



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic political briefing:
2024: A Political Outlook
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2024: A Political Outlook

Summary

The briefing addresses the main political events expected in 2024. The attention is focused on three elections which will be held in the Czech Republic. Citizens will elect their representatives to the European Parliament, Senate and regional governments. Before respective elections are analysed in greater detail, the briefing inquires into a broader European context of the upcoming EU election, interpreting the political developments through the prism of a struggle between liberalism and sovereign populism.

Introduction

The Czech political development will be affected by several major factors in 2024. First, three elections will be held. The elections to the European Parliament, Senate and regional governments do not belong to the most attractive ones but both the government and opposition parties will adapt their strategies and actions to the election competition. Second, the economic factors will be either supportive of the government's position or further undermine the ruling coalition. Galloping inflation and energy crisis are seemingly over but the question is whether this year will be as positive as the prime minister announced during his Christmas speech. Third, external factors can change the overall situation immediately even though no severe crisis is generally expected in 2024.

European Parliament

Even though the election to the European Parliament, which will take place in June, usually enjoys low attention among the Czech public, they can become an interesting event this time. It is a matter of fact that illiberal parties are on the rise throughout the EU, which poses a serious challenge to the liberal democratic establishment. Such parties and movements are usually labelled "populist", "far-right" and even "extremist" to damage their reputation and weaken their chance to gain broader public support. These discursive practices are, however, frequently misleading. Although some of those parties show controversial and problematic features indeed, they largely represent the legitimate interests of a majority of citizens whose

attitudes have been marginalised by the ruling parties and liberal elites as a whole. Naturally, this dismissive position leads to growing dissatisfaction, frustration and support for “protest” political subjects. The exclusion of majoritarian interests sometimes turns into what is called a “cancel culture” which has a wide array of negative social implications.

From my point of view, it is useful to interpret this gap in terms of a dualism between liberalism and sovereign populism. Some basic explanatory remarks are, nonetheless, needed here. In this line of reasoning, sovereign populism includes both right-wing and left-wing parties, conservative, socialist, nationalist and communist if they oppose the liberal hegemony and tend to sovereigntist policies which are critical of the current model of European integration and security architecture, based on NATO, as well as the liberal international order, that is, the so-called rules-based order. Sovereign populist actors often combine rightist and leftist policies together, which makes them conservative in values and socially-oriented (socialist) in economic programmes. The analytical concept of sovereign populism is rather a Weberian ideal type and the empiric reality is usually more colourful but it can generally help to conceptualise and understand the transformation of the liberal democratic model which is increasingly authoritarian and becomes “postliberal”. At the same time, the liberal ideology is less and less liberal from the point of view of classical liberalism.¹

The political landscape in the European Parliament and the executive bodies has been dominated by an alliance between the right-wing European People’s Party (EEP) and the left-wing Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D). This heterogeneous cooperation can be seen as a certain parallel to the emerging sovereign populist alliance. In many countries including the Czech Republic, there is a clear tendency towards tactical collaboration between illiberal forces of different orientations and ideological and historical backgrounds. Despite their differences, they are inclined to each other to establish a counterdiscourse against the hegemonic liberal discourse. Irrespective of the fact that the dominance of the EEP and S&D will probably be maintained after the June election, sovereign populist Identity and Democracy (ID) can surpass Renew Europe (RE) where a leading role is played by Emmanuel Macron’s Renaissance. The Czech ANO movement headed by former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš is an important member of the RE. The liberal Renew Europe group was the third-strongest force in the European Parliament for a long period but the recent surveys indicate that they can lose their position. In addition, the EEP will be weakened by the departure of the Hungarian Fidesz which has 12 deputies at the moment while the S&D has probably lost deputies from the Slovak

¹ See Zemánek, L. (2023). The Rise of Liberal Authoritarianism and Global Transition to Polycentrism. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21(3), pp. 84–102. <https://doi.org/10.31278/1810-6374-2023-21-3-84-102>

Smer. Not surprisingly, both Fidesz and Smer can be perceived as sovereign populist parties, which makes them closer to the ID or—to a lesser degree—European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR).

According to the data presented by *Politico* in early January, the EEP and S&D could gain 171 and 141 seats respectively in contrast to ID's 90 mandates.² However, the sovereign populist camp can be much stronger if one adds deputies from Fidesz, Smer and, perhaps, the Czech ANO and some other influential parties from other groups such as the Brothers of Italia and the Polish Law and Justice. In that case, the sovereign populist bloc and its possible allies can control more than 150 seats. And it has one important consequence. Sovereign populists could play a significant role in forming the new European Commission, its head and agenda. Even though the liberal hegemony will probably endure for many years to come, the illiberal counterdiscourse can cement its positions, contain the liberal agenda and wait for a crisis which might change the rules of the game in Europe.

European elections in the Czech Republic

Preparations for the European elections have already started even though the lists of candidates are not completed yet. Undoubtedly, this year's election will bring some important changes in both the government and opposition camp as far as their representation in the European Parliament is concerned. It is worth noticing that the ruling SPOLU coalition, which is formed by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL (People's Party), will run for the election together despite substantial political differences regarding European affairs starting from a perspective on the integration process and the current model of the EU and ending with the question of the implementation of the European currency. Nonetheless, the government leaders are seemingly afraid of pre-election competition and rivalry which would further undermine the position of the current cabinet and they decided to put the political differences aside. This decision will likely strengthen their election potential because the pro-government voters do not have a serious alternative, being afraid of the rise of the opposition actors. At the same time, it was not easy to reach an agreement because many representatives of respective parties including the election leaders were not in favour of the idea. The single list of candidates was eventually pushed through by the heads of the parties. Their decisive role in

² *European Parliament election 2024 — seat projection (2024)*. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/european-parliament-election/>

the project became evident when the nomination of the former TOP 09's chairman and ex-minister of finance Miroslav Kalousek was rejected despite the will of the rank and file.³

Unlike SPOLU, the second government coalition constituted by the Mayors and Independents (STAN) and the Pirates will not run together. The STAN has succeeded in coopting unsuccessful presidential candidate Danuše Nerudová who can bring new voters for this party to the detriment of the Pirates as well as SPOLU. The question is to what extent ANO will manage to mobilise its voters because the electorate is rather less interested in European affairs, which can weaken the movement. At the moment, the government parties have 12 deputies in the European Parliament in contrast to 6 representatives of the ANO. At the same time, both the ANO and SPD can capitalise on their prominent role in the opposition camp. Undoubtedly, they will be able to gain support from those citizens who voted for social democrats, communists and minor Euro-sceptic parties in the past. It also implied that neither the SOCDEM (Social Democratic Party) nor the Communist Party (KSČM) succeeded in gaining mandates. Communists tried to establish a broader coalition overcoming the left-right division, negotiating cooperation with social democrats, a movement led by former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek as well as Jindřich Rajchl's PRO movement which is of national conservative orientation and attracted attention thanks to mass anti-government rallies in 2022. However, this pre-election project failed and it is, therefore, very probable that none of them will exceed the 5-per cent threshold. In other words, the Communist Party will lose its last important political representative.

Furthermore, it will be interesting to observe the results of SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy). The movement is a part of the ID in the European Parliament and is expanding its foreign ties, not limiting itself to allies from the ID such as the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), French National Rally (NR), Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Matteo Salvini's League in Italy. The Czech SPD maintains cooperation with Fidesz, even though the latter's main partner is Andrej Babiš and his ANO. In certain contrast to Babiš' movement, the SPD inclines to nationalism, which is demonstrated by a "Declaration for a free Europe of Nations" that was concluded at the initiative of Hungary's opposition Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk) in Budapest in August 2023.⁴ Interestingly, neither the SPD nor ANO took part in the Cross-

³ Machová, M., Stuchlíková, L. (2024, January 11). *Kampaň Spolu: Vondra chce být na billboardech sám*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-kampan-spolu-vondra-chce-byt-na-billboardech-sam-243269>

⁴ Almásy, F. (2023, August 29). A "Declaration for a free Europe of Nations" announcing a possible new European group. Visegrad Post. <https://visegradpost.com/en/2023/08/29/a-declaration-for-a-free-europe-of-nations-announcing-a-possible-new-european-group/>

Continental Conservative Congress which was organised by the Serbian People's Party (SNS) and the US Republicans for National Renewal in Belgrade in November last year. The event was attended by politicians from AfD, Fidesz, FPÖ, Salvini's League, NR, Spanish VOX and last but not least the American Republican Party.⁵ Nevertheless, SPD is a part of the rising sovereign populist movement, having the potential to increase its influence in the Czech Republic. The question is whether they will be able to convince people to vote for the SPD in the election to an institution which is strongly criticised by the party itself. Moreover, the SPD can experience the same situation which happened to social democrats and communists whose voters largely took ANO's side. This risk will be imminent in the future all the more so that the ANO has recently adopted conservative and socially-oriented policies in many respects.⁶

Senate and regional elections

These are second-order elections both in terms of popularity and real power. The upper chamber of the Parliament has been perceived ambiguously for a long period. On one hand, the existence of the Senate is interpreted as essential for the protection of the liberal democratic system, on the other, the chamber is criticised as redundant. Since the establishment of the Czech Republic, the Senate was usually controlled by the opposition, which made it a political counterbalance to the government and the majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Nonetheless, if the Senate is to be perceived as the key actor in protecting the constitutional order, a question about the role of the Constitutional Court emerges naturally. In fact, the existence of several bodies counterbalancing the executive and the ruling coalition seems rather excessive and makes an efficient operation of the political system difficult if not impossible.

The country has a proportional representation system so the government is necessarily composed of two or more parties, which prevents a single party from dominating the political and state institutions. The political will of several ruling parties, which is weakened by the very need to seek compromises, is further obstructed by the upper chamber and, in the last instance, by the Constitutional Court which supervises conformity with the Constitution. If one adds incessant control on the part of the media, an immense number of NGOs, supranational institutions (first of all, the EU authorities), inflexible legal framework, bureaucratism and

⁵ Gaspar, F. (2023, November 11). *Conservative Conference in Belgrade: CPAC's Little Brother*. The European Conservative. <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/commentary/conservative-conference-in-belgrade-cpacs-little-brother/>

⁶ Zemánek, L. (2023, May 12). *Redrawing the Czech Political Scene: A Revival of Conservatism?* China-CEE Institute. <https://china-cee.eu/2023/05/12/czech-republic-political-briefing-redrawing-the-czech-political-scene-a-revival-of-conservatism/>

departmentalism together with interests of influential businessmen and local actors, it becomes clear that efficient governance is hardly possible in the Czech Republic under the current conditions. From this perspective, the low popularity of the Senate is far from surprising. It can be demonstrated in the voter turnout, especially in the second round. Over the last ten years, it oscillated between 33 and 43 per cent in the first round in contrast to a mere 15 to 20 per cent in the second round where only two candidates struggle for votes. It necessarily raises doubts about the legitimacy of senators and their actions, particularly, if they carry out policies in breach of the government programme. For example, when the chairman of the upper chamber Miloš Vystrčil initiated an official visit to Taiwan in 2020, it contradicted the attitude of all other highest constitutional representatives as well as valid state strategies. It is worth emphasising that Miloš Vystrčil was elected a senator by a mere 8,144 people in 2016. One cannot be, therefore, surprised by the controversial reputation of the Senate and repeated appeals for its dissolution.

This year, the Senate elections will be held in 27 out of 81 districts. The mandate will expire for such prominent senators as Pavel Fischer and Jiří Drahoš. Both of them have been involved in China-related activities, being supportive of developing political relations with Taipei. Nonetheless, they will retain their position if standing as a candidate. The upper chamber is dominated by the government parties in contrast to the ANO which has solely five representatives while the SPD has no senator at all. Despite the low popularity of the incumbent cabinet, one cannot expect a fundamental change in the Senate's political orientation. It is not possible for objective reasons because only one-third of the members will be (re)elected and, moreover, the two-round election system favours consensual, non-controversial candidates. Given the fact that the ruling SPOLU coalition will likely maintain their joint project at least until the next parliamentary election, they will benefit from their cooperation, being able to push through their candidates together with the STAN. The chance to increase the number of senators on the part of the ANO is thus rather limited. The same applies to candidates nominated by the SPD. Moreover, the Social Democratic Party (SOCDEM) can lose its last representative in the upper chamber and complete its withdrawal from parliamentary politics.

The results can, at the same time, be different in the elections to regional governments which will be held together with the Senate one. The Czechs will elect new political representation in 13 regions except for the capital of Prague. Unlike the two-round system for the Senate, the regional elections have a proportional representation system. It creates wider opportunities for different parties. The regional elections are sometimes considered a referendum about the national government and the ruling coalition parties. It can be true in

some cases but it definitely does not hold true in general. The voter turnout is usually much lower compared to the election to the Chamber of Deputies and largely coincides with the Senate turnout. The 2020 regional elections were typical of the success of the then opposition, especially ODS, Pirates and STAN in contrast to a fiasco on the part of social democrats and communists. Overall, one can expect further strengthening of the ANO and SPD to the detriment of the government parties but the success of the SOCDEM and KSČM is highly improbable. Again, social democrats can lose their last governor. Last time, the ANO won in ten regions so it will be interesting to observe whether they will manage to increase this figure. At the same time, however, the election victory does not entail participation in the regional government because other parties can cooperate together against the winner just as at the national level. It happened in 2020 when the ANO gained only three governors.

Controversies over postal voting

Aside from pre-election clashes, one can expect disputes over election rules. Even though these will remain unchanged in the case of the three elections held this year, the government has recently agreed on an important adjustment of the mechanism that could come into force in 2025 when the Czechs will elect their deputies. The ruling coalition wants to enforce the introduction of postal voting despite the position of the parliamentary opposition. The Czech Republic is one of the few European countries that does not allow their citizens abroad to take part in elections through postal voting. This method is prohibited in Croatia, France, Iceland and Malta as well. According to the government, postal voting will provide citizens with the possibility to use their basic political rights whereas the opposition warns against the risk of violation of the principle of secret voting and electoral fraud, referring to the problems in such countries as Austria or the US. In Austria, the results of the presidential election were declared null and void in 2016 because of mistakes in counting the postal votes.

Yet the Czech debate has also an utterly practical political dimension. The new instrument could be used by some 600,000 Czechs living abroad, which would have a significant impact on the overall results.⁷ Both the government and opposition are aware that the Czechs abroad overwhelmingly vote for the government parties so postal voting could provide them with a

⁷ *Vláda podpořila zavedení korespondenční volby pro Čechy v zahraničí* (2024, January 4). Tvoříme Evropu. <https://tvorimevropu.cz/2024/01/04/vlada-podporila-zavedeni-korespondencni-volby-pro-cechy-v-zahranici/>

comparative advantage and prevent the ANO and SPD from assuming power. A comparison of the results of the 2021 parliamentary election is very illustrative.⁸

	Overall votes (in %)	Votes abroad (in %)
SPOLU	27.79	34.26
ANO	27.12	5.00
Pirates+STAN	15.62	50.47
SPD	9.56	2.19

The same applies to the presidential election in 2023. In the second round, 95.41 per cent of people voted for Petr Pavel in contrast to a mere 4.59 per cent votes for Andrej Babiš.⁹ It is beyond any doubt that the introduction of postal voting would strengthen the liberal hegemony.

Conclusion

The political status quo could be undermined only by an economic or geopolitical “black swan”. State authorities and government politicians generally expect overall stabilisation of the socioeconomic situation after several shocks since 2020. Inflation could return to the level of 2 to 3 per cent year-on-year after 15.1 and 10.7 per cent in 2022 and 2023 respectively. The mild recession will likely be replaced with a moderate growth between 1 and 2 per cent. However, such calming will further weaken any attempts to carry out structural reforms, which will have long-term negative consequences for the country.

⁸ *Parlamentní volby 2021. Výsledky voleb ve světě* (2021). iROZHLAS. <https://www.irozhlas.cz/volby/parlamentni-volby-2021/zahranici>

⁹ *Jak volili Češi v zahraničí: rekordní volební účast byla v Belgii i Německu* (2023, January 28). iROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/prezidentske-volby-2023vysledky-zahranici-brusel_2301281518_mst