DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 14.10.2021 | Urban Überschär

After Czechia's vote, it all comes down to the president

Andrej Babiš's right-wing populist ANO party lost ground in the Czech elections. But Babiš may still have an ace up his sleeve: President Miloš Zeman

Czechia has voted. On 9 and 10 October, its 8.4 million citizens were asked to vote on the future composition of the parliament. The results led to some surprises, but also disappointments.

For one, there is the strong performance of the conservative opposition electoral alliance SPOLU consisting of ODS (Civic Democrats), KDU-ČSL (Christian Democrats) and TOP 09 (Conservatives), which achieved 27.8 per cent of the votes and thus emerged as the winner of the elections. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's right-wing populist party ANO, in contrast, received only 27.1 per cent and came in a close second.

The election also ended rather disappointingly for the second electoral alliance of the Pirate Party and STAN (the party of mayors). After polling highly in the run-up to the election, they only achieved a meagre 15.6 per cent. The Pirates, which had long been considered an up-and-coming and progressive force, suffered particularly heavy losses. After 22 mandates in the 2017 election, they were able to win a mere four mandates this election.

The Social Democrats (ČSSD) and the Communists (KSČM), both which were part of the previous government, even failed to clear the five-per cent hurdle with 4.6 per cent and 3.6 per cent, respectively. For both parties, this marks a historic turning point: it's the first time since the existence of Czechia that these parties are no longer represented in parliament. It is also worth mentioning that the far-right party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) made it into parliament as the fourth force with 9.6 per cent of the vote.

The next Czech government

SPOLU and Pirates/STAN announced on Saturday evening that they would hold talks on forming a coalition exclusively with each other. Together, the two have a majority in parliament, with 108 of 200 seats. The two lead candidates – Petr Fiala for SPOLU and Ivan Bartoš for Pirates/STAN – also categorically ruled out a cooperation with Andrej Babiš during the election campaign. Against this background, one might assume that the formation of a new government in Prague could succeed relatively quickly, especially since both alliances agree on many issues.

It's an open secret in Czechia that President Zeman is pursuing his own political agenda.

But then there's the Czech President, Miloš Zeman. In Czechia, unlike in Germany, for example, the president plays an important role in elections, since he gives the formal mandate to form a new government. And this is where things get interesting.

On several occasions in the past, Zeman has publicly announced that he will only accept Babiš as the old and new prime minister and entrust him with the task of forming a government. His argument is that he will give the mandate only to the candidate of the strongest single party. And this is not completely baseless. In purely arithmetical terms, ANO as a single party has achieved the most votes, because the SPOLU electoral alliance consists of three parties and its possible coalition partner is made up of two parties.

In any case, it's an open secret in Czechia that President Zeman is pursuing his own political agenda here and that his special relationship with Babiš for some time will have a significant impact on the decision who will be the next Czech prime minister. As if this did not complicate the situation enough, it is now exacerbated by the president's health.

The 77-year-old Zeman has been in poor health for some time already. In September, shortly before the election, he had to be hospitalised for several days in a Prague hospital. The day after the elections, his condition worsened to such an extent that he was again taken to the hospital, where he is now receiving intensive medical care. It is therefore questionable whether he will be able to perform his official duties at all in the foreseeable future. If the president were to be unable to perform his duties, his powers would pass to the Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Where is Czech society heading?

For starters, the political discourse has clearly shifted further to the right. With the failure of the ČSSD and the Communists to clear the five-per cent hurdle, no left-wing party is represented in the Czech parliament anymore. The leader of the ČSSD and former Minister of the Interior, Jan Hamáček, has already announced his resignation in response to the electoral debacle, and the entire leadership of the Communist Party resigned over the weekend. A reshuffle in terms of content and personnel has thus become inevitable for both parties.

In the election campaign itself, the tone of debate has recently been quite aggressive. A debate on substance rarely took place, and when topics were discussed, they tended to have negative connotations. Babiš, for example, repeatedly warned of an alleged threat of illegal migration to Czechia and staged himself as the protector of Czech interests vis-à-vis Europe: 'Against the Brussels climate dictate'. SPOLU and Pirates/STAN, in turn, distanced themselves from Babiš's policies and also repeatedly referred to the prime minister's personal conflicts of interest and misconduct. Only recently, in the wake of the Pandora Papers, further details of possible offshore dealings of the ANO candidate had been uncovered.

SPOLU's top candidate, Petr Fiala, currently has the best prospects of becoming prime minister.

On Tuesday after the election, it became known that SPOLU and Pirates/STAN had already begun initial coalition talks even without the formal mandate of the president. Such a five-party government would presumably take a very strongly neoliberal course on economic issues. For instance, it could threaten further privatisations and job cuts in the public administration. During the election campaign, ODS in particular clearly committed itself to reducing public debt, but at the same time categorically ruled out tax increases.

It would be interesting to see how the Pirates, who can still be considered progressive and to some extent left-wing, would behave in such a coalition. Against the backdrop of widening social disparities in Czechia, society is at a risk of increasing polarisation under a five-party government that seeks to further push back the power of the state. In this context, it is also important to note that approximately one million citizens are not represented in Parliament because their votes went to parties failing to clear the five-percent hurdle.

SPOLU's top candidate, Petr Fiala, currently has the best prospects of becoming prime minister. However, this will only be the case if he receives the mandate from the president to form a government. Should Zeman decide otherwise and appoint Babiš, the negotiations could become much more difficult. Possibly, Babiš could renounce the office of prime minister in favour of another ANO leader – the former finance minister Alena Schillerová has repeatedly been mentioned here.

This could make coalition negotiations with SPOLU possible after all, and Babiš could in turn try to become president next year. He has long been said to have ambitions for Czechia's highest office, and the incumbent president will not be able to run again because he has already been re-elected once. In any case, President Zeman's actions in the coming days and weeks will be decisive.



Urban Überschär
Prague

Urban Überschär has been the director of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Prague since 2020. Previously, he headed the foundation's regional office in Lower Saxony.