



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic political briefing:
New Dynamics of the Domestic Politics: Forming Blocs against the
Hegemon
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New Dynamics of the Domestic Politics: Forming Blocs against the Hegemon

Opposition parties have started to negotiate on cooperation in the parliamentary election held next year with the aim to ostracise the dominant ANO movement with the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. An apparent move towards an establishment of two blocs has taken place, being encouraged by the regional and Senate election in October.¹ I will analyse the new dynamics on the Czech political scene in this briefing, pointing to both perspectives and weaknesses thereof.

The right-wing opposition parties – Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL) and TOP 09 – agreed on mutual cooperation, thus establishing an opposition bloc against the current Government, consisting of the dominant ANO movement and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). As both subjects do not have enough seats in the Chamber of Deputies (ANO with 78 deputies and ČSSD with 14 deputies out of 200), the government coalition have cooperated with the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), having 15 seats, with whom the Government made an agreement on toleration. The opposition have been criticising the government policies from the very beginning, however, it has been too weak to be able to jeopardise the ruling coalition. This inability has been caused – among other things – by fragmentation and disunity of the opposition itself as the opposition camp was composed by 9 parties or movements which subsequently split in the current 11 subjects and 6 other deputies without political affiliation. Moreover, the opposition is politically and ideologically heterogeneous, ranging from the liberal left-wing Pirates, centrist Christians Democrats as well as the Mayors and Independents movement (STAN), right-wing Civic Democrats and TOP 09, to the populist, Eurosceptic Freedom and Direct Democracy movement or the recently established national conservative Tricolour movement which has the negative stance towards the EU in common with the populists from SPD.

¹ The election will be analysed in another briefing.

Liberal and more-liberal coalitions to be formed

From this picture it follows that the Government has not needed to be afraid of its position and the opposition has not been capable of forming a united front including the Communists with the aim to overthrow the cabinet. Therefore, there have been increasing demand for and attempts to create alliances and blocs promising and strong enough to defeat the Andrej Babiš' ANO movement in the election to the Chamber of Deputies held in autumn 2021. According to public opinion polls and sociological surveys, the ANO still maintains its dominant, hegemonic position, being supported by around 30 per cent of voters, even though it seems that the support has started to drop over the recent weeks, especially due to a mismanagement of the second wave of the coronavirus crisis. Some surveys have already indicated that the support for ANO has plunged to less than 25 per cent, thus being the worst since the 2017 election when they gained 29.64 per cent of votes. At the same time, the second position is occupied by the Pirates who have been likely to get ahead of the Civic Democratic Party with which they have fought for the role of the strongest rival of the PM. Furthermore, the position of the ANO's allies – Social Democrats and Communists – is utterly uncertain and there is a real risk that these two parties will not get through to the lower chamber at all or will gain only few seats. Under such circumstances, the current government model could not continue owing to an insufficient number of mandates in the Chamber of Deputies. This scenario could become reality all the more if alliances of the today's opposition forces exist. The anti-Babiš politicians are well aware of this fact and see the opportunity to remove the PM from power which has been their main goal for a long period. The experience of the municipal elections that took place in October indicates that this way of thinking and political tactics can bear fruit as in many cases, several subjects have united successfully to defeat ANO. It is more and more likely that the present hegemon will win, having, however, no allies and coalition partners. A majority of the non-governmental actors have already declared that they will not enter into a coalition with ANO. In that case the ANO's position will be extremely difficult and maintenance of power very improbable.

It is thus not surprising that individual political subjects started to negotiate about prospective alliances or even election coalitions. It should be noted in this regard that the boundary for gaining mandates in the lower chamber is set at 5 per cent of all votes, being, nevertheless, higher in case of candidature of a coalition subject (i.e. two or more parties), which poses a specific risk for the parties. If the coalition is composed of two parties, the quorum amounts to 10 per cent; if it consists of three parties, the quorum is 15 per cent, and finally, if the coalition is comprised of three and more subjects, the boundary needed increases

to 20 per cent. In the past, many attempts to create coalitions failed due to the fears of not exceeding the minimum limit. In a sense, the October memorandum signed by the chairmen of the Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats and TOP 09 expresses high political ambitions and self-confidence these opposition parties have. This right-wing bloc declared that the goal was to form a government to lead the country out of crisis, which had been allegedly caused by incompetence, incapacity and amateurism of the current Government. The leaders of the bloc – Petr Fiala (ODS), Marian Jurečka (KDU-ČSL) and Markéta Pekarová Adamová (TOP 09) – have spoken out strongly against populism, alleged undemocratic and authoritarian tendencies present in the Government's actions, promoting the need for a strong liberal-conservative coalition.

Uncertain prospects

However, there are multiple differences among these three parties which will inevitably undermine the coherence of the prospective coalition, being extremely difficult to maintain it after the “common enemy” (i.e. the Prime Minister Babiš) is defeated. The idea of such a bloc would make more sense if it gained the overall majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies (at least 101 mandates). This vision is but a chimera and wishful thinking. It follows that in case the “liberal-conservative” coalition is assigned to form the next government, it will need another partner, probably the left-wing liberal Pirates, the centrist Mayors and Independents or the Social Democrats, the latter being hardly imaginable, similarly as all other options apart from the abovementioned. Moreover, prospects are complicated by the oncoming talks on a parallel coalition of the Pirates and Mayors. The negotiations were approved by the leadership of the Mayors and Independents after holding a referendum among the members. A similar procedure has been carried out in the Pirate Party. The final Pirates' decision on a prospective coalition has not been taken yet, nevertheless, cooperation is probable given the fact it is supported by the chairman Ivan Bartoš. At the same time, it can be hindered by inexperience, egoism and excessive ambitions of the Pirate Party's representatives which have been boosted by recent public opinion polls, according to which the Pirates might be approaching 20 per cent of support. In any case, the “liberal-conservative” bloc is farther than the Pirates-led “liberal” rival one. However, the dynamics and progress in cooperation of the “liberal conservatives” may accelerate the establishment of the coalition consisting of the Pirates and Mayors and Independents.

Experts and commentators agree that the opposition forces can defeat the leading ANO and its chairman Andrej Babiš only if they stand as coalitions or blocs. But the past experiences show that support and final gains of coalitions are not equal to the sum of support for individual members thereof. In practice, a synergic effect may occur producing high gains, however, the opposite were usually true in the past. As indicated above, there are potential points of difference and frictions among the participating actors of the coalition to be formed. First, as for the programme and political orientation, the Christian Democrats and TOP 09 are clearly pro-European parties whereas the Civic Democrats are slightly Euro-sceptical, although the current leadership dissociates itself from a Euro-sceptic and realistic wing of the party which follows the policy of the former chairman Václav Klaus. Potential disagreement can emerge regarding the external relations, especially in relation to other Visegrád Group partners Poland and Hungary.² At the same time, this kind of difference can be put aside at the national level and with regard to the main domestic political goal, which is a removal of ANO. Second, as far as the personal affairs are concerned, this question will likely to be more important than agreement on the programme. All the more that positions on the list of candidates will influence significantly financial gains for the parties. No less important is the question of the coalition leader. Despite the TOP 09 is headed by a woman, which is considered to be a comparative advantage, the Civic Democrats' chairman Petr Fiala will probably be put in charge of presidency given the stronger position of his party. In that case, the two alternatives to the current left-wing Government offered to the citizens will be predominantly liberal and strongly pro-European.

² Both the Czech Civic Democratic Party and Jaroslav Kaczyński's Polish Law and Justice Party are members of the European Conservatives and Reformists Party and of the common group in the European Parliament.