many investments have since quietly been pulled out. The public perception is that China tried to present itself as a big player in Czechia but that it didn't deliver. However, the China issue revolves around economic interests. Meanwhile, Russia is perceived as a larger threat and a security threat rather than an economic one.

Part of the Czech political scene still has close ties to Russia, sometimes via the Social

Democrats and of course via the Communists. Pro-Russian sentiment in some circles, including around the president, remains a problem and the Czech public is one of the most influenced by Russia in the EU. This year has seen a diplomatic incident around the explosion of an ammunition depot in 2014 connected to Russian agents that led to some diplomats being expelled from the Russian embassy in Prague. The effect has been to weaken pro-Russian forces although they are still present.

Another geopolitical debate in Czechia is whether we Czechs belong to the West or the East. The Conservatives like to argue that Czechia is a Western country. But this is only meant in a tokenistic way. Western countries generally have strong democracies, strong human rights policies, marriage equality, more ambitious climate policies, and so on. But the Conservatives oppose all this. So the geopolitical debate over the East-West divide lacks real credible political content when you look at it in those terms. It's a narrative that doesn't mean much to people's daily lives.

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The Greens support more integration in the European structures because, policy by policy, it's better than our independent Czech approach. Almost everything that has been discussed on the European level would be beneficial from the position of the Greens. We are the most pro-European and federalist force in the Czech political scene, and that includes the common currency but also strengthening the power of the EU over national governments.

The Greens intend to use their platform to influence the debate around the October elections. But looking ahead, what do you see as the priorities for the Czech Greens?

These elections are important because the results will determine whether or not we will receive state financing and how stable that will be. It's really important for the capacity of the Czech Greens in the upcoming years. There will be local elections in 2022 and the Czech Greens have quite a lot of councillors and a few mayors so it's a chance to do real politics and shape things on the ground. Some members have lost motivation nationally but are much more engaged locally. We'll need to build on our active local base once the national elections are past.

The longer strategic question is whether there is a way to cooperate with the progressive Social Democrats on building a stronger leftist progressive force. Perhaps the cultural differences will make it impossible and we'll need to develop the green agenda independently, but it is a question that we'll focus on.



Michal Berg is a co-chair of Czech Greens and member of the committee of European Greens. Since 2014 he serves as a local councillor in the town of Vsetín, Czechia, where he lives with his wife and daughter. His areas of expertise are climate change, human rights, and transparency; he is also a passionate train traveller.

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