Czechia

A Lucky Break from Populism?

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While the defeat of Prime Minister Andrej Babia at the hands of a right-wing coalition surprised everyone, the electoral results can hardly be heralded as the end of populism. They do mark the demise of the billionaire oligarch Babia, but they also show how far the political scene has shifted towards xenophobic and authoritarian tendencies, with no real left-wing forces in view.

**Babia Ousted by the Right**

"We made it, we made it!" shouted in unison the swanky youngsters assembled at the Prague headquarters of the SPOLU ('Together') coalition made up of three right-wing conservative parties. After trailing in the ballot counts during the whole of Saturday afternoon, they were lifted to a surprising victory at the finish line by the urban vote that came in the evening. With close to 28% of the vote, SPOLU overtook the ruling ANO party of Prime Minister Andrej Babia, who got just a little over 27%. The latter still received one more seat than its rivals, but he has virtually no chance of building a parliamentary majority anymore.

Indeed, the third party, a more liberal coalition built by the centre to centre-left Pirate party and the centre-right Mayors and Independents (STAN), received over 15% of the vote and the two coalitions are set to build a large coalition government. On the very evening following the elections, the two coalitions met and presented the public with a signed memorandum expressing interest in forming a government and pledging not to engage in negotiation with any other party. In doing so, they wanted to cut short to any efforts by Babia to try to lure SPOLU or one of its parties into a new government.

They also wanted to send a strong signal to president Miloa Zeman, a declared ally of the Prime Minister, who is responsible for entrusting the elections' winner with the formation of a government. Zeman had previously declared that he considered coalitions a scam and that he would only recognise the strongest party as the winner, in this case the ANO party. Following the results, Babia and his troops have indicated that they are expecting to be entrusted with forming a government by the president, but it is already clear that they have little hope of achieving anything. On Sunday morning, after meeting with Babia, President Zeman had to be urgently brought to the hospital and his faltering health could delay negotiations.

**Not Much to Celebrate**

SPOLU's victory can be interpreted as the success of the conservative anti-Babia programme it offered, but the elections themselves can hardly be considered as anything more than a lucky break for liberal democracy in the country. Despite all the scandals hitting the Prime Minister, the Pandora Papers revelations only adding another layer a few days before the vote, and despite the catastrophic mismanagement of the pandemic, the opposition coalitions could not gather a majority of votes. Gaining a parliamentary majority only thanks to more than a million votes (over 20%) ‘thrown away’ to smaller parties failing to enter parliament, their 'triumph' is no more than a lucky break.

As a matter of fact, it would have been enough for two of those smaller parties, the social-democrats (SSD) and the ‘Oath’ (PYisaha) party, to gather twenty thousand votes more each and Czechia would have woken up with quite a different outlook. Indeed, the two so-called democratic coalitions would have not obtained a majority of seats and
those smaller parties could have been tempted to join Babia instead of the old neoliberal right-wing forces. After all, the social-democrats have brought Babia to power in 2013 and kept the alliance going after the 2017 elections. And the 'Oath' (PYísaha) led by a former anti-corruption police officer played on the same populistic tropes as Babia in the past and could have also been tempted to choose the oligarch maverick over the old elites.

The Shadow of a Far-Right Coalition

Even worse, it wasn't before more than 75% of ballots were counted that the nightmare scenario of Babia allying with the far-right Freedom and Democracy Party (SPD) started withering away. For the whole afternoon, it seemed like ANO and the SPD had the 101 seats necessary to build the next government and it would not have been such a surprise to see the Prime Minister enter such a Faustian pact, since he built his campaign on anti-migrant and anti-EU rhetoric. Even before the vote, some ANO figureheads were already talking about a post-electoral alliance with the SPD. Finally, the SPD received a little under 10% and lost two seats, but mostly because of smaller far-right parties cannibalizing its voter base.

The real message of the elections is not that Czechs want to turn the page on the oligarchic populism of Andrej Babia, but rather that they are a majority ready to support political projects based on the kind of populist, authoritarian and radical right ideas that have become mainstream. Babia's sharp turn towards the far right during the campaign hardly cost him any votes: quite the opposite. And the main opposition forces did not stand up against the anti-migrant rhetoric; they just argued that it was not a relevant topic. Even Babia's self-proclaimed democratic opposition is far from liberal ideals, with the ODS (Civic Democratic Party), the main party of the Spolu coalition, being filled with conservative homophobic and xenophobic deputies. Their leader, and probably next prime minister, Petr Fiala, is not even convinced that climate change is a human-made disaster.

A Leftist Phoenix?

Part of Andrej Babia's defeat comes from the assisted suicide committed by left-wing parties together with the oligarch billionaire. Both the SSD and the KSM kept Babia in power since 2018 and failed to show any tangible results from this collaboration. Unable to push through any real left-wing agenda and even tamely watching by as ANO passed some anti-social legislation with the help of the right and far-right, they became entirely discredited and irrelevant. Especially as politics became increasingly divided between a pro- and an anti-Babia camp, it made more sense to support Babia's than to support his allies or to vote for parties who really opposed him. Trying to campaign by criticising the ruling party they kept in power didn't work out for the SSD and the KSM, strangely enough. As soon as it became clear that the two parties had missed the electoral threshold, both of their leaders resigned and it is unsure whether they will recover from this historical knock-out.

While the old left parties were heading towards the dustbin of history, there was some hope that the liberal Pirate party with some centre-left tendencies could represent some kind of watchdog in the new anti-Babia coalition. Running in a coalition with the centre-right Mayors and Independent (STAN), they nevertheless had a disappointing result (15,6%) and, worst of all, saw the system of preferential voices [1] push forward most STAN candidates in front of theirs. As a result, the Pirate party ends up with only 4 of the 37 deputies elected on the coalitions' list, despite being the senior party in the alliance. The PirSTAN coalition has announced that it will nevertheless continue advancing as a united group with a common programme, but it is unclear if the Pirates will really be able to make their voices heard in the announced right-wing coalition. Especially since their four deputies will not be necessary for the new government to maintain majority.
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As Czechia moves on towards a future that strangely resembles the past, with roughly the same political forces taking over after socio-economic turmoil, as they did in 2010 after the financial crisis, it remains to be seen whether the same mistakes will be repeated. In 2010-2013, the right-wing government imposed brutal austerity measures that triggered mass protests, but it was Babia, and not the social movements, that gained political capital from this wave of discontent. Will this government be more careful to avoid mass protests? And will left-wing grassroots movements be able to provide other alternatives than a populist oligarch, an authoritarian former cop, or some other far-right projects? It is definitely a historical opportunity for a new Left, but it will be difficult considering the shift of the entire political scene towards conservative, (far-)right positions.

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[1] In Czechia, each elector votes for a regional party list and can give a preferential vote to four candidates from this party, which can make some people go up the list and have more chance to be elected. While the initial order of candidates is chosen by the party, electors can change the order with their preferential votes. It seems like STAN voters massively used that option and concentrated their efforts on the top STAN candidates, making them overtake the Pirate candidates, while Pirate voters did not use the option much or spread their preferential votes across Pirate candidates.