

Briefing on

Parliamentary Elections in the Czech Republic

October 8-9, 2021

Daniel Martínek

IDM Research Associate

65,43 %

voter turnout

22

running political entities

200

seats in the
Chamber of Deputies

Introduction

One year after the regional and Senate elections in October 2020, the legislative elections have been held in Czechia on 8th and 9th October 2021. During the eighth elections since the founding of the state in 1993, a total of 200 members of the lower house of the Parliament coming from 14 constituencies have been elected for another four-year term.

Twenty-two registered political entities have nominated their candidates for the Chamber of Deputies, eight of which had a real chance of receiving seats in the future government. The total of 101 seats were needed to win the majority in the Parliament. Due to the ongoing pandemic measures, the Ministry of the Interior has decided that, as in last year's elections, quarantined people will be able to vote from a car or a portable ballot box. Any citizen of the Czech Republic who was 18 years old on at least the second day of the election could cast a vote.

Change of the electoral system

In February 2021, the Constitutional Court decided, based on a complaint from a group of senators (coming from the following parties: STAN – Mayors

and Independents, KDU-ČSL – Christian and Democratic Union and TOP 09), to repeal part of the electoral law in force since 2001. According to the court's ruling, the former electoral law violated the equality of the voting right and disadvantaged smaller candidate entities. Following a period of uncertainty, new election rules were approved by the parliament and the president in May 2021, only a couple of months before the elections.

The amendment to the electoral law regulates the entry threshold for candidate coalitions. The 5 percent threshold for the entry of individual parties and movements remains unchanged. However, whereas two-member coalitions used to have to win at least 10 percent, the new regulation recognises only 8 percent as sufficient. Three-member and multi-member coalitions only need to secure 11 percent instead of the previous 15 respectively 20 percent. Moreover, the allocation of seats was changed accordingly. Under the new law, each electoral party obtains an appropriate share of seats in the Chamber according to its share in the total number of valid votes casted.

At the same time, this electoral gain is supposed to be reflected in the allocation of seats within individual regional candidate lists of the single political party. In general, the new electoral law has brought a more equal opportunity for smaller parties, while large parties and coalitions, on the other hand, will eventually lose several seats. Finally, a voter could cast preferential votes, where up to four candidates within one party could be identified and prioritised over the other candidates.

The running political entities

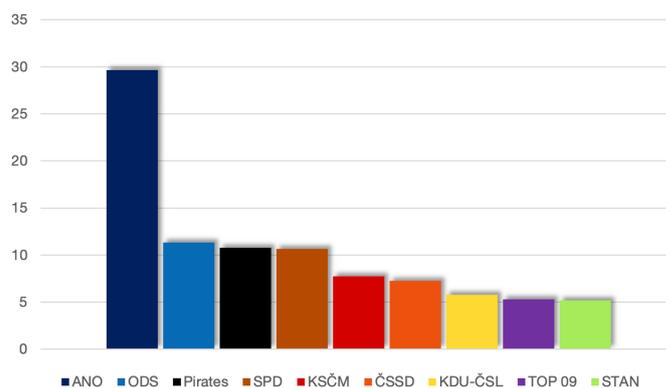
For the purposes of the briefing, only eight political entities were mentioned here, that according to the opinion polls, could reach the relevant threshold for representation in parliament. The sovereign winner of the last elections in 2017 and the movement founded and led by the current Prime Minister Andrej Babiš was again this year favoured as the party with the highest support among the population.

The SPOLU coalition, a bloc of three center-right, conservative parties formed in October 2020 – the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Christian Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) and Liberal-Conservatives (TOP 09) – was close behind. The coalition of Pirates and Mayors, which was formed in December 2020, was the third one among the political subjects with assumed support of more than 20 percent. Formed by splitting from the Dawn of Direct Democracy in 2015, the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD), led by Tomio Okamura, premiered in parliament four years ago and represented a growing group with a support of around 10 percent.

The other half of the monitored political entities were political parties that balanced around the threshold for entering the parliament. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which supported the minority government of Andrej Babiš in the past four years, could still rely on the support of its electorate.

However, the same could not be said of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), which was unable to tackle the decline of its support in the last decade, facing therefore a real risk that it will not participate in the formation of the upcoming government. The Oath party (Přísaha), founded by Robert Šlachta in January 2021, was the political newcomer and the only extra-parliamentary party running in the elections that had the potential to enter the parliament. A rather small chance was attributed to the newly formed coalition (TSS) of the Tricolour Citizens 'Movement (Trikolóra), Free Citizens' Party (Svobodní) and Freeholder Party of the Czech Republic (Soukromníci), which, however, was lacking a sufficiently formed electorate core.

Election results 2017



Source: MF Dnes

Coalitions as the key to power

Coalitions were one of the most significant aspects of the 2021 elections, with the two-party alliance Pirates and Mayors and the three-party bloc SPOLU trying to prevent fragmentation of the political landscape and to maximise their electoral potential. In order to avert the ANO party and particularly Andrej Babiš from forming a future government, these opposition groups were able to find consensus across their ideological positions and to agree on a common election agenda.

In the case of the SPOLU formation, the conservative anchoring of all parties involved represented a suitable precondition for the creation of a jointly organised electoral platform. Through a unifying element represented by an emphasis on traditional values (family, nation, Christianity), the formation targets rather older generation of the electorate. Similarly, the coalition of Pirates and Mayors has found unifying elements in pragmatic cooperation and seeks to gain the support of the widest possible electorate by an ingenious combination: while the Pirate Party has been established in large cities for several years, Mayors rely on a strong local electoral base in the regions and rural areas. Although both coalitions were characterised by their "anti-Babiš" definition, there was no uniform agreement, especially within the SPOLU alliance, regarding possible post-election negotiations with Babiš and the potential formation of a government with his party ANO.

The current trend, which can be observed in the wider region of Central and Eastern Europe, has not escaped Czechia, where the decline of support for social democratic and left-wing parties at the national level affected two long-established political parties: first the KSČM, but foremost the ČSSD, one of the oldest political parties in the Czech Republic.

Between Western liberal democracy and Eastern illiberalism

The election campaign and programme, ideological identification and European political affiliation of individual candidate entities largely suggested two contradictory geopolitical directions in the pre-election development. They will be an important determining factor in the post-election negotiating composition and within the newly formed government. While the coalitions of SPOLU and Pirates/Mayors, as well as party ANO, define themselves as clearly pro-European (EU), pro-Western (NATO) actors, the SPD and KSČM push for the adoption of a referendum law and openly calling for the withdrawal both from the EU and NATO.

Another dividing line was the dealing with Covid-19 pandemic. The country was harshly hit in terms of mortality, for which Babiš and his incompetence in resolving the crisis was blamed by many. But still, the ANO party remained stable in the party preferences and was not affected by the development of the past months.

The same applied for the central topics of the election campaigns, which revolved around Babiš' way of governing and the linkages between his political and business activities, leaving the topic of Covid-19 completely on the fringes of pre-election discourse. Babiš' highly controversial political and entrepreneur performance, together with his admiration of and close friendship with the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, raised concerns about the possible further direction of the country in the event of his re-appointment as Prime Minister.

Small parties as a decisive element of post-election negotiations

The election results of small parties currently trying to reach the 5 percent threshold for entering the parliament was the crucial aspect in the formation of the future government. If the ČSSD and KSČM would obtain mandates, the negotiating position of ANO party with the possible involvement of the SPD would improve. On the contrary, their failure and dropping out from parliament would strengthen the pressure of the opposition coalitions SPOLU and Pirates/Mayors against ANO party within the post-election negotiations.

However, the (rather surprising) cooperation of the ANO party with the SPOLU coalition could not be ruled out either, since certain opinion inconsistency amongst individual SPOLU candidates persisted. These did not reject a possible coalition with the ANO party, provided that Babiš renounces his ambitions for re-election as a Prime Minister.

Finally, the decision of the President of the Czech Republic Miloš Zeman, who is obliged to appoint the Prime Minister, may eventually become a game changer in the government-formation process. Whether he entrusts Babiš or the leader of the winning coalition SPOLU is entirely within the Zeman's competence. Based on long-term sympathies and mutual support between Zeman and Babiš, however, the re-appointment of the current Prime Minister can be assumed.

The election results 2021

The parliamentary elections were an example of the fragmentation of both the political landscape and the electorate. From the above-mentioned eight running entities, only four eventually exceeded the entry threshold to the Chamber of Deputies. The central election competition between the opposition coalition SPOLU and the party ANO resulted in a very close outcome: the SPOLU coalition with its leader Petr Fiala achieved to be the winner of the elections with 27.79% of the votes, the ANO party of Andrej Babiš finished in second place with 27.12%. The coalition of Pirates and Mayors with the election leader Ivan Bartoš landed in third place with 15.62% and the SPD party of Tomio Okamura will be represented in the Parliament with the election result of 9.56%.

For the first time since the formation of the independent Czech Republic in 1993, the traditional and well-established left-wing parties of the ČSSD (4,65%) and the KSČM (3,60%) have not surpassed the entry threshold and will not be represented in parliament at all. Finally, the newly formed Oath Party (4,68%) and the Tricolour Coalition (2,76%) did not reach the relevant amount of votes and will remain outside the parliament.

A positive outcome of the elections is the future representation of women in the Chamber of Deputies, where female politicians will make up 50 mandates (quarter of the seats) in the lower house.

The new system of preferential votes mainly contributed to this highest female representation in history of the Czech parliament.

Post-election negotiations

Although the SPOLU coalition eventually won the elections, it represents a fragile victory, considering it won by only a few tenths of a percent and in terms of mandates the coalition even obtained one mandate less than the second ANO party - a paradoxical situation caused by the recent change in the electoral system. Immediately after the announcement of the result, the SPOLU coalition drew up a memorandum together with a coalition of Pirates and the Mayors, in which they undertook not to enter into negotiations with any other political entity.

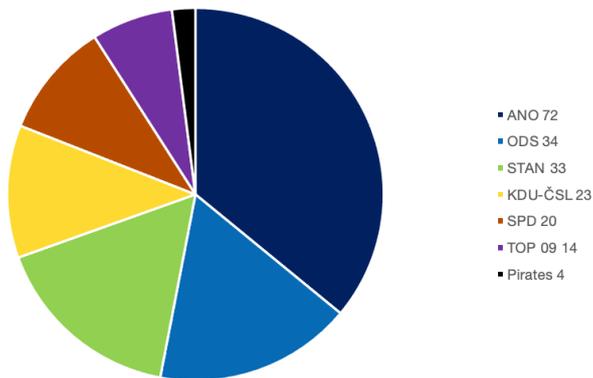
Therefore, the parties of ANO and SPD are expected to end up in opposition. Although Babiš assured several times that he would leave politics in the event of electoral failure, not only would he become a part of strong opposition, but his political career could continue with his possible candidacy in the 2023 presidential elections. The elections themselves testified that, despite all of Babiš' controversial activities, the core of his electorate remains strong.

Post-election negotiations were complicated by the deteriorating state of health of President Zeman, who was admitted to the hospital on the day after elections. Although the SPOLU and Pirates and Mayors coalitions continue to discuss a future government, the president's nomination of the future Czech prime minister remains unfulfilled, leaving to certain extent the post-election negotiations in a political vacuum.

The running political entities, their main candidates and political orientations

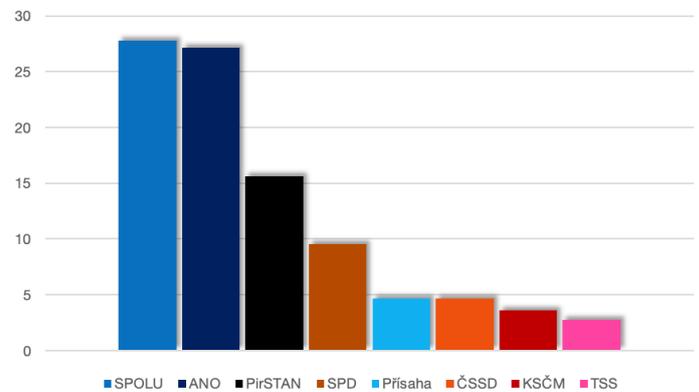
Political entity	Main candidate	Political ideology	European party
ANO 2011	Andrej Babiš	Populism, pro-European	ALDE
SPOLU	Petr Fiala	Liberal conservatism, pro-European	ECR/EPP
Pirates and Mayors	Ivan Bartoš	Liberalism, Progressivism, pro-European	Greens-EFA/EPP
Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD)	Tomio Okamura	Right-wing populism, Eurosceptic	ID
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM)	Vojtěch Filip	Communism, Eurosceptic	Left
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	Jan Hamáček	Social Democracy, pro-European	S&D
Oath party (Přísaha)	Robert Šlachta	Anti-corruption, Populism, pro-European	-
TSS	Zuzana Majerová Zahradníková	National conservatism, Eurosceptic	-

Expected seats distribution in the Parliament



Source: Czech Statistical Office - Volby.cz

Election results 2021



Source: Czech Statistical Office - Volby.cz