



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic political briefing:
One Month before the Election:
Recent Development & Foreign
Policy Agenda**

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One Month before the Election: Recent Development & Foreign Policy Agenda

Summary

One month before the election to the Chamber of Deputies, the Prime Minister's movement reasserted its leading after a period of decline connected with the Government's anti-pandemic policy. Liberal, pro-Western parties have established two coalitions attempting to topple Andrej Babiš and undermine President Miloš Zeman's position. If focusing on the foreign policy programmes of the five strongest political subjects, one cannot miss the one-sidedness and opportunist character of the external orientation of a majority of the parties. The Euro-Atlantic dogma continues dominating. However, a multivector, multilateral attitude has also its adherents.

Introduction

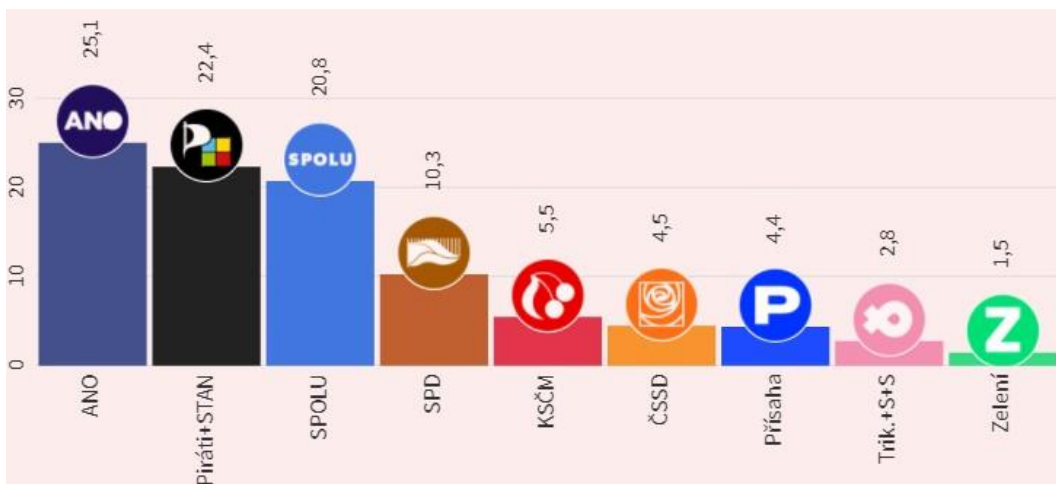
Over the last year, many public opinion polls indicated that the ANO movement, led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, had lost its position and the so-called „democratic opposition“ had taken the lead. Undoubtedly, the long-term popularity of the ANO, as well as the ANO-led Government, dropped during the past months which was connected with the people's dissatisfaction with the anti-pandemic policy, mismanagement of the crisis, frequent changes of the restrictive measures and, generally, bad communication with the public. Nevertheless, according to recent surveys, the movement led by the Prime Minister will win again.

Situation before the election

There was a period when the number of the infected and hospitalised was high compared to the total number of inhabitants and when some experts and politicians warned against a collapse of the health care system.¹ Even though the situation was serious, such alarmism was

¹ In January 2021, the number of new cases reached virtually 18.000 people a day. By September 07, the total number of people who suffered from the COVID-19 amounted to 1.681.091, i.e. approximately 15.7 per cent of the population. However, these are only the official statistics. The real number is expected to be much higher since a lot of people might have not to go to the tests or did not know they were infected at all. The official data are available at *COVID-19: Přehled aktuální situace v ČR (2021)*, mzcr.cz. Retrieved September 08, 2021, from <https://onemocneni-aktualne.mzcr.cz/covid-19>.

exaggerated. Since the spring, the situation has been stabilising and improving substantially. It is related both to the vaccination of the population and a high level of collective immunity. This development has also had an impact on the political preferences and support of the ruling parties. The obvious decline of the ANO, which has dominated the domestic political scene for many years, stopped, being followed by a return to the former position. The chart below shows the preferences at the beginning of September, one month before the election:



Source: Seznamzpravy.cz²

The chart is an aggregate of data collected by six leading agencies which should lead to a relatively accurate picture of the preferences. Although it seems at first sight that there is no dominant subject as the first three positions are occupied by similarly strong actors, the opposite is true. The point is that the PirSTAN and SPOLU are coalitions. The first one consists of the Pirate Party and the Mayors and Independents (STAN). Both parties are liberal. The Pirates have managed to strengthen significantly since the last election, becoming one of the major phenomena of Czech politics. It has gained support especially among the young and educated voters, attracting them by

new, fresh faces and style („hipsters“), anti-corruption and protest ethos as well as by addressing progressive topics such as digitalisation, transparency or participatory democracy. However, the Pirates' rise has met with its limits. The leadership started to tend to the concept of a catch-all party which is analogous to the ANO. This space is already occupied by the PM's movement so the Pirates' policy has become somewhat vague.

² Mahdalová, K. *Unikátní model. Jak Babiš ztrácel a zase roste a kdo vyhraje volby* (2021, September 07), seznamzpravy.cz. Retrieved September 08, 2021, from <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/pocitame-sance-kdo-vyhraje-volby-144566>.

At the same time, such efforts weaken the identity of the Pirate Party.³ In addition, a permanent campaign aimed against Andrej Babiš cannot bring new votes anymore. The same applies to the initiative of their deputies to dissolve the lower chamber several weeks before the regular elections. Further expansion is hindered by their positive attitude towards migration, multiculturalism as well as a support for LGBT activism or high taxes. It is therefore unlikely that the people's political preferences in favour of the Pirates will grow.

The second coalition called SPOLU („Together“) is composed of three subjects. They have presented themselves as a „conservative, democratic opposition“. Even though some conservative elements can be observed (especially in the case of the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party, KDU-ČSL), the dominant tendency is liberal. The parties from the allegedly conservative groupings are far away from Viktor Orbán's Fidesz in Hungary or Jarosław Kaczyński's Prawo i Sprawiedliwość in Poland which pursue national conservative and sovereigntist policy. Minor actors within the coalition have made use of the common project to maintain mandates in the Chamber of Deputies. Public support for both KDU-ČSL and TOP 09 party was oscillating around 5 per cent needed for gaining seats in the lower chamber, with the possibility of not exceeding the threshold being high. Both opposition coalitions deny future cooperation with ANO vehemently, preferring cooperation between PirSTAN and SPOLU. Success is, nevertheless, dependent on whether these coalitions manage to gain the absolute majority of seats. In that case, the „democratic“ bloc could form a government. The major problem of this scenario is that such a government would be comprised of five parties, thus being extremely vulnerable to

instability, and the question also is an attitude adopted by President Miloš Zeman who has declared repeatedly that he will charge a chairman of the strongest party to form a new government. It is beyond any doubt that the highest number of votes will not obtain any party from the coalitions but the ANO movement. The post-election negotiations will also be affected by which subjects exceed the minimum threshold. In any case, the October election will not put an end to the long-term fragmentation and instability of the political scene.

Comparison of the foreign policy programmes

The election programmes of the political subjects concerning foreign policy are very concise. It relates to the fact that, usually, foreign policy is not the „hot“ topic in terms of

³ Pehe, J. *Proč Piráti ztrácejí podporu* (2021, July 02). Retrieved September 06, 2021, from <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/32868-proc-pirati-ztraceji-podporu>.

people's interests. In the following lines, the most important features of the main actors are analysed.

ANO

The strongest subject and probable winner of the election tends to a relatively balanced position, at least compared to the „democratic“ opposition. ANO supports the EU pursuing, at the same time, its reform in line with the Czech national interests. The EU should assert an active foreign policy with a focus on negotiations on trade agreements, especially with the US, as well as reinforce the single market. The Euro-Atlantic orientation is present as proven by an emphasis put on strengthening the transatlanticism and alleged „indisputability“ of our country's membership in NATO. The PM's movement stresses the need for regional cooperation within the Visegrád Group, keeping close ties with Israel and deepening economic cooperation with non-European partners, especially in Asia. The programme mentions Vietnam, South Korea, Japan, Thailand and India but not China which illustrates the power of the anti-

Chinese discourse in the Czech Republic. The programme contains more anachronisms including the concept of human rights as a pillar of foreign policy.⁴

PirSTAN

The liberal, progressivist coalition led by the Pirates is extremely one-sided, West-orientated and dominated by the liberal democratic ideology. While supporting the EU and European integration, the coalition wants to weaken the role of the Visegrád Group, the strongest political alliance in the EU. The foreign policy should be strictly „value-based“ which entails active support for NGOs, media and non-system (i.e. pro-Western, liberal) opposition in the so-called „authoritarian“ countries, support for the „oppressed“ people all around the world. In other words, the extremist PirSTAN calls for undermining legitimate governments, sovereignty, territorial integrity and traditional social patterns and institutions such as family. The coalition strongly supports NATO and its military presence in the Baltic states (against Russia) and other countries, rejecting military or technological cooperation with the

⁴ *Až do roztrhání těla!* (2021), anobudelip.cz. Retrieved September 06, 2021, from <https://www.anobudelip.cz/file/edee/2021/ano-volebni-program.pdf>.

„authoritarian“ regimes. Noteworthy, there is an explicit mention of the need for developing ties with Taiwan, thus breaching the One-China principle.⁵

SPOLU

The second „democratic“ coalition declares adherence to the same orientation and values as shown by the slogans „Czechia belongs to the West!“ and „NATO First“. The radical pro-Western orientation is obvious which is accompanied by the requirements including higher expenses on military purposes, a revival of the „human-rightism“ in the foreign policy, expansion of the NATO’s military presence in the Baltic states and Poland, active support for the European integration based on the single market, protection of the external borders and Euro-Atlantic partnership. The coalition

promotes NATO to geopolitically unite the West against external threats – among which Russia is openly mentioned in the programme. They call for deepening cooperation with the countries from EU and NATO and other „perspective partners“ (Israel, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan), cooperation within V4 and the Three Seas Initiative, the latter being perceived as a tool for strengthening relations with Washington.⁶ The coalition’s position is, therefore, less extreme in comparison with the PirSTAN, however, it is determined by the exclusive, US-formed discourse dividing the international community between „democracies“ and „autocracies“.

SPD

A completely different policy is pursued by the movement Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD). It is based on the sovereigntist principle that the Czech foreign policy must not be influenced by the EU, US, NATO or NGOs. The movement favours multivector orientation and win-win cooperation with any country regardless of its political, economic or social model. An emphasis is put on cooperation within the V4, strict protection of borders, fight against illegal migration and opposition to both the EU and NATO. This subject is the only one in the Chamber of Deputies that strives for withdrawal from the EU as well as NATO through a referendum.⁷

⁵ *Volební program pro parlamentní volby 2021* (2021), piratiastarostove.cz. Retrieved September 06, 2021, from https://www.piratiastarostove.cz/documents/70/PIRÁTI_A_STAROSTOVÉ_VOLEBNÍ_PROGRAM.pdf.

⁶ *SPOLU dáme Česko dohromady* (2021), spolu21.cz. Retrieved September 06, 2021, from <https://www.spolu21.cz/assets/documents/program/program.pdf>.

⁷ *Program pro volby do Poslanecké sněmovny 2021* (2021), spd.cz. Retrieved September 06, 2021, from <https://www.spd.cz/volby2021/program-do-voleb-2021/>.

KSČM

The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia is the second sovereigntist Parliamentary subject. Similarly, Communists call for leaving NATO and dissolution of the military alliance, rejecting unilateral „aggressive military missions“ without authorisation by the UN. The continental security should be guaranteed by OSCE. The Party aims to launch multivector foreign policy and explicitly speaks about the need for the renewal of comprehensive cooperation with Russia and China. Communists

strongly oppose Western hegemonism and unilateralism accompanied also by discriminatory policies and economic sanctions. Unlike SPD, the programme does not include withdrawal from the EU but its substantial reform to guarantee equality among member states, strengthening the elective bodies.⁸

Conclusion

The analysis of the foreign policy election programmes of the main political subjects in the Czech Republic shows that the dogma of the Euro-Atlantic partnership (transatlanticism) remains to be very strong, thus hampering the development of genuinely multivector orientation and equal, win-win cooperation with those non-Western countries which are classified as „autocracies“ by the US-dominated hegemonic discourse in the West. While the strongest movement partially tends to pragmatism and sovereigntism (however from populist reasons), the fundamental orientation follows Euro-Atlanticism. The liberal opposition has not even avoided extremist stances. The only subjects seeking multivector and independent foreign policy are, therefore, Freedom and Direct Democracy and the Communist Party.

⁸ *Programové teze KSČM* (2021), kscm.cz. Retrieved September 06, 2021, from <https://www.kscm.cz/cs/programove-teze>.