



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic political briefing:

Redrawing the Czech Political Scene: A Revival of Conservatism?

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Summary

The leading opposition actor - the ANO movement led by former Prime Minister and successful businessman Andrej Babiš - is experiencing a revision of its strategy. Since the recent presidential election, the catch-all party with a strong social (leftist) programme has been turning towards conservatism. It was reaffirmed by the leader's participation at the Conservative Political Action Conference which took place in Budapest at the beginning of May. The briefing addresses the structural transformation of the Czech political landscape and goes on to analyse the evolution of ANO within a broader international context.

Introduction

The Czech political scene is undergoing shifts that will probably result in a new shape of domestic politics in the years to come. The left-right division is increasingly irrelevant and the main dividing line is seemingly drawn between the dominant liberal democratic bloc and the sovereign populists who include both leftist and rightist subjects. Their common denominator can be described in terms of populism, anti-elitism, illiberalism, sovereigntism and conservatism. I have already proposed this reconceptualisation in other analyses.¹ Interestingly, some mainstream sociologists arrive at a similar conclusion going beyond the left-right classification and distinguishing between government centre-right bloc, social-oriented and anti-system opposition.²

Twist and turns of the ANO movement

An important role in the abovementioned developments will be played by the strongest opposition subject and the long-term most popular political actor ANO. The movement was

¹ Zemánek, L. (2022, December 14). *Main Tendencies of the Political Development in 2022*. China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2022/12/14/czech-republic-political-briefing-main-tendencies-of-the-political-development-in-2022/>

² Grim, J. (2023, April 24). *Tři klastry české politiky: vládní pravice, sociálně orientovaná levicová opozice a antisystémový extrém*. iROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/vlada-opozice-rachl-okamura-babis-fiala-extrem-levice-pravice_2304240625_jgr#opozice

removed from executive power by a wide liberal democratic bloc consisting of two coalitions and five parties which united to defeat Andrej Babiš. Petr Pavel's victory in the January presidential election crowned their successful strategy and strengthened the hegemony of liberal democrats. The deepening hegemony—which has been accompanied by the introduction of a variety of authoritarian measures face to face with the unfavourable external development inclusive of the open confrontation with Russia, growing rivalry with China and the concurrent revival of both NATO and transatlantic partnership—has stimulated transformative processes among the political opposition with the emergence of new actors and new tactical alliances. After the lost presidential election, ANO started to change itself, starting to accentuate conservative values. Let's summarise its ideological evolution since 2012 when it was established as a political movement.

The original programme was mostly liberal and centred around the fight against corruption, traditional political parties and parliamentary politics, one of the symbols of which was Václav Klaus together with the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). The movement gained broad support among rightist voters of ODS and people who were dissatisfied with the existing parties. ANO's rise was one of the causes of the decline of ODS which was traditionally associated with right-wing politics and interests. In the following years, nevertheless, flexibility, ideological pragmatism and catch-all character became the dominant features of the movement. It enabled them to embrace an increasingly leftist agenda which turned ANO into a *de facto* social democratic actor. This shift had far-reaching consequences, for it contributed significantly to the decline of the two traditional left-wing parties—the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) and Communist Party (KSČM). ANO thus became a hegemon on the left but the price which was paid for it was high as neither social democrats nor communists reached the obligatory 5-per cent threshold needed for entering the Chamber of Deputies in 2021. As a consequence, ANO found itself in isolation with national conservative Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) being the only possible partner. However, the two subjects did not have a majority of seats in the lower chamber.

On the path towards conservatism?

In the last months, ANO began to move towards value conservatism which might endanger the position of Tomio Okamura's SPD. The latter has been under increasing pressure from two sides—from ANO and emerging protest subjects which are more dynamic than SPD

and succeeded in organising mass public actions in the streets of Czech cities (for example, PRO led by Jindřich Rajchl). ANO's Deputy Chairman Former Deputy Prime Minister Karel Havlíček is the main face of the ongoing conservative move, making several statements and giving interviews whereby explaining the new policy. He describes the movement's position in terms of liberal conservatism which is, by the way, the same concept as that used by the ruling ODS. At the same time, Havlíček reiterates that ANO remains a catch-all party which is neither leftist nor rightist, considering this division obsolete and replaced by a division along the line of progressivism versus conservatism.³ It is worth noticing that the latter is conceptualised also by some representatives of SPD and other national conservative subjects. The conservative turn was mentioned by Havlíček at the beginning of February for the first time when he declared that ANO defended conservative values based on the traditional family, free individuals and institutions, common sense and the market.⁴

It is exactly the same programme that has been shared by President Václav Klaus who embodied it into his ODS in the 1990s. Such statements differ from the dominant ANO's discourse of the last years and indicate that the movement may strive for support from some voters of ODS and Václav Klaus, SPD and national conservatives as well as traditional leftist citizens who do not share progressivist radicalism of the current left such as promotion of interests of minorities to the detriment of the majority, gender and sexual revolution or extreme environmentalism. From such a perspective, the concept of a clash between conservatives and progressivists does make sense, for the conservative camp includes both the "conservative" left and right, enabling cooperation between ideologically diverse actors who, at the same time, identify liberal democratic hegemony (which entails progressivist agenda indeed) as their common political enemy. On one hand, what is presented as conservative values (protection of traditional family, domestic producers and individual freedoms, accent on nation-state) does not drive a substantial part of the traditional leftists away and, on the other, the emphasis on the market environment, pragmatism, value conservatism and maintenance of welfare state can be attractive for some voters of the government parties, particularly ODS, if they are able to overcome an aversion to Andrej Babiš and populist features of ANO's policies.

³ Rambousková, M. (2023, May 4). „*Jsmo pro EU, ale...*“ Havlíček vysvětluje nové ideologické směřování ANO. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-havlicek-k-novemu-ideologickemu-smerovani-ano-zbytecne-nalepkujete-230331>

⁴ Pergler, T., Dolejší, V. (2023, April 26). *Babiš vedle Orbána a spol. ANO se hlásí o nálepku konzervativní strany.* Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-babis-vedle-orbana-a-spol-ano-se-hlasi-o-nalepku-konzervativni-strany-229982>

International implications and alliances

The metamorphoses of the movement's policies have already provoked internal frictions and leaving of high-level politicians inclusive of former Deputy Chairman of the European Parliament Pavel Telička, MEP Radka Maxová (a vocal proponent of the LGBTQ+ agenda) and a popular Mayor of Ostrava Tomáš Macura. The conservative turn can also have an impact on ANO's engagement in the European Parliament. The movement is a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe Party (ALDE) which is liberal democratic rather than conservative. ALDE promotes sanctions against Hungary and the Hungarian opposition Momentum Movement's MEP is its vice president. Moreover, ANO's MEPs often pursue policies that are far from conservative (Karel Havlíček explains this discrepancy, referring to the catch-all character of the movement which enables a wide range of opinions). According to some analysts, the pivot to conservatism is to lay the foundations for the establishment of a new faction in the European Parliament based on the central role of Fidesz which left the European People's Party in 2021. Orbán's Fidesz is seeking new allies after its relations with German CDU/CSU, Polish Law and Justice (PiS) as well as the US deteriorated. Both Fidesz and ANO highlight the 2024 election to the EP after which conservative and sovereigntist parties could have a strong influence on the formation of a new European Commission. After all, the incumbent EC President Ursula von der Leyen succeeded only thanks to votes from Fidesz and PiS in 2019.⁵

The relationship with Viktor Orbán is very important for ANO's leader Andrej Babiš. Both politicians meet each other frequently and share a number of interests. Babiš was invited as one of the main speakers to the second Conservative Political Action Conference held in Budapest at the beginning of May. Last year, the Hungarian side invited Václav Klaus to deliver a speech and he attended the event this year as well. A joint photo of Babiš and Klaus symbolises their rapprochement and a new spirit of ANO.⁶ The CPAC is a prominent platform which associates conservative-oriented actors throughout countries. It originated in the US in the 1970s where the organisation enjoyed wide support among high-level politicians including President Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Donald Trump.⁷ It is worth noting that Andrej Babiš was given priority to SPD whose conservative political work is longer-term. It indicates

⁵ Dostál, V. (2023, May 3). *Orbán čeká na nové konzervativní a autoritářské spojení*. Deník Referendum. <https://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/35172-orban-ceka-nanove-konzervativni-aaautoritarske-spojence>

⁶ Vilček, I. (2023, May 4). *Orbán přivítal v Budapešti „ochránce svobodného světa“ Babiše a Klause*. Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/zahranicni-evropa-orban-privital-v-budapesti-ochrance-svobodneho-sveta-babise-a-klause-40430612>

⁷ *Agenda* (2023). CPAC Hungary. <https://www.cpachungary.com/en/agenda>

that international conservative players could have picked ANO as a more appropriate instrument for advancing the conservative agenda in the Czech Republic.

Conclusion

The participation of Andrej Babiš in the May CPAC in Budapest corroborates ANO's new political strategy. It also reaffirmed its main foreign allies—Viktor Orbán and Emmanuel Macron. The latter was not a guest at the event, nevertheless, Babiš claimed allegiance to the French President's idea of strategic autonomy for the EU independent of the US, China or any other third party. Interestingly, Babiš visited Macron during the former's presidential campaign this year.⁸ At the CPAC, the Czech opposition leader lambasted a “progressivist madness” and stressed the significance of sovereignty, common sense, individual freedoms, traditional values and democracy. He strongly criticised the Union's bureaucracy and its ideology. At the same time, “conservative” ANO continues to support the EU but calls for its reform and rejuvenation.⁹ This stance differentiates ANO from SPD, which advocates the withdrawal from the EU.

⁸ *Andrej Babiš byl u Macrona, sešel se s nejbohatším mužem světa* (2023, January 10). Echo24.cz. <https://echo24.cz/a/HzguZ/zpravy-domov-setkani-s-miliardarem-babis>

⁹ Babiš, A. (2023, May 5). *Vystoupení na konferenci CPAC*. Facebook. <https://fb.watch/kIQEvK0DDN/>