Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 30.10.2013 www.osw.waw.pl

Political destabilisation is becoming entrenched following elections in the Czech Republic

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The Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) gained majority of votes in the snap election to the Chamber of Deputies on 25–26 October. However, the real winner of the election is ANO 2011, a grouping founded by billionaire Andrej Babis. ANO 2011 came in second, attracting crowds of voters frustrated with the activity of the traditional political parties. The Social Democrats have the greatest chance of forming a cabinet in coalition with ANO 2011 and the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-CSL), which is returning to the Chamber of Deputies after an absence of three years. Such a broad coalition of groupings whose political manifestos are contradictory in many areas would most likely be rather unstable, in part due to divisions existing inside the individual parties. The key precondition for the formation of a new cabinet is the resolution of the conflict inside the CSSD's leadership between the supporters and opponents of President Milos Zeman, former leader of the Social Democrats. If the pro-presidential faction led by the CSSD deputy head, Michal Hasek, wins, Zeman will be able to influence the work of the future cabinet. The new government will be formed in two or three months at the earliest. The risk of serious disputes occurring within the government is very high and this will contribute to the destabilisation of the Czech political scene.

The post-election landscape

The immediate reason for the snap election to have been held was the political crisis caused by the dismissal of the centre-right cabinet led by Petr Necas as a consequence of the corruption and sleaze scandal which shook the Czech political scene in June this year. The centre-right had been in power for three years, which was a period marked by regular conflicts inside the coalition and corruption scandals. Power was then taken by the cabinet led by Jiri Rusnok, who was nominated by President Milos Zeman in an atmosphere of bitter conflict with the parliamentary majority. The political crisis continuing for the past few months has been coupled with increasing voter disillusionment with the traditional political parties. As a consequence, new political projects with charismatic leaders with very clear-cut views, which are not drawn from any concrete ideology, have been gaining popularity. The left-wing CSSD and the right-wing ODS, which have dominated the Czech political scene since the 1990s, are carrying a heavy burden of scandals and corruption allegations. In the opinion of a great part of the public, these parties do not represent voters, and are instead susceptible to influence from non-transparent criminal structures. Furthermore, they have

serious problems with finding reliable leaders due to the limited staff rotation. In effect, both the CSSD and the ODS achieved the worst results in this election since the collapse of Czechoslovakia.

The frustration which voters feel is reflected in the strong support for anti-establishment groupings. ANO 2011, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) and the Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy won in aggregate of over 40% of the votes. The Communists were traditionally backed by their regular electorate dissatisfied with the transformation since 1989. ANO 2011 and the Dawn of Direct Democracy attracted mainly those who are looking for distinct characters and strong personalities in politics. The leader of ANO 2011, Andrej Babis is a potentate on the food and chemical markets with a fortune estimated at US$2 billion. He is trying to convince the public that the state should be managed like a company, and that the present politicians have no idea about management. Tomio Okamura, a businessman with Japanese roots, is appealing for the Czech Republic to opt for direct democracy, like Switzerland. He is also suggesting that the Roma minority, with support from the Czech Republic, should seek to set up their own state, for example, in India. The political movements ANO 2011 and the Dawn of Direct Democracy are more reminiscent of political business projects than political parties. Their manifestos are vague, which could cause divides within their parliamentary clubs. Since these groupings entered the Chamber of Deputies and ANO 2011 could participate in the new cabinet, a further destabilisation of the Czech political scene may be expected.

The conflict among the Social Democrats

The fragmented parliament (see Appendix), the lack of strong players on the political scene (Andrej Babis could potentially become one) together with the president's constitutional prerogatives are all bringing about a situation wherein Milos Zeman will be dealing the cards in Czech politics until the new government is formed. It is in the president's interests to maintain this position also once the new cabinet is in place. The electoral defeat of the Party of Civic Rights – Zemanovci means that Zeman could only gain influence in the future government, if the faction of the CSSD who support him strengthen their position. To achieve this, the president could delay the process of the formation of a new cabinet for as much as several months. A dispute between the faction headed by the present CSSD leader, Bohuslav Sobotka (the more ideological one which is ready to co-operate with the KSCM) and the faction headed by the party's deputy chairman, Michal Hasek (the more pragmatic one, possibly ready to co-operate with right-wing parties) has been observed among the Social Democrats since 2010. The two factions also differ in their approaches to some economic ideas being pushed through by influential business groups. The victory of Milos Zeman, the former CSSD leader, in the presidential election has strengthened Hasek's faction, who see the president as a strong ally. Sobotka's camp are warning against co-operation with Zeman, claiming that the president only needs the party as a tool to strengthen his power. Since the CSSD performed worse in the election than expected, the pro-Zeman wing in the party used this as a pretext for insisting than Sobotka should step down as chairman. Sobotka firmly rejected the criticism and announced that he would keep the post until he is dismissed by the party body authorised to do so. It is difficult to predict how the dispute will be resolved, and this is likely to draw out the crisis in the party. Should

the conflict worsen, the extreme scenario is that the CSSD could split in two which would result in an even greater fragmentation of the political party scene.

The possible scenarios for forming a government

The conflict inside the CSSD is postponing the talks on its post-electoral co-operation with ANO 2011 and the Christian Democrats. The CSSD's potential coalition partners will wait and see how the situation is resolved in the party before they make any decisions. Nevertheless, they have already declared that they see Bohuslav Sobotka as a partner they would talk to. As regards the KDU-CSL, it can be assumed that its leaders will decide to enter the coalition regardless of the outcome of the conflict inside the CSSD. However, it is not so obvious what decision ANO 2011 will make. This grouping has gained vast support in an atmosphere of strong resistance against traditional parties and owes its popularity to criticising the political elite. The leaders of ANO 2011 will have to calculate whether they will benefit more from entering government, which entails the risk of confronting seasoned political players (including Milos Zeman), or whether they should be criticising the government in opposition, hoping for a better result in another election. A compromise solution could be conditional support offered by ANO 2011 to a minority cabined formed by the CSSD and the KDU-CSL. If the coalition negotiations are deadlocked, ANO 2011 could cause another snap election to be held. Unlike Andrej Babis, the leaders of the remaining groupings could find it difficult to finance another professional electoral campaign in the coming months.

Appendix

Results of the election to the Chamber of Deputies

Voter turnout	59%	
Party name	**Support level**	**Number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies (total of 200)**
Czech Social Democratic Party	20.5	50
ANO 2011	18.7	47
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia	14.9	33
TOP 09	12	26
Civic Democratic Party	7.7	16

Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy	6.9	14
Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party	6.8	14