

Czech Republic: a second term for President Zeman

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On 26–27 January, President Miloš Zeman was elected for a second five-year term. On a record turnout (66.6%), he defeated the former president of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jiří Drahoš, winning 51.4% of the vote, 152,000 votes more than his rival. Zeman won among the residents of smaller cities and those with lower education, especially in areas with higher levels of unemployment (above 5%). He beat Drahoš decisively in Silesia and Moravia, and in the region bordering the German state of Saxony. In turn, Drahoš won most votes in Prague and the surrounding area, and in most of the major cities. Drahoš was supported by the right-wing parties, led by the main opposition Civic Democratic Party (ODS); Zeman was supported by the ANO movement of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, as well as two opposition parties, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and the xenophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy political movement (SPD).

Commentary

- Miloš Zeman owes his victory to the fact that he made the threat from migrants the main theme of the campaign before the second round of elections. He was aided in this by politicians from the SPD and Communists; thanks to them, in the last few days before the vote the media paid a great deal of attention to the work on the EU's Dublin IV regulations and the risk of new relocation quotas being set. By taking advantage of the strong reluctance in the Czech Republic to accept migrants, Zeman persuaded voters that in 'tough times', an experienced and effective politician was needed. Drahoš, a political novice, claimed that his position in migration policy was similar to Zeman's, but many Czechs saw him as less trustworthy, as in 2015 he had signed an appeal against indifference towards refugees.
- Despite losing, Drahoš achieved a certain degree of success, doubling the number of votes from his result two weeks before, thanks to active support of three of the first-round candidates, among other factors. The figure of over 2.7 million votes for Drahoš is largely the effect of the resentment which a large number of Czechs feel towards Miloš Zeman, who for years has placed himself in opposition to the 'Prague elite'. The president will most likely continue to contribute to the polarisation of society, although at the same time this will be conducive to the activation of liberal circles. However, given the great fragmentation of the opposition critical of Zeman and Babiš, the political potential for these groups will remain limited. The anticipated continued public engagement of Drahoš and a few other anti-Zeman candidates for the presidency will constitute only a minor

gain for this part of the political scene.

- In the coming months, Zeman is likely to focus on domestic politics, which is associated with the process of creating a new government after the failure of Babiš's cabinet to receive a vote of confidence on 16 January. Zeman said that he will reappoint Babiš as prime minister if the latter gathers a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, a process which may take several months. Until then, Babiš's previously dismissed government will hold power. The president is working to get ANO to cooperate with those groups in which he has the greatest influence: the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the Communist Party (KSČM) and the xenophobic SPD. The election of a new governing committee for the Social Democrats, scheduled for mid-February, will be of key importance to the process of creating a new national government, as supporters favouring close cooperation with Zeman are most likely to take control of the party. The favourite for the post of the new party leader is Jan Hamáček, who supports the ČSSD going into government with ANO. However, such a coalition would not have a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and so ANO has discussed the possibility of getting support for a new government from the Communists and the SPD.
- President Zeman will most probably continue his current foreign policy, focusing on the promotion of the interests of Czech entrepreneurs in the East, including Russia and China. To this end, he will continue to call for the elimination of reciprocal sanctions by the EU and Russia, among other moves. The beneficiaries of Zeman's foreign policy so far have been major Czech businessmen, including Petr Kellner, the richest person in the country (he runs the Home Credit group which is active on Eastern European markets and growing in China) and Jaroslav Strnad (owner of the arms holding Czechoslovak Group), whose companies generously supported Zeman's campaign. The President is also expected to continue his criticism of the EU's migration policy and call for the preservation of the sovereignty of the Czech Republic within the EU.

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