

ELECTIONWATCH CZECH REPUBLIC



Czech Republic Pre-Election Watch: May 2010 Parliamentary Elections

Since the 1990s, the Czech Republic has been considered an example of stability among the post-Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Almost from the outset, it developed a stable party system dominated by two large parties - one on the right, one on the left - competing broadly on socio-economic issues. The country's success in avoiding fragmentation into a large number of splinter parties has produced an unwanted side effect: a political stalemate between the two large camps. The last two elections have yielded almost a dead heat in the number of seats on the right and on the left in the 200-seat Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament. Many observers fear that the forthcoming elections may produce similar results to the past two elections, protracting an already long period of gridlock in the government.

The upcoming elections are for the more powerful 200-seat lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, of the Czech Republic's bicameral legislature. Over a two-day period on Friday, May 28 and Saturday, May 29, voters will elect deputies for four-year terms out of 14 multimember constituencies, using a proportional list system. Political parties must reach a five percent threshold in order to be allocated a mandate in the Chamber of Deputies. Voters can also cast up to two preferential votes for specific candidates. Elections for the upper house, the Senate, are scheduled for October 2010. The Senate has 81 members in single member districts that serve six year terms; one-third of the Senate is elected every even-numbered year.

In the 2006 elections, the tie between the left - represented by the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) - and the right, comprised of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Christian Democratic Union-Czech People's Party (KDU-CSL) was made possible by alignment of the Green Party with the right. While each camp garnered exactly 100 deputies in the 200-seat lower Chamber of Deputies, the ODS and KDU-CSL, together with the Greens, were able on a second attempt to form a coalition government led by then-ODS Chairman Mirek Topolánek with the help of two dissenting parliamentarians from the left. The process of forming this government took some seven months, including a three-month period without a government.

As a consequence of this troubled birth, the Topolánek government's capacity to implement its program - including tax, health and pension reforms - was crippled by the ever-present threat of losing a vote of confidence in parliament. In the end, Topolánek could not hold the pieces together, and the government fell in March 2009 while the country held the rotating presidency of the European Union. A technocratic, caretaker government was appointed by the major political parties, with early elections in the fall of 2009 agreed to in principle. All parties began preparations for early elections (including buying advertising space and posting billboards), but in a surprise move, the Social Democrats refused to vote for the law abrogating the tenure of the standing parliament, thus making early elections impossible.

To the embarrassment of the major parties, the technocratic government led by high-ranking civil servant and Chairman of the State Office of Statistics Jan Fischer, has enjoyed very high popularity during its unusually long tenure. The Fischer government is viewed as professional, competent and able to rise above the political fray so disliked by the population. The success and popularity of the caretaker government facilitated the extension of its mandate until the regularly scheduled elections in May 2010; however, the Fischer government has deliberately refused to take decisions on several crucial issues of national importance, arguing that the lack of a political mandate gave them no power to make such decisions.

New Actors in the Party Spectrum

In the meantime, the Czech political scene has undergone serious changes since 2006, with new actors bleeding support from the traditional dominant players. The popularity of the Greens, whose "new politics" seemed so refreshing in Czech politics in 2006, has faded away, and polls show the party is now on the verge of losing all its seats in parliament. This is the result of ongoing conflicts between the pragmatic and fundamentalist wings within the party over the degree to which its environmentalist goals may have been diluted within Topolánek's center-right coalition. In fact, it was the defection of two Green parliamentarians that made possible the Socialist attempt to topple Topolánek's government in the spring of 2009.

The Christian Democrats also face a possible period out of parliament, as many of their activists and supporters have abandoned the party to join a new grouping on the center-right called TOP 09 (Tradition - Responsibility - Prosperity 2009). TOP 09 was formed by dissenting Christian Democrats and has been bolstered by popular independent personalities - such as popular Senator and former Foreign Minister Prince Karel Schwarzenberg - who were previously aligned with the Greens or the informal circle of intellectuals around former President Václav Havel. The new party has offered shelter for disaffected voters on the right by campaigning on a message of market liberalism, responsible management of state finances, and honest political conduct. While TOP 09 claims ODS as its closest partner, it also contrasts its new image with what it says are the tired politics and cronyism of the Civic Democrats.

Finally, another new actor has emerged in the party spectrum, campaigning on criticism of the "compromised" politics of the traditional parties. Called Public Affairs (VV in the Czech acronym), the party combines anti-establishment condemnation of the conduct of the "old" parties (using a they're all crooks, except us line) with a call for the re-engagement of people in politics by means of transparency and direct democracy and populist gestures (such as party patrols on streets). The party has managed to score some success, namely at the expense of the ČSSD and, particularly in the capital city of Prague, at the expense of the ODS. TOP 09 and VV messages have resonated remarkably among the electorate - while the former may obtain as much as 15 percent of vote, polls show the latter approaching 10 percent.

The Campaign

All parties spent a large portion of their campaign budgets in preparation for the planned fall

2009 election which was ultimately cancelled. This has had two major consequences on the current campaign. First and foremost, the two major parties may face serious financial problems if they do not perform well on May 28-29, as parties receive state funding according to their percentage of the vote. Secondly, the almost non-stop campaign since the fall of 2009 has tired the electorate and driven many voters from the bigger to the new, small parties.

The state of public finances is a dominant topic in the campaign for all the parties. Even if defined by general slogans about "defending the common people" versus "protecting the state from bankruptcy," both the Social Democrats and the Civic Democrats have emphasized the need to put the treasury back in order and cut public debt. While the right tends to stress savings and expenditure cuts as the way to a balanced budget, the left includes increasing revenue to retain the "social standards" of the population in the post-election toolbox.

As with all elections in Europe this year, this campaign has been replete with warnings against a repetition of the Greek scenario. In general, health and pension reforms are considered inevitable, but are handled in only the most general terms by the parties. None - particularly the CSSD - wants to scare voters with details. TOP 09 is an exception from this trend, as it has held true in its campaign to its support of market liberalism. The party straightforwardly recommends crafting a balanced budget through spending cuts, implementing health-care reform including patient co-payments, and introducing university tuition fees. This is a campaign message that is very hard to come by in Europe under current circumstances, and it will be interesting to see how much damage this message will do to the traditional ODS base.

Under the chairmanship of the polarizing Jiri Paroubek, the CSSD has tried to achieve a balance between its effort not to scare its base with talk of reform, but also to prepare its rank-and-file for a post-election scenario in which some tough measures to improve public finance will be necessary. The fight against the 30-crown (approximately \$1.40) medical-care co-pay imposed by the Topolanek government - since opposed and boycotted by the CSSD - has become a powerful symbol of the allegedly anti-social policies of the right in the Socialists' campaign. Not surprisingly, this was very much the case in neighboring Slovakia in 2006, when this economically inconsequential but symbolically powerful co-pay issue contributed to the victory of leftist Smer-Social Democracy under Prime Minister Robert Fico.

The unhealthy relationship of politics and business symbolized by corruption and rigged public procurements is another major campaign issue. All parties promise to erect legal barriers between the corporate sector and the political decision-making process and to increase the transparency of state tenders - even those parties notoriously known for rigging tenders in favor of pre-selected clients. The Civic Democrats have made some steps to distance themselves and decrease the influence of some prominent members well-known for tight relationships with powerful business-interest groups. The forced change of leadership in the party as it entered this election, in which the pragmatic but sometimes publically flippant Topolanek was replaced by Petr Necas, who represents a conservative wing of the party and demonstrates a much more traditional political demeanor, contributed to this effort.

The election season has been dominated by negative campaigning. In the case of the Social

Democrats, this tack has often overshadowed its positive message. An easy target for their campaign was the unpopular Topolanek; the more careful new Chairman Necas presents a much tougher challenge. Over time, the Social Democrats have gradually broadened their negative campaign to focus on both TOP 09 and VV, as both parties have become more of a threat. The Civic Democrats, for their part, have mainly targeted CSSD Chairman Paroubek, who almost all polls say is the single least-liked political figure in the country. The ODS has tried to imply that it gave up Topolanek, so Paroubek should also be shown the door by the people in these elections. As outsider parties, both TOP 09 and VV have focused their aim on criticism of the big parties, and another new party - the Party of the Rights of Citizens, led by former CSSD Prime Minister Milos Zeman - has emerged as a critic of Paroubek and today's Social Democrats, although this new party will most probably not make the five percent threshold.

Possible Outcomes

As the elections approach, the overwhelming, defining feature in the campaign is the public's disenchantment with the established political actors in the country. Not since the 1999-2000 era of the "Thank You and Leave Now!" initiatives by civic activists and public intellectuals has the public perceived the leading parties as so out of touch. In this environment, several popular initiatives have emerged urging people to send a message, reshape the political scene and vote for the new parties. These initiatives, supported by artists and other celebrities, are believed to be sponsored by the new parties, regardless of claims of complete independence from party influence.

Despite all the calls for change, these elections may in the end be about those things that remain constant. Although recent polls suggest a comfortable 30 percent win for the Social Democrats, with the Civic Democrats lagging behind by some 10 percent, the overall situation in terms of political alliances suggests a repetition of the 2006 stalemate, with the CSSD and Communists on one side and the ODS, TOP 09, VV, and (not likely, but possibly) the KDU-CSL on the other. In this situation, it is not surprising that all parties are maneuvering in advance of the elections to position themselves for the period afterward.

There are indications that Social Democrats might for the first time consider breaking their internal rule banning direct cooperation with the Communists on the government level, even though the Communists have not met the CSSD demand that they renounce their totalitarian past. If this threat of a red-red coalition putting the unreformed Communist Party into government persists, it could drive the VV into a post-election alliance with the ODS and TOP 09, leaving the Social Democrats considering a choice of tacit support from the Communists, on one hand, and open acceptance of the Communists into a ruling coalition, on the other. For the time being, the CSSD prefers a coalition with a group of smaller parties - including the VV and TOP 09 - over an alliance with the Communists. The depth of this commitment, though, is treated with certain skepticism by both the public and the political class.

On the right side of the spectrum, the ODS under new leader Necas may emerge from this fight badly bruised but not broken; in this case, he would be sufficiently well-positioned to lead a new coalition that could build a government program on instituting the economic and social reforms necessary to move the Czech Republic back to the regional leadership role it once played. As in the United Kingdom, one of the tasks of such a new government led by the right would be a commitment to reform the country's political discourse toward more

transparency, accountability, and openness. In the end, the ability of such a coalition to accomplish these goals will come down to the question of whether one side or the other can break the now decade-long stalemate in the Czech political system.

IRI in Europe

In Europe, the International Republican Institute (IRI) focuses on helping political parties become more issue-oriented and responsive to voters' concerns. IRI's training helps parties create more coherent platforms, better strategic communications, more effective grassroots organizations, and stable party foundations or institutes that can provide necessary training and analytical support. IRI is also active in expanding political participation among women, youth and minorities. By working with governments and civil society to concentrate more on policy, IRI seeks to make the region's democracies more responsive and sustainable.

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