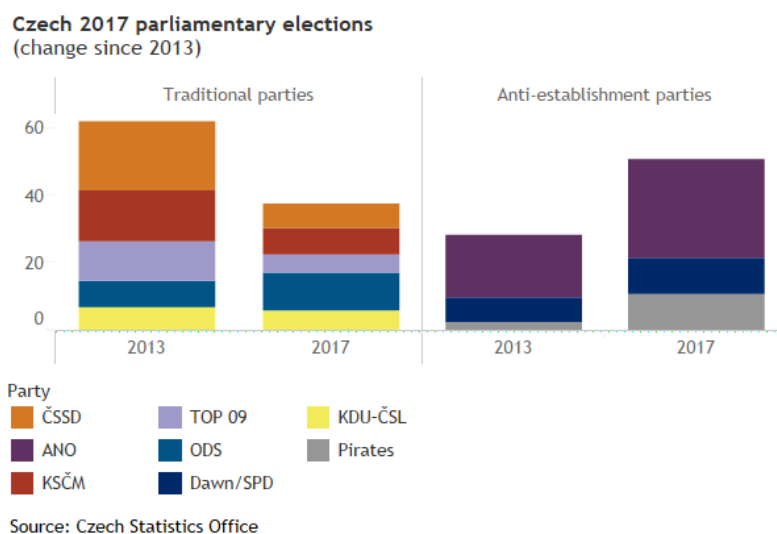


Will ANO say 'Yes' to Euroscepticism and 'No' to Brussels?

Blog post by Practice Lead Alexander Smotrov, 25 October 2017

The parliamentary elections in Czech Republic last weekend produced an unsettling but not unexpected result. The moderate populist ANO party won nearly 30% of the vote, but fell far short of a majority in the parliament. Other anti-establishment parties - the Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) and the Pirates Party - have significantly strengthened their positions. Support for the traditional parties, including Social Democrats who led the previous government for four years, dropped to single digits. Only Eurosceptic Civic Democratic Party (ODS) managed to regain some of its centre-right ground lost in the previous elections.



The question now is how this result could affect the relations between Prague and Brussels, and whether Czechia is set to move even closer to its Visegrád Group neighbours, such as Poland and Hungary, in its animosity towards migrants, adoption of the euro and deeper European integration in general?

Czech Euroscepticism is not a new thing. In 2007, then-President Václav Klaus became the only EU head of state who did not sign the Lisbon treaty. In 2016, President Miloš Zeman mulled an idea of a British-style referendum on Czechia's EU and NATO membership. Even generally pro-European Social Democrats have been cautious about further European integration. Two years ago, Prague sided with other Visegrád nations in voting against EU mandatory quotas for migrants' relocation two years ago. The departure of prominent pro-EU state secretary for European affairs, Tomáš Prouza, from the government earlier this year also weakened Prague's drive towards the EU. The level of the Czechs' satisfaction with the benefits of the EU membership, according to recent

Parlemeter poll, stands at 56%, which is one of the lowest among the member states, only two notches above the UK (Ireland tops the list with 90% and the EU average is 64%).

ANO means “Yes” in Czech, but the acronym also stands for “Action of Dissatisfied Citizens”. As the party lacks a traditional political ideology, the key factors which are expected to determine the future government policies, including on the EU, will be who the ANO governs with and how it responds to demands from prospective coalition partners and to the swings in popular mood which brought the party to power.

ANO’s leader and new Czech Prime Minister in waiting, Andrej Babiš, stepped up his anti-EU rhetoric in the run-up to the elections, stating that he would refuse to give more national powers to Brussels and rejects the euro and a common migration policy. However, this could be a mere reflection of the public sentiment, rather than a firm ideological conviction of a calibre of Jarosław Kaczyński in Poland or Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Right after the election, when Babiš faced a boycott from the mainstream parties to become his coalition partners because of the fraud allegations against him (ironically, linked to misappropriation of the EU funds), he toned down his opposition towards the EU, saying his party is still pro-European and offered to take on an active role in the European debate on sensitive issues like dual quality foods or illegal migration.

Meanwhile, a governing coalition with the populist and highly Eurosceptic parties remains the most realistic prospect for ANO, and this will have consequences on Prague’s EU vocation. In this scenario, Babiš will have to accommodate at least some of their anti-EU views, with future eurozone membership for Czechia as well as EU collective efforts on migration and external relations looking the most vulnerable.

So far, the Czech political elite aligned with the common EU line on the relations with Russia and Ukraine. But both Zeman and Babiš are often seen as Moscow sympathizers and, combined with general European populists’ inclination towards Russia, this could present a challenge to Europe’s unity on sanctions and energy trade.

Zeman - who is a close ally of Babiš and a Eurosceptic himself - will undoubtedly add fuel to the fire as he runs for re-election next January on the same populist platform. And while [a possibility of a de jure ‘Czexit’ referendum still looks quite remote](#), an increased level of Prague’s European policy uncertainty and the threat of its de facto centrifugal drift away from the EU core are very real, and could become a new headache for Brussels in the next few years.

