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Babiš it's you: where now for the Czech Republic?

Anne Seyfferth reports on the fall of the social democrats in the Czech Republic – and the man of the moment, anti-establishment billionaire Andrej Babiš

Billionaire Andrej Babiš – the man the media likes to call the Czech Trump – and his ANO movement have won the legislative election in the Czech Republic by a clear margin. The ruling social democratic party, the ČSSD, suffered its worst ever result. How did it happen, and what are the implications for both the country and the European Union?

In last weekend's vote, Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka's social democratic ČSSD party was unseated as the strongest force in the Czech Chamber of Deputies. The party was originally expected to come second, but it has tumbled to sixth place – the first time it has finished behind the communist KSČM party and the radical right-wing SPD, which has entered parliament for the first time with a surprising 10.6 per cent of votes.

The Czech social democrats are, in many ways, old-fashioned and have long been falling out of favour in the capital, Prague. They have shied away from debating many topical domestic issues, such as how to shape globalisation and digitalisation, and what strategies to adopt for a climate and environment policy fit for the world we live in today. There are very few women in the party's top ranks, and no young people. With its regional branches continuing to be plagued by corrupt clientelism, its old boys' club and its campaign slogan – 'The Czech Republic, a good place to live' – neither the urban, progressive middle class nor younger voters see the party as a viable alternative.

And then there are the party's internal disputes. After Sobotka resigned as leader and top candidate in June because of falling approval ratings, acting leader and Interior Minister Milan Chovanec initiated a constitutional amendment in response to the tightened EU Firearms Directive – an amendment that granted citizens with a firearms licence the right to use their weapon in the event of a 'threat to national security'.

Chovanec is a hardliner when it comes to migration policy, too, and many progressives cannot bring themselves to vote for him, even though increasing the minimum wage and bringing wages in line with the West were at the heart of Sobotka's and new top candidate Lubomír Zaorálek's campaign.

The media refer to Andrej Babiš as Babisconi, in reference to the former Italian prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. They also call him the Czech Trump. Like Trump and Berlusconi, Babiš is a successful entrepreneur and billionaire, but he is more serious and relatively softly spoken. He doesn't really fit into the traditional left-right spectrum. He has no established ideology, but he is a pragmatist attuned to the needs of voters. That's what his promises are based on.

As prime minister-elect, he is seeking to run the country like a business: efficiently and as a facilitator. He has made clear his desire to abolish the Senate and significantly reduce the size of the Chamber of Deputies.

What is both interesting and alarming is how he has managed to present himself as not only a critic but also a victim of a corrupt and incompetent political establishment, which he has accused of lying and has pledged to tackle – despite allegations against him of tax fraud and abuse of EU funds.

The policies he has announced – coupled with the high concentration of power in politics, business and the media – could lead to a strongly interest-led policy. There are fears of an authoritarian style of politics and a dismantling of democracy, which would see the Czech Republic steering a similarly illiberal course to that of Poland and Hungary. While immediately after the elections, Babiš stated that he was not opposed to the European project, he is against introducing the euro and closer EU integration.

For a number of reasons, forming a coalition will be no mean feat – not least the fact that there are 16 different coalitions possible. All parties, except the communists and the far right, ruled out a coalition with Babiš for as long as he was under investigation for misuse of EU funds, something they confirmed on the evening of the election.

The current coalition between ČSSD, ANO and KDU-ČSL could remain in power, but with 103 seats, it would have a relatively slim majority. On election night, both the social democrats and Christian democrats announced that they would form the opposition, given their sharp decline in vote share. A four-way coalition between three parties plus the Party of Mayors and Independents (STAN), the smallest faction,

is also unlikely. A coalition between ANO and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) alone would be an option, but this was ruled out by ODS leader Petr Fiala. Several coalitions would be possible with the Czech Pirate Party, which received more than 10 per cent of the vote share, though they have said they want to remain in opposition.

There is still the option of a coalition between ANO and the SPD, but that would require tolerance from the communists. In any case, Babiš asserted on the evening of the election that he did not want to pursue an anti-EU policy. What policy can we expect from a future Czech government with regard to Europe?

That depends on what the future government consists of. All the parties that did well at the polls (ANO, ODS and SPD) are either completely opposed to or critical of the EU. The SPD would like to change the constitution to allow a referendum on leaving the EU, while ANO and the ODS are both against joining the euro and further EU integration.

The social democrats' policy on Europe will depend on the party's leader. Zaorálek, for instance, is very pro-Europe, but the party is likely to form part of the opposition. The same goes for the pro-European TOP 09 and the Christian democrats.

As prime minister, Sobotka learned to build bridges with his colleagues in the Visegrád Group of four Central European states, as well as with Berlin, Paris and Brussels. We certainly won't have a politician like him leading the Czech Republic again – and, unlike its sibling Slovakia, the country will have no ambition to play a significant role in Central Europe.



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