

The Czech paradox: Did the winner lose and the losers win?

By Tim Haughton, Tereza Novotna and Kevin Deegan-Krause

October 30, 2013



[Joshua Tucker: Continuing our series of [Election Reports](#), we are pleased to welcome the following post-election report on the Oct. 25-26 Czech parliamentary elections from political scientists Tim Haughton (University of Birmingham, UK), Tereza Novotna (Universite Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium) and Kevin Deegan-Krause, (Wayne State University), who blogs about East European politics at the excellent [Pozorblog](#). Deegan-Krause's pre-election report is [available here](#).]

Czech party politics used to be boring. The 2013 parliamentary election, however, highlights the transformation of the party system, the arrival of new entrants and the woes faced by the long-established parties.

The Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) won the election, but the margin of victory was slender. When the centre-right government under Prime Minister Petr Necas collapsed in a scandal involving sex, lies and spies in June, CSSD looked on course to win 30 percent of the vote. The only question seemed to be whether they would strike a deal with the Communists or not.

The party, however, managed just 20.45 percent in October's election, throwing the party into turmoil. Tensions between the different wings of the party re-emerged and within hours the knives were out for party leader Bohuslav Sobotka.

The explanation for the failure of CSSD may lie with Sobotka's lack of charisma and a lackluster campaign full of rather bland promises such a "well-functioning state", but it is worth recalling that the party garnered almost the same level of support it got in the previous election in 2010. The key to CSSD's weakness lies in the inability to integrate the forces of the left in the way that Robert Fico has managed in Slovakia. The Czech Communists (KSCM) remain a solid, robust party with a well-developed organization and loyal and dependable voters.

Just as in 2010 the established parties faced new challengers. Two newly formed parties, ANO 2011 and *Usvit prime demokracie* ('Dawn of the Direct Democracy') mustered over 25 percent of the vote. The two new parties offered the more colorful characters of the election. Usvit was created and led by the Czech-Japanese entrepreneur Tomio Okamura, whereas ANO was founded and led by the Slovak born billionaire Andrej Babis.

With his call for "direct democracy", fused with anti-EU and anti-Roma rhetoric, Okamura's party won 6.88 percent of the vote, but his success was cast into the shadows by Babis's success. ANO (the acronym spells out the word 'yes' in Czech) won 18.65 percent of the vote and was seen at home and abroad as the *de facto* winner of the election. The well-organized and well-funded ANO mixed appeals of left and right, although the most prominent campaign slogan was for low levels of corporate tax. Babis was plagued by accusations of his collaboration with the Communist-era secret services and when interviewed or in the leaders' debates mixed Slovak words and grammar into his Czech, but his star rose in the final few weeks of the campaign thanks in part to media performances including an appearance on the Jan Kraus show, the Czech equivalent of Jay Leno's *Tonight* show.

Dubbed the Czech Berlusconi, “Babisconi” not only channeled significant resources into his campaign and took less of a hands-on role running his company *Agrofert* in recent weeks, he also bought the publisher (MAFRA) of two of the most prominent opinion forming newspapers, *Mlada fronta Dnes* and *Lidove noviny*.

In the eyes of the voters there are murky links between business and politics in the Czech Republic, so the success of businessmen in elections is at one level rather ironic. Nonetheless, in a trend not uncommon across Central and Eastern Europe, a strong element of Babis’s and Okamura’s appeal was “trust me I’m a successful businessmen: I know how to get things done and can run politics like I run my business”, enabling them to make a stark contrast between themselves and the established parties.

Although some polling agencies’ statistics suggest ANO’s support came from across the board, research from Kamil Gregor of Masaryk University indicates that the support for ANO came largely from the parties of the right. A sizeable chunk came from one of the new entrants of the 2010 election Public Affairs (VV). VV was another party with strong business links which had promised the “end of political dinosaurs” three years ago, but had seen its support collapse and the party disintegrate thanks to corruption scandals and the emergence of leaked documents highlighting that its leader Vit Barta was using the party as a vehicle to help his security business win contracts. But the main source of support for ANO came from the two main parties of the centre-right, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and TOP 09.

TOP 09, founded and created in 2009, was the other new entrant to parliament in 2010. In contrast to VV, however, TOP 09 had a clearer ideological agenda (“conservative”) and more seasoned politicians at the helm. The real power in the party is former Finance Minister, Miroslav Kalousek, who is respected rather than liked by a large chunk of the Czech electorate, although he has a less than angelic past. The main source of support for TOP 09 lies in the avuncular figure of former Foreign Minister and former presidential candidate Karel Schwarzenberg who for the second parliamentary election in a row won the largest number of preference votes. Although now in his late 70s, the aristocratic Schwarzenberg appealed strongly to voters in Prague, especially young party activists who used the social media and the internet to boost support for TOP 09.

ODS had been the main party of the Czech right for two decades. The party had weathered political storms in the past and had even managed to survive the departure of its once iconic leader Vaclav Klaus, but the events of 2013 proved to be much more damaging. The sex, lies and spies scandal which brought down the Necas government seemed to encapsulate all that was wrong in Czech politics. It was not so much the fact that the self-declared Catholic Prime Minister and father of four was having an affair with his Chief of Cabinet, Jana Nagyova, but more that he had used state resources to spy on his wife (whom he suspected of cheating on him), the shady deals involving pay-offs to MPs and the role of powerful businessmen, the “godfathers” of Czech politics.

On the one hand ODS's result was a disaster. It slumped to just under 8 percent of the vote; a far cry from the days when it mopped up around a third of the votes. As Sean Hanley of University College London noted, the party did almost everything it should do in such a predicament. It offered some contrition for its past errors, changed its leader (choosing not just someone with political experience but untainted by corruption allegations, Miroslava Nemcova), elevated other new faces and offered a relatively simple clear message to voters: vote right, vote ODS. The fact that ODS, however, hung on to enough votes to cross the 5 percent threshold highlights that party identification and organizational structure matter.

Strongly rooted party identification and organizational structure also helps explain one of the most striking elements of the election: the return to parliament of the Christian-centrist Christian Democratic Union — Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-CSL). The party had been a constant element in parliamentary politics for two decades until the 2010 elections, when the creation of TOP 09 took away leading politicians and many votes, pushing the party below the 5 percent electoral threshold.

A quick glance at the results seemed to suggest two prominent politicians lost the elections. Former Prime Minister and President Vaclav Klaus associated himself with the *Hlavu vzhuru* (“Heads Up”) movement which — despite some extensive campaigning and Eurosceptic rhetoric boosted by Klaus’s suggestion that it might be better if the Czech Republic left the EU — failed to even get over 0.5 percent of the vote.

Moreover, the party formed by current President Milos Zeman in time for the 2010 elections, the Party of the Rights of Citizens – Zemanites (SPOZ) mustered just over 1.5 percent of the vote in this year’s poll. Klaus, however, had been quick to dismiss these elections as “mezivolyby” (interim elections). As for Zeman, the creation of SPOZ was probably largely as a vehicle to help his presidential bid. Having fulfilled that function, the party was of less use to Zeman. He didn’t openly campaign for the party in 2013, although he declared himself a voter and took some serving ministers from SPOZ around the Czech Republic on presidential trips.

Ironically Zeman may prove to be one of the ultimate winners of this election. Not only did the results provoke tensions within Zeman’s old party, CSSD, with the faction closest to him strengthened by Sobotka’s disappointing result, but the results offered no clear coalition. The arithmetic of the election means that no majority coalition can be formed without at least three parties striking a deal. We have observed Czech politics for long enough to know it is foolish to predict the future or even to believe everything said by politicians in the immediate post-election environment, but there are a few points we can make at this stage.

Firstly, KDU-CSL looks a relatively safe bet for any formal coalition or tolerance agreement. Its centrist appeal, history of participation in coalitions and relative secure base makes it appealing as a coalition partner. Secondly, central to virtually any majority coalition would be Babis. The businessman has not only suggested he isn't willing to form a coalition with what he dubs the parties discredited by the corruption of the past (i.e. ODS and TOP 09), he seems unwilling to enter a coalition himself. Although ANO looks a much stronger organization than Okamura's Usvit, it is still a party centred around one man (and his firm) with various other individuals who have jumped onto the bandwagon. Thirdly, it will be difficult for Babis or anyone else to strike a deal with CSSD when the Social Democrats are going through their current turmoil. Sobotka's main rival for the leadership of the party, Michal Hasek, has even created his own coalition negotiating team and has initiated some discussions with other parties himself. Fourthly, it looks like a safe bet that a new governing coalition will not be agreed for some time. The joker in the pack may be Okamura. His appeal to racist sentiments and his call for 'direct democracy' allied to the fragile nature of his party (it would be a surprise if it survived in its current form for long) make him an unattractive coalition partner, but he may be more easily bought off with a promise to change the law on the use of referenda.

Protracted coalition negotiations would benefit two men more than most: Zeman and the current Prime Minister Jiri Rusnok (who was appointed by Zeman). The technocratic caretaker government formed after Necas's resignation was unable to win a vote of confidence which helped trigger the early elections, but until a new government is formed and wins the confidence of parliament, Rusnok will stay in power. There will be numerous hurdles ahead — not the least of which is the passing of any legislation — but Rusnok and his government may remain in power for some time. The ultimate winner, therefore, of the 2013 parliamentary election may be Zeman. Nevertheless, Babis is arguably in the strongest position of all Czech politicians at the moment. His actions may well determine how much power and influence Zeman will have in the coming days, weeks and months.

The 2013 elections suggest Czech party politics are more volatile than they once used to be. Not only is the headline figure (just) higher than at any point since the early 1990s, but the level of change witnessed in the 2010 'earthquake elections' has been maintained. Delving deeper into the statistics and following [Powell and Tucker's](#) distinction between shifts between existing parties and shifts from established to new parties, we can see that there is virtually no change in the level of change in both categories. The dynamism of the Czech party system therefore comes both from within and without. In 2010 prior to the elections two of us wrote an article pointing to the '[fragile stability](#)' of Czech party politics, following two elections which have been dubbed by pundits and analysts, "earthquakes". It might be appropriate instead to start referring to Czech politics' stable fragility.
