

Czech Social Democrats are ready to take over power

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The Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) is the frontrunner in the parliamentary elections due to be held on 28 and 29 May in the Czech Republic. The Social Democrats are likely to be the main force in the new cabinet although they will have to seek support from other parties. The formation of a centre-right cabinet or a grand coalition of the CSSD and the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) are the less likely outcomes of the elections. The large number of possible post-electoral configurations will make negotiations on the formation of the government more difficult. Talks will probably be protracted and offer an opportunity for President Vaclav Klaus to be actively engaged. The most likely post-election scenarios will not bring about any major changes in the Czech Republic's foreign policy. This policy will be rather balanced owing to a compromise the coalition will be forced to achieve.

The electoral campaign

The main point in the pre-election dispute between the Czech right and left has been the state of public finances and the shape of planned economic reforms. Although both the CSSD and the ODS see the need for repairing state finances, they differ in their evaluation of the crisis and the proposed changes. The ODS's programme envisages cost cutting and the continuation of liberal reforms, the symbols of which are the flat tax and charges in the healthcare system. In turn, the CSSD wants to cancel the charges and to raise taxes on wealthier citizens.

The phenomenon of new parties

Seven parties (for results of the recent public opinion polls see Appendix) have a real chance of winning some of the two hundred seats in the Chamber of Deputies. The highest support is enjoyed by CSSD, which is moving ahead of ODS, and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM). The Christian Democratic KDU-CSL and the Green Party - for whom polls show results very close to the five-percent threshold - are working hard to preserve their seats in parliament. Their main competitors are the parties aiming to win seats in parliament for the first time, such as the conservative TOP 09 and the centrist Public Affairs (VV). The new parties draw on the popularity of their leaders. The president of TOP 09 is the former foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg, and VV is led by the popular former journalist Radek John. The core of the two parties consists of the former rank and

file members of KDU-CSL and ODS. TOP 09 has a liberal economic programme, similar to that of ODS, and it supports a strong alliance with the USA and definitely wants to deepen European integration. VV has a rather vague programme, the key slogan of which is increasing citizen's influence on political decisions. It can be concluded from statements given by the party leaders, the most influential of whom are a group of businessmen from Prague, that VV is more likely to co-operate with ODS than with CSSD.

The likely scenarios

Pre-election polls indicate that CSSD is the clear favourite, albeit without having a chance to form a government by itself. The Social Democrats in the first order will try to strike a deal with KDU-CSL and the Green Party, provided that they win enough votes to enter parliament. Additionally, Public Affairs may be an alternative candidate with whom the Social Democrats could start coalition talks. However, mutual attacks from both parties during the election campaign indicate that the talks will not be easy.

Even if CSSD and KSCM in total win over half of the seats in parliament, the Social Democrats would rather not form a government coalition with the Communists because this would definitely not be accepted by Czech elites. "Political collaboration" with KSCM, which has been isolated on the political scene since 1989, is also forbidden under CSSD's internal resolution. However, a deal between the Social Democrats and the Communists cannot be ruled out, especially if negotiations with the smaller centrist parties end in a failure. As a result of such a deal, CSSD could form a minority government accepted in parliament by KSCM. However, in such a situation the Social Democrats would have to make a number of concessions, including offering posts in parliament and the government administration.

If the right-wing parties, ODS, TOP 09 and VV achieve good results and at the same time the smaller centrist parties, such as KDU-CSL and the Green Party, enter parliament, a centre-right government could be formed. However, such a cabinet would have to consist of several parties, which would complicate coalition talks and adversely affect the government's stability.

The scenario which will be considered by the parties last is that of a grand coalition of ODS and CSSD. This could be considered seriously in the case of a post-election deadlock, should the right and the left receive equal support or if potential coalition partners make overly high demands with regard to the large parties.

Implications for foreign policy

The most likely configurations of post-election coalitions indicate that no major change should be expected in Czech politics; instead the structural reforms can be slightly adjusted and the present line in foreign policy will be preserved, with a possible change of rhetoric. If CSSD forms a coalition with a centrist partner, the 'continental' line (oriented at deepening European integration and a simultaneous rapprochement with Russia) is likely to be

adjusted by the coalition partner, sceptical about the Kremlin's policy and more willing to maintain good relations with the USA. Similarly, in the case of a wide coalition of centre-right parties, the 'pro-Atlantic' orientation preferred by ODS will be weakened by its coalition partners, willing to deepen European integration as a priority.

A more significant change can be expected if CSSD forms a government supported by KSCM. Although the Social Democrats would not allow the Communists to influence any key issues in the government's policy, the lack of a centrist coalition partner would most likely strengthen the party's left wing, which rejects liberal reforms, is sceptical about the Czech Republic's engagement in NATO activity and wants closer contacts with Russia.

Post-election negotiations are likely to drag on. President Vaclav Klaus will play a large role in the process. The constitution authorises him to choose at his discretion the person he will entrust with the mission of forming government. The Czech president is expected to support the right-wing parties and may successfully impede any attempts to build a government based on a deal between the Social Democrats and the Communists.

Appendix:

Support for major political parties according to polls conducted in May by Czech public opinion research centres (CVVM, STEM and Factum Invenio).

Party name	Support range (%)
CSSD	26.3 – 30.5
ODS	18.7 – 22.9
KSCM	11.8 – 13.1
TOP 09	9.2 – 14
Public Affairs (VV)	8.8 – 12.6
KDU-CSL	3.5 – 5.5
Green Party	2.6 – 4.5