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The imitation game? EP election campaign in the Czech Republic

Reviving memories of the historically lowest election turnout five years ago (18.2%), most commentators have not expected the campaign for the 2019 EP election to spark either any controversy or much of an interest by the Czech public. It was therefore a rather pleasant surprise to see a 10 per cent increase in the turnout – up to 28.7 per cent – which was the highest ever EP election turnout in the Czech Republic, even though still the third lowest in the entire EU this year.

Record number of 39 parties and coalitions have entered the election contest, but the intensity of the campaign was very moderate, as evidenced by the relatively low campaign spending, as most of the relevant parties have more than halved their campaign budgets in comparison with the 2017 Parliamentary Election; the leading party ANO (member of the ALDE group) was estimated to have spent by far the highest figure (over 35 mil. CZK), but still well short of the statutory limit of 50 mil. CZK (2 mil. Euro). The main election debate broadcasted by Czech television on the eve of the election was only watched by 6.3 per cent of the audience – the rest gave preference either to soap operas or to the national team's game at the World Ice Hockey Championship.

Overall, the campaign itself has been fairly lacklustre and predominantly relying upon empty slogans devoid of references to specific issues (e.i. "For fairer Europe", "For better Europe", "We are the heart of Europe, we want to be heard!"), focusing on core supporters rather than attempting to mobilize new ones. Perhaps the only exception to the rule was the topic of double food quality – with global brands being accused of exporting lower quality product to the Czech Republic – that has resonated among voters across political spectrum. The dire lack of original ideas was perhaps most apparent with regards to the visual campaign style of ANO, the party of the Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who has unabashedly copied the trademark of Donald Trump – the red baseball cap with white capital letters, just replacing the words "America First" with "Strong Czechia". This very simple imitation – of course skilfully promoted across different media platforms – secured Babiš plenty of attention, both from journalists and commentators as well as from social media users; and while it has sparked the production of a number of parodies and online memes, it has certainly fulfilled its main objective.

However, the red cap was not the only thing Babiš borrowed from Trump for the campaign. ANO's main slogan for the election was "We will protect Czechia. Strictly and adamantly", a not-too-subtle reference to the migration crisis which has been used as a bogeyman in the Czech politics for the last several years, despite the fact that there are virtually no immigrants in the country. Instigating fear from immigration – and particularly the Muslim-led one – has proven to be an efficient mobilizing strategy in the last 2018 Presidential Election, won by the incumbent President Miloš Zeman. Given that his voters partly overlap with those of



Andrej Babiš, it is no wonder that the Prime Minister's party adopted similar strategy for the EP election, and that Babiš attempted to pose as the hardliner who will protect Czechs from Brussels' alleged plans to impose immigration quotas on member countries. Apart from trying to emulate Trump's nationalistic and protectionist appeal to the voters, Babiš was actively striving to avert the challenge from the extremist right-wing party Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), led by Tomio Okamura, which has reached over 10 per cent of votes in the 2017 Parliamentary Election pretty much only by playing the anti-immigration card. In the 2019 EP election, Okamura resorted to the same rhetoric, although this time he accompanied it by another item from Donald Trump's political marketing repertoire, adapting his signature slogan to "Czech Republic First!".

The bet by the two most prominent Czech populist parties on a Trumpian style of campaigning has brought mixed results in terms of the election outcomes. ANO's win was widely expected, however the 21 per cent of votes that it had received – a steep drop from nearly 30 per cent in the 2017 national election – fell behind most pollsters' predictions, indicating the declining appeal of Andrej Babiš's technocratic populism and, at the same time, growing dissatisfaction with his ongoing business scandals that have prompted investigation by domestic and EU authorities. With 9.1 per cent, SPD on the other hand nearly repeated its result from the 2017 Parliamentary Election, capitalizing on its loyal hard-core electorate, and perhaps also on the support by other right-wing populist leaders that came to Prague for Okamura's election

rally – Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders. The minor partner in the government coalition with ANO, the Czech Social Democratic Party (S&D group), was completely obliterated, failing to cross the 5 per cent threshold – a result widely attributed to the party’s undignified role in Andrej Babiš’s increasingly contested government. Both the two main opposition parties – the conservative ODS (ECR group, 14.5%) and the liberal Pirate Party (14%) – recorded electoral gains, and in combination with several smaller parties that together received nearly 20 per cent, the outcomes of the EP election have been generally interpreted as a victory for the parliamentary opposition. This result has undoubtedly boosted ongoing public protests against Andrej Babiš and his government that have been organized by a civic group called “Million Moments for Democracy”, bringing into the streets a hundred thousand people less than two weeks after the EP election. Looking into the near future, the otherwise uneventful campaign might therefore still have an unexpected and very eventful epilogue.