

European  
Elections monitor

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ANALYSIS

# ANO, the party of outgoing Prime Minister Andrej Babis, favourite in the Czech parliamentary elections, may not be able to form a government coalition

On 28 December 2020, and unusually early, the President of the Czech Republic, Milos Zeman (Citizens' Rights Party, SPOZ), announced that the next general elections: will be held on 8 and 9 October 2021. And so the electoral campaign started very early, ten months before the vote. 7,533 candidates, of whom more than 30% are women, from 31 parties and political groupings are participating in the election.

The Czech Republic is led by a government that includes ANO, (whose acronym means both "yes" and "action of dissatisfied citizens"), the party of the outgoing Prime Minister Andrej Babis, and the Social Democratic Party (CSSD). This coalition, supported in parliament by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), has faced 3 motions of censure since it came to power, none of which have been successful. The last one was in June this year; the government won the support of the two parties that make it up, and the communists did not vote, thus expressing their support for the Prime Minister.

According to the latest opinion poll conducted by the Phoenix Institute between 1 and 10 September, ANO is due to take the lead with 25.4% of the vote. The party is due to be followed by the *Spolu* coalition (which means *Together*, and comprises the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Christian Democratic Union-People's Party (KDU-CSL) and Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity 09 (TOP 09)), which is forecast to win 17.1% of the vote, and the *Pirati a Starostove* (Pirates and Mayors) coalition, which includes the Pirate Party (CSP) and Mayors and Independents (STAN), which is forecast to win 15.6%. Next in line is Freedom and

Direct Democracy (SPD), a right-wing populist party led by Tomio Okamura, with 11.5%, and the Social Democratic Party with 6%. ANO's governmental partner is dangerously close to the 5% electoral threshold, necessary to secure seats in parliament. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is only due to win 3.3% of the vote and possibly might not be represented in the Chamber of Deputies.

The *Pirati a Starostove* coalition was ahead of ANO in the spring polls between mid-March and mid-June. However, ANO regained the lead. "*ANO was at low ebb during the pandemic as people tired of the restrictions and the government's mismanagement of the situation*" declared Otto Eibl, professor of political science at Masaryk University in Brno. The coronavirus has killed more than 30,400 people in the Czech Republic, which has a population of 10.7 million.

According to a poll conducted by the Median agency in August for Czech Radio, two thirds of voters (65%) intend to go to the polls on 8 and 9 October. People over 60 years of age, residents of Prague and the country's major cities are among the most motivated to participate. "*ANO will win the legislative elections: the polls have been stable for a long time and show that ANO is ahead of the two coalitions formed by the opposition. However, even if the outgoing Prime Minister's movement wins the elections, it will not be able to form a government alone. It will have to find allies and form a coalition*", declared Jiri Pehe, director of the University of New York in Prague. "*The popularity of the ANO movement was at its lowest*

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*during the deepest crisis of Covid-19. I believe that only a further lockdown or closure of schools could possibly lower ANO's rating again before the election, but it is unlikely," he added.*

ANO and Freedom and Direct Democracy have announced that they will not govern with the Pirate Party. The Pirati a Starostove and Spolu coalitions reject any alliance with ANO, Freedom and Direct Democracy and the Communist Party, although Spolu might agree to negotiate with ANO but without Andrej Babis.

According to the Median survey, access to quality health care, independence of the judiciary and access to education for all are the most important issues for Czech voters.

#### 4 YEARS OF ANO-CSSD GOVERNMENT

ANO has a stable electorate, including many of the over 55's. It has managed to attract some social democratic voters, notably through its generous social policy towards pensioners and the poor. Although ANO is expected to come out ahead on 8 and 9 October, the party will need to find allies to govern, which may prove difficult.

Recently, ANO won the European elections on 24 and 25 May 2019. It also came first in the last regional elections on 2-3 October 2020, although the Pirate Party made gains. However, while it came first in 10 of the 13 regions, receiving more votes than in the previous elections of the same type on 7 and 8 October 2016, ANO ultimately won only 3 regional presidencies.

*"You want to overthrow a government that has increased pensions and salaries and lowered taxes, that has improved the standard of living of Czechs, that thinks about families and consumers, a government that has finally started investing and protecting the interests of the Czech Republic?" repeats Andrej Babis. He promises to increase pensions again so that by 2025 the average pension will reach 20,000 Czech crowns (€790). "I have already said that the Czech Republic is a sovereign state and only we can decide who can work and live there. I do not want a Muslim Europe. We don't want a multicultural, ecofanatical*

*pirate state in the Czech Republic," says the outgoing head of government who does not hesitate to resort to populist themes. He has called the Pirates "pro-migration activists", adding, "they are not politicians, but activists who want to subvert the Czech Republic."*

Without being anti-European, Andrej Babis says he rejects the euro and wants to keep the crown. The European Commission has called on both Prague and Warsaw to answer to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) for restrictions on EU citizens who wish to participate in domestic politics. While they can stand in local or European elections, they can only do so as independent candidates, which under a proportional system leaves them with almost no chance of being elected. *"We are a sovereign country, and the European Parliament is trying to influence our parliamentary elections. And of course, the initiative comes from the Czech opposition,"* answered Babis.

Protecting the free health care system is the priority of the Social Democratic Party (CSSD), ANO's partner in the outgoing government. The CSSD wants to improve access to healthcare in rural areas and reduce the number of health insurance companies. Finally, it wants Prague to increase its spending on health, which currently accounts for 7.8% of its GDP.

The Communist Party (KSCM), led by Vojtech Filip, wants the Czech Republic to leave NATO and establish better relations with China and Russia. Finally, the Communists support the organisation of a referendum on the Czech Republic's membership of the European Union, as do Freedom and Direct Democracy.

#### WHAT DOES THE OPPOSITION LOOK LIKE?

The Czech opposition has one priority: to remove Andrej Babis. To do this (and also because of the change in the electoral threshold), the parties are pooling their forces. Several coalitions have been formed for the elections.

- **Pirati a Starostove (PaS)** comprises an alliance that *"can reasonably envisage threatening the supremacy of ANO"* according to Lubomir Kopecek, professor of

political science at Masaryk University in Brno. The programme of this liberal coalition (even though the Pirate Party is difficult to classify along political lines) includes tax reduction, better access to health services in the regions, climate protection, transparent governance, greater care for public finances, modernisation and digitalisation of the country.

- **The Spolu** is: a "*liberal and conservative centre-right alliance*" in the words of TOP09 leader Marketa Adamova, with the slogan "*We will unite the Czech Republic*". Petr Fiala (ODS) is the candidate of this coalition for the post of Prime Minister. The electoral agreement that the three partners sealed on 27 October provides for the ODS to lead the electoral lists in 9 constituencies, the KDU-CSL in 3 and TOP 09 in 2. *Spolu* promises tax reform, simplification of the social, pension and health systems. The coalition wants to introduce a minimum pension and reduce the public debt but does not plan to raise taxes.

- Finally, **Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)**, says it is ready to negotiate with any party willing to implement parts of his programme, including the referendum law. As its name suggests, the party wants to make greater use of direct democracy.

## THE CZECH POLITICAL SYSTEM

The Czech Parliament is bicameral and comprises the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. The latter has 200 deputies elected for 4 years by multi-mandate voting in 14 constituencies (the 13 regions of the country and Prague) in which the distribution of votes was previously carried out according to the d'Hondt method. But this year the method of calculation has been changed so that the distribution of seats is better balanced between parties.

Each party has until now had to obtain a minimum of 5% of the votes cast at the national level (10% for coalitions of 2 parties, 15% for coalitions of 3 parties and 20% for coalitions of 4 or more parties) to be represented in the lower house of parliament. Lists of independent candidates had to obtain a minimum of 5% of the preferential votes in the constituency

in which they were running. This year, the electoral threshold for coalitions of 2 parties was set at 8% of the vote and that for alliances of 3 or more parties at 11%. Candidates must be at least 21 years old.

Voting in the Czech Republic takes place over two days (Friday and Saturday morning). During the night the ballot boxes remain inside the polling stations, which are usually located in public buildings, but sometimes also in private buildings such as hostels in some villages. No election result has ever been contested since Czechoslovakia (as the country was then called) returned to democracy.

The Czech Senate has 81 members elected for a six-year term by a two-round first-past-the-post system, with one-third of the members eligible for re-election every two years. The choice of this voting system reflects the will of the authors of the Constitution, and in particular that of the former President of the Republic (1993-2003), Vaclav Havel, to facilitate the election of independent personalities who are well established within the constituencies.

Finally, the Czechs elect their President of the Republic by universal suffrage. Milos Zeman (Citizens' Rights Party, SPOZ) was re-elected to this position on 27 January 2018. With 51.37% of the vote, he defeated Jiri Drahos (independent), who obtained 48.63% of the votes in the second round of voting. The turnout was 66.6%.

9 political parties won seats in the Chamber of Deputies in the parliamentary elections of 20 and 21 October 2017:

- ANO, a populist party founded in 2012 by Andrej Babis, outgoing Prime Minister, 2nd richest man in the country and owner of the Agrofert conglomerate and the Mafra media group. It has 78 MPs;
- The Civic Democratic Party (ODS), a right-wing Eurosceptic party created in 1991 and led by Petr Fiala, has 25 seats;
- The Pirate Party (CSP), founded in 2009 and part of the international pirate movement. Led by Ivan Bartos, it has 22 seats;

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- Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a right-wing populist party founded in 2015 and led by Tomio Okamura, has 22 seats;
- The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), founded in 1989, the last unreformed communist party in Central Europe. Led by Vojtech Filip, it has 15 seats;
- The Social Democratic Party (CSSD), founded in 1878, chaired by Jan Hamacek and member of the outgoing government coalition. It has 15 seats;
- The Christian Democratic Union-People's Party (KDU-CSL), a centrist party founded in 1919 and led by Marian Jurecka, has 10 seats;
- Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity 09 (TOP 09), a centre-right party founded in 2009 and chaired by Marketa Pekarova Adamova, has 7 seats;
- Mayors and Independents (STAN), a party that defends local interests and supports decentralisation. Founded in 2004, led by Vit Rakusan, it has 6 seats.

### Reminder of the results of the parliamentary elections 20-21 October 2017 in the Czech Republic

Turnout : 60,84%

Political Parties	Number of votes won	Percentage of votes cast	Number of seats
<b>ANO</b>	1 500 113	29,64	78
<b>Civic Democratic Party (ODS)</b>	572 962	11,32	25
<b>Pirate Party (CSP)</b>	546 393	10,79	22
<b>Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD)</b>	538 574	10,64	22
<b>Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM)</b>	393 100	7,76	15
<b>Social Democratic Party (CSSD)</b>	368 347	7,27	15
<b>Christian Democratic Union-People's Party (KDU-CSL)</b>	293 643	5,80	10
<b>Tradition, Responsibility Prosperity 09 (TOP 09)</b>	268 811	5,31	7
<b>Mayors and Independents (STAN)</b>	262 157	5,18	6
<b>Free Citizens Party (Svobodni)</b>	79 229	1,56	0
<b>Green Party (Z)</b>	74 335	1,46	0
<b>Others</b>	163 095	3,24	0

Source : <https://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2017/ps2?xjazyk=CZ>

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