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# Czech far right scores big in elections, but struggles to form a government

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Andrej Babiš, riding high. EPA/Martin Divisek

As expected, the general election which took place in the Czech Republic on 20-21 October, was won by authoritarian, populist oligarch Andrej Babiš. He is well known for his brutal business practices, his desire to curtail the role of parliament, and his urge to interfere with the media. Although he is currently being prosecuted for financial irregularities, he and his ANO party nonetheless won 29.64% of the popular vote.

The usually right-of-centre Civic Democratic Party (ODS), some of whose top politicians recently moved sharply to the extreme right, came second with 11.32%. In third place was the anti-establishment Pirate Party, with 10.79%, while the Czech-Japanese-Korean activist Tomio Okamura's sharply xenophobic, anti-refugee and anti-Muslim Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party was fourth, with 10.64% of the vote.

The left, meanwhile, met with electoral disaster. The Czech Social Democratic Party, which has to date been the senior partner in the government coalition and which in 2013 won 20.45% of the vote, saw

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its share crash to a mere 7.27% – putting it behind even the unreconstructed Communist Party, which won 7.76%.

But what matters in the Czech elections is not the number of votes, but the number of seats gained. Babiš's ANO won only 78 seats in parliament's 200-seat lower chamber, and at this stage, it's far from clear with whom it will form a governing coalition.

Babiš cannot go in with the fascist SPD or the communists alone: ANO-plus-SPD equals 100 seats, while ANO-plus-Communist Party comes to 93. Even though Babiš wants to make “simplifying” changes to the Czech constitution, this appears impossible after the election, because none of the potential coalitions of partners that might support this would reach the three-fifths majority (120 seats) required for constitutional changes.

There's been speculation that ANO could form a coalition with the right-of-centre ODS, but that would still only get it to a mere 103 seats. Coalitions of several parties are also being discussed; the strongest possible combinations of three or four parties would have 125 of the 200 seats. The ultimate question, then, is whether the hard-right SPD will be included.

## **Pirates and cynics**

Babiš has tried to reassure the world that he is strongly pro-European, adding that he is not in favour of forming a government coalition with SPD extremists. But at the same time, he has expressed intentions to form a pan-European “anti-refugee” alliance in order to stop all immigration into Europe.

In the past, he has issued various brutal anti-refugee statements, and in his new “EU anti-refugee project”, Babiš is hoping to gain the support of the new Austrian Chancellor, migration hawk Sebastian Kurz.

The problem with Babiš, though, is he can't be taken at his word. In business and in politics alike, he has a long record of almost always doing the exact opposite of what he promises. And while Western commentators might justifiably be wary of a potentially anti-European, xenophobic, authoritarian and anti-refugee leader who might further destabilise Europe, the fact is, in spite of Babiš's win in the Czech election, his position seems rather unstable.

With the exception of the ODS, most of the other parties might be unwilling or unable to form a lasting coalition. The anti-establishment Pirate Party, which has entered parliament for the first time by winning 22 seats, has no consistent ideology or political programme, and its elected figures are politically inexperienced; its incoherence means it could disintegrate within weeks.



Strange bedfellows: Pirate Party leader Ivan Bartos (L) and the SPD's Tomio Okamura. EPA/Martin Divisek

The same applies to the anti-Muslim, anti-immigration and fiercely xenophobic SPD. Only a couple of years ago, its leader Okamura was still an ardent supporter of multiculturalism and of welcoming foreigners. Cynics say that someone may have advised Okamura to stand on an anti-Muslim, anti-refugee platform simply to gain access to large amounts of money; after all, many Czech politicians enter parliament principally to gain access to lucrative contracts.

Babiš is also dogged by the European Union's OLAF anti-fraud office, which is investigating allegations of fraud and misuse of EU subsidies for his entertainment centre Čapí hnízdo (A Stork's Nest). The inquiry is reportedly nearing completion. Should he be prosecuted or even jailed, it could be disastrous for his party, an extremely autocratic organisation that would all likelihood collapse without him.

So why exactly did the Czech general public vote for an authoritarian oligarch who has promised to "simplify" parliament and who is under criminal investigation for fraud? I spent the election weekend talking to voters in the Czech Republic, and their views were almost unanimous. As one told me: "All the establishment politicians over the past 28 years of post-communism have been corrupt. This is why we have now voted for an anti-establishment figure. Are we bothered that Babiš is being prosecuted for financial irregularities? No, we admire him for being able to outwit evil Brussels."

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*This piece has been updated to correct the number of parliamentary votes needed to pass constitutional changes. The correct number is a three-fifths majority, i.e. 120 seats.*

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