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Czechia first, Ukraine second

Mass protests against the Russia sanctions in Prague have shocked Europe. While it is worrying, there are several reasons not to lose one's head

On Saturday, 3 September 70,000 people gathered in the centre of Prague to protest against the Czech government and its policies. Upper half of the huge Wenceslas square was filled with people carrying Czech flags.

The demonstration had been co-organised by an unholy coalition of several fringe left and right parties, including the Communist party and anti-immigrant Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). They demanded, among other things, to stop supplying Ukraine with arms and sanctioning Russia, and for the start of negotiations for the supply of cheap Russian gas. Some even called to exit the EU and NATO.

The gathering, arguably the biggest of its kind in Europe, sent a wave of anxiety across the continent. Has the Western solidarity fractured? Will the Czech Republic turn into another weak link like Orban's Hungary?

The answer is, most likely, no.

Such a big gathering demanding from the government to cease supporting Ukraine is certainly worrying, but there are several reasons not to lose one's head.

Protesting economic hardship

Firstly, the Czech Republic has a mature civil society and a strong tradition of peaceful protests. The Velvet Revolution of 1989 culminated in a 800,000-strong anti-government meeting. Since then, Czechs of all political views regularly go to the streets to protest against governmental actions. The demonstration of 3 September was quite big, but by no means the biggest in recent years. For instance, in 2018-2019, the opposition to then prime-minister Andrej Babiš organised a series of demonstrations with 100,000-250,000 participants each. There is

nothing extraordinary about the last anti-government demonstration, except that it happened in extraordinary times.

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Secondly, though the organisers of the gathering can be called pro-Russian, many of the people who went to Wenceslas square don't care about Russia or Ukraine. Instead, they went to vent out their frustration about their financial grievances. The government was late to react to the gas supply crisis and, by some estimates, the energy prices in the Czech Republic are currently the highest in Europe. In August, electricity bills for some households reportedly increased 4- and even 6-fold. People are predictably unhappy and demand from the government to do something to put the prices under control. In the last weeks, the government finally started to address the problem in earnest, so there's hope that these people will have fewer reasons to be angry.

But even if the situation won't improve, it doesn't mean that the political course of the Czech Republic will change.

The third reason not to be excessively worried is that the current governing conservative-liberal coalition is staunchly anti-Putin and pro-Ukrainian and had been so even before the start of the war. The stand against Russian neo-Imperialism is a principal position of every party in the government and always has been. The coalition has a secure majority in the Parliament, the next general election is in the autumn of 2025, so at least in the next 3 years we shouldn't expect any changes in the Czech foreign policy orientation.

Finally, even if something extraordinary happens and a snap election is called, the fringe left-right pro-Putin coalition won't get much out of it. According to the latest opinion polls, if elections were held now, only one of the fringe left and right parties that organised the demonstration would get into the parliament: anti-immigrant SPD with 9 per cent-12,5 per cent, about the same as in the 2021 election. The real winner of a snap election would be the previous prime minister, the populist billionaire Andrej Babiš.

A strong governmental opposition to Putin

Political opponents routinely call Babiš pro-Russian, but in fact, he's not. Babiš is a special breed of centrist populist. During his 8 years in government, he and his party ANO consistently pursued pro-European policies. In fact, his party is even more pro-European than the Citizens' Democratic Party (ODS), the largest party in the current governing coalition. ANO is part of the most Euro-optimistic pan-European coalition, ALDE, while the ODS is part of the relatively Eurosceptic ECR bloc. One of Orban's main opponents in Brussels, Vice-President of the European Commission Vera Jourová, is a member of ANO and was vice-president of this party.

An illustrative example is the case with the Prague Russian embassy. For many years, the embassy was the object of criticism for its obviously bloated personnel of about 150 diplomats and technical workers, blatantly disproportional for such a small country. Journalists and secret services strongly suspected that the embassy serves as a spy headquarters covering not only Czechia but entire Europe. ODS politicians spoke of making Russians cut the personnel and bring it to parity with the Czech embassy in Moscow for at least a decade, but nothing changed. It was the government of Andrej Babiš that finally expelled most of the Russian diplomats doubling as spies in April-May 2021, almost a year before the war, cutting the embassy staff by about 80 per cent.

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Babiš is certainly populist, probably corrupt and possibly authoritarian, but he's not pro-Russian.

Of course, there's also the President Miloš Zeman, infamous for his pro-Russian statements. But the Russian aggression left him visibly shocked, and since February, he has taken a consistent pro-Ukrainian stance. Not everyone is convinced, but even if he eventually returns to his previous views, the President is mostly a symbolic position, and he won't be able to change the course of the country.

To sum it up, it is highly unlikely that the Czech Republic would change its political position toward Russia and Ukraine in the next years despite

the demonstrations we see in Prague.

All that said, in the last 10 years we saw the rise of the populist movements across the entirety of the EU, as well as the annexation of Crimea, the election of Donald Trump, Brexit, and the biggest war in Europe since 1945. The world in general, and Europe in particular, does not seem as stable as it used to be. Today, it would be unwise to wave off any political development, however unlikely or even unimaginable it may seem. The nearest test for the Czech political system is just days away: the municipal elections at the end of September. If the fringe left and right get more than 25 per cent, we might have the reason to start worrying.



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