

The End of the Babiš Era? The Czech Republic Between Past and Future

Article by Adéla Jurečková
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Following the parliamentary elections in early October, many Czechs celebrated the opposition parties' victory over the business magnate and incumbent Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. However, the new centre-right governing coalition must be careful not to return to the status quo ante that helped Babiš to power eight years ago.

The Czech Republic is turning its back on the Orbán model and returning to the fold of the EU. The spirit of Václav Havel is moving through the streets of Prague again – this is how many in Czech and international media commented on the election. The parliamentary majority against the populist, whose ANO party is often critically referred to as the “political wing of Babiš company,” is undoubtedly a cause for celebration. It will no longer be possible for structures from the Babiš concern to continue to spread into the state unhindered. It seems possible that there will be a return – at least partially – to politics as a deliberation over ideas, as well as an end to sham debates. However, liberal, left-wing, and green voices are scarcely represented in the new parliament, and little progress can be expected on climate and gender issues. The new centre-right government must be careful not to return to the previous status quo that helped Babiš to power eight years ago.

People were biting their nails until the last ballots were counted – then jubilation broke out over Prague. With 27.8 per cent and a razor-thin margin of about 30,000 votes, the conservative three-party alliance Together (SPOLU) was ahead of Babiš's ANO party (27.1 per cent). This was followed by the liberal Pirate Party alliance with Mayors and Independents (PirStan) – significantly lower than earlier poll figures, but still with around 16 per cent. The right-wing populist Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) remained just below 10 per cent and thus below its own expectations as well as what many feared. The Social Democrats (ČSSD), the Communist Party (KSČM) and several small far-right parties failed to clear the 5 per cent threshold. The Czech Greens (1 per cent) also met the same fate.

A victory for civil society – and the electoral system

Babiš has long been followed by corruption scandals and conflicts of interest – according to the latest revelations in the Pandora Papers, he allegedly covered up the purchase and ownership of luxury real estate in France through tax havens. At first glance, the reasons for his ANO party's electoral defeat seem obvious. However, this impression must be balanced with the fact that Babiš's party only lost about 2 per cent of support among voters compared to the last parliamentary election in 2017. Several small parties, including potential coalition partners, failed to clear the 5-per-cent hurdle – in some cases narrowly. Barring this, both anti-Babiš alliances would hardly have achieved their comfortable

majority, and the billionaire certainly would have tried to form a coalition himself.

The opposition also would have had a difficult time winning without the Million Moments for Democracy movement. This civil society movement set the goal of ending the oligarchic government of Andrej Babiš and brought hundreds of thousands of people out onto the streets of Prague in recent years. What was likely even more crucial was that it also created a regional network, reaching out to people in smaller towns and organising rallies. It is still unclear whether the movement changed the minds of many Babiš voters, but it seems to have succeeded in mobilising his critics to vote. Five per cent more people participated in the elections than four years ago – the highest turnout since 1998. This primarily led to an increase in votes for the opposition alliances.

Whether and how quickly these alliances can now form a government depends on President Zeman. The latter now has two attempts to commission the leading candidate of the winning party to form a government. Zeman, who makes no secret of his support for Babiš, has already announced that he will not recognise these alliances as parties and thus consider Andrej Babiš the winner of the election. The very day after the election, however, the chronically ill Zeman was hospitalised – [little is known about his current condition](#). Although Babiš has already announced his willingness to follow Zeman's directive and negotiate with the SPOLU alliance, his attempt will most likely fail due to SPOLU's lack of interest.

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From oligarchy to economic liberal conservatism

Two multiparty alliances were assembled to topple Andrej Babiš: one conservative, the other more liberal. The respective vote shares of 28 and 16 per cent reveal that Czechs have opted for a more conservative way out of Babiš's oligarchic dominance. The winning Together alliance is led by the Civic Democrats (ODS) and their head Petr Fiala. A respected political science professor, Fiala brings a new, decent face to the party originally founded by Václav Klaus. The ODS nevertheless remains home to many EU and climate sceptics with a pronounced proximity to the fossil fuel industry. The second alliance partner, TOP09, is also conservative and economically liberal, but clearly more friendly towards the EU. The third party, the Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL), are also conservative. For example, party leader Marian Jurečka announced before the elections that he did not want to form a coalition with any party that supported marriage equality.

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While hardly any progressive impulses can be expected from SPOLU in terms of climate policy, gender equality or social justice, many liberal-minded voters are pinning their hopes on the alliance of the Pirate Party and the Mayors' Party (PirStan). Although they were leading the polls just a few months ago, together these parties achieved a relatively meager 16 per cent. The Pirate Party suffered a bitter loss: on the joint election list with the Mayors, many voters gave priority to the mayors by means of ranked voting. Although the Pirates were the stronger of the two parties, they only won 4 of the 37 PirStan mandates.

How could this happen? According to observers, there were two main reasons: First, the fierce disinformation and smear campaign by Andrej Babiš and some media portraying the Pirates as a symbol of the "morally degraded" and simply "crazy" West. They claimed the Pirates were drug addicts, controlled by Brussels, they wanted to take away the weekend houses and apartments of the Czechs in favour of migrants. These accusations were as absurd as they were effective: according to one poll, almost half of the Czechs believed them. On the other hand, the Pirates' alliance with the more bourgeois mayors caused them to lose their image of a young, courageous and rebellious party. Suddenly, they wanted to be a catch-all party and became less edgy to render themselves more attractive to the centre – thus alienating some of their core voters while hardly winning any new ones.

The Pirate Party's failure is bad news for the climate and for liberal, progressive politics. Among the five parties now seeking to form a government, they were the only clear advocates of these issues. The centrist mayors may not block climate policy concerns or, for example, marriage equality, but they probably will not push them strongly either. The Pirates can get little done with only four deputies. As a result, there are calls within the party for the resignation of chairman Ivan Bartoš and even for the party to retreat into the opposition.

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The end of an era

For the first time since its founding in 1921, the Communist Party (KSČM) is not represented in the Chamber of Deputies. Whether it was doomed by its support for the minority government of Babiš and the Social Democrats, or by its inability to appeal to younger voters, its departure is for many a symbol of a completed transformation of the Czech Republic toward a Western democracy. It remains to be seen whether this "end of an era"

also heralds the end of a phenomenon that has been observed in the Czech politics since the 1990s. Critics often deliberately label welfare state measures, climate protection regulations and idea-based progressive politics as “communism” or “neo-Marxism” in an effort to defame them. This label still carries extreme connotations in Czech Republic. Instead of tackling today’s challenges rationally and decisively, the ghosts of yesterday are deliberately evoked and instrumentalised. Now the few remaining old-school communists are gone – perhaps creating the space to deal more with problems that have to do with today’s Czech reality and that cannot be so easily blamed on “communism” from now on.

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The Social Democrats were punished for their opportunism, internal disunity, and joint governance with Andrej Babiš and did not break the 5 per cent threshold. Now they must reflect on the reasons for this outcome and come to terms with this defeat. Hopefully they return, because a renewed democratic Left to the Czech political stage is highly desirable and necessary. No one else will honestly represent the real interests of people who are worse off in real terms or threatened with downward mobility, even if Babiš’s ANO and the right-wing populists will probably do everything they can to style themselves as allies of these people with bogus populist arguments.

The Czech Greens, too, must now reflect on why they were only able to win over about 1 per cent of Czech voters for several consecutive parliamentary elections. This time, many young, urban and progressive-minded Czech voters turned to the Pirate Party, which is programmatically closest to the Greens and had a much better chance of success. On the other hand, the rise of the Pirates shows that there is also ample potential for a party like the Greens in the Czech Republic, provided they find a language that appeals to people outside their core constituency and manage to forge broader social alliances. Global warming is still somewhat lower on the priority list of political issues in the Czech Republic – but that could change quite a bit in the next four years.

No “business as usual”

Two days after the election, even before the two-party alliances could meet at the negotiating table, industry representatives were already addressing them with a peculiar demand: stop the “green madness!” They claimed the Czech economy to be threatened by the EU’s Fit for 55 package of climate and energy efficient laws. Particularly, they fear the early demise of the internal combustion engine. In addition, employers wanted even more “flexibility” in dealing with their workers.

The new government must resist the temptation to thoughtlessly heed such calls from the business community. It should free the Czech Republic from the oligarchic grip of recent years and lead it toward a future that more sustainable and socially just, not back to the coal-scented past ruled with the strict, supposed hand of the market. If the new government has little regard for climate and social inequalities, civil society will remind it – uncomfortably and vociferously if necessary. Any new government would do well to listen:

it was no coincidence that Andrej Babiš's party won more than 18 per cent of the vote in 2013 but precisely a phase of disenchantment following a series of centre-right governments. He could attempt a comeback in four years at the latest – or even as early as 2023 in the presidential election.

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