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Czech Republic: a good result in the Senate for the ruling coalition, but a warning in the local elections

Krzysztof Dębiec

On 1 October, the week-long cycle of elections to the Senate and local governments (23-24 September) ended in the Czech Republic. One third of the senators (27 seats) were being elected – see Appendix. The greatest number of seats was won by the right-wing Civic Democratic Party – ODS (8) and the Christian Democrat KDU-ČSL (7). These parties also managed to retain three and six seats in the upper house, respectively. As regards the other government coalition parties: the liberal TOP 09 won an additional seat, the centrist Mayors and Independents (STAN) lost two seats and the left-liberal Czech Pirate Party neither lost nor gained any seats. Miloš Vystrčil (ODS) is likely to retain the position of speaker of the upper house. After the election, the five government coalition parties filled 72% of the seats in the Senate, with ODS (28%), STAN (18.5%) and KDU-ČSL (15%) having the most seats.

In the municipal elections, the most votes – 16.6%, up 1.7 points on 2018 – went to ANO, the opposition party led by the former Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. This party won in 8 out of 13 regional capital cities (the largest of which is Ostrava) and came second in the rest of the capitals. In some large cities, it improved its results by up to 8-10 points. The parties of the centre-right government coalition, alone or in smaller alliances, won in 5 of the country's 7 largest cities, including Prague, Brno and Plzeň. A change is expected in Prague, where the new composition of the city council will most likely elect Bohuslav Svoboda from ODS as mayor of Prague. Svoboda was the leader of the victorious coalition's electoral list in Prague and will replace Zdeněk Hřib (Pirates). The turnout in the Senate elections (first round – 42.6%, second round – 19.4%) was higher compared to both the vote two years ago (36.7% and 16.7% respectively), when it was held together with the regional elections (see Appendix), and four years ago, when the format was identical (42.3% and 16.5%). However, the turnout in local elections (46.1%) was lower than in 2018 (47.3%).

Commentary

- The election was a popularity test for the centre-right coalition, which has governed the country since autumn 2021. Andrej Babiš, the leader of ANO, which is leading in the polls, tried to take advantage of the growing social tension associated with high energy prices and the decline in living standards, and called on voters to treat the vote as a referendum on the quality of the government's work. In the second quarter of this year, real wages fell for the third quarter in a row – this time by 9.8% y/y, which was the largest fall among the countries of the region. In September, anti-government demonstrations held by pro-Russian formations took place in Prague and several regional capital cities. The largest

protest was seen in Prague, where 70,000 people took to the streets. As many as 55% of Czechs distrust the government, and two-thirds are dissatisfied with how it is dealing with rising energy prices (Median survey carried out on 6 and 7 September). However, Babiš'sappeals had a limited impact on the turnout, which did not differ significantly from the previous year's average and remained clearly below that of the elections to the Chamber of Deputies and the presidential elections (60-65% each).

- Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), the anti-establishment, pro-Russian party, achieved a major success in the local elections as it tripled the number of its councillors. The party's proposals include withdrawal from NATO and holding a referendum on leaving the EU. It won seats in the councils of all 13 regional capital cities (previously it had councillors in five of them). Furthermore, support for the lists on which its representatives were placedin many regional capital cities has doubled – to 10% in Brno and to 11-12% in Ostrava, Olomouc and Ústí nad Labem. It managed to cross the electoral threshold (5%) in large cities, where it enjoys less support, thanks to forming broader coalitions with other radical groupings, most often with its rival, Trikolora. Though previously marginalised, SPD saw a breakthrough when its candidate made it to the second round of the Senate elections (in Karlovy Vary) for the first time in history. However, its representative lost to an ANO member. In the elections, the party focused on strongly emphasising both the current and systemic socio-economic problems. It gained particularly high support in less developed areas and those affected by structural problems (including the Ústí, Karlovy Vary and Moravian-Silesian regions). The good election result will strengthen SPD's already relatively strong position. In September, the first poll appeared showing that – with 14% support – it is the second most popular political party, behind ANO (STEM survey conducted on 1-8 September). However, the radical groupings may find it problematic in the long term to maintain the cohesion of their alliance, especially since new formations of this type are emerging and gaining popularity partly as a result of ever new anti-government demonstrations.
- ANO achieved only moderate success in the elections (about 30% support in the polls), but the party has become an attractive coalition partner at the local level in view of the good result achieved by the marginalised SPD. The main leaderships of the centre-right parties have emphasised their reluctance to enter into local alliances with ANO, building their message on cutting themselves off from Babiš. However, since ANO's result has been improving (an increase in the number of seats by 11%) and anti-establishment parties are growing stronger, coalitions with Babiš's party may turn out to be the lesser of two evils needed to find a majority in city councils. Good cooperation between ANO and ODS at the local level may form the basis for possible cooperation between these formations at the national level after the next parliamentary elections (planned for 2025). This solution has supporters in both parties.
- Large increases in support for SPD and ANO in industrial areas seal the collapse of the traditional left-wing formations that have for years dominated these areas. Babiš's party has recently mostly taken over the votes of former Social Democratic voters (ČSSD); the discouraged electorate of the more radical Communists (KSČM) increasingly voted for the SPD. Since the 2021 elections, both parties have not been represented in the Chamber of Deputies, and are currently losing influence at the local level at an

accelerated pace (a 2.5-fold decrease in the number of councillors from the ČSSD and a 3-fold decrease in the case of the KSČM). Before the elections the Communists were represented in nine regional capital city councils, but now they are present in only one (Ostrava); the Social Democrats, on the other hand, have representatives in only two regional capitals. Although the ČSSD maintains a strong position in several towns on the Polish-Czech border (Náchod, Karviná and Bohumín), its logo is becoming more of a burden than an asset for local activists.

- The centre-right coalition, which governs the country at the national level, has confirmed its strength in the largest cities, but all five coalition parties have lost some of their influence. The scandal-ridden Mayors and Independents (STAN) party lost a third of their councillors, which is the worst result. The Pirates, after suffering defeat in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies (they retained only four of 37 seats), lost 22% of the councillors' seats in the local elections and, despite the improvement in the result in the capital (18% support), they will also soon lose the prestigious seat of the mayor of Prague. The other ruling parties, ODS, KDU-ČSL and TOP 09 (which often ran, as during the parliamentary elections, in the common bloc Spolu), lost 10-11% of their councillors' seats each. The support level for this bloc in Prague was 15 percentage points lower than the 40% it won there in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies a year ago, which came as a big disappointment. However, given the current scale of public dissatisfaction with the government's actions, the result could have been much worse. Furthermore, the fact that the parties participated in local elections in seven regional capitals as part of the Spolu bloc can be seen as a step towards consolidating this alliance, especially in view of the uncertain prospects of the Christian Democrats and Liberals who are teetering on the edge of the electoral threshold. Despite the good result in the Senate elections, it is difficult to draw far-reaching conclusions for the government due to the low turnout in the second round.

APPENDIX

The special characteristics of local and Senate elections in the Czech Republic

It is specific to the Czech Republic to hold separate elections to local and regional governments. They are both held every four years and separated by a two-year break (the next regional elections are planned for 2024). Each time they are combined with the replacement of one third of the members of the Senate, and senators are elected for six-year terms. Due to the significant fragmentation at the lowest level of local government, municipal elections are held in as many as 6,383 municipal, city and district councils. While in the Czech Republic voters elect almost 62,000 councillors, in Poland, which is over 3.5 times larger than the Czech Republic, less than 53,000 representatives are elected in similar elections. Due to this fragmentation, voters could only vote for one list in one third of municipalities, and 70% of councillors' seats were won by independent candidates or local associations; the main political parties focused on larger cities. One exception is the Christian Democrat KDU-ČSL which, due to its strong local structures in Moravia, also put forward candidates in smaller towns and has the largest number of councillors in total. Since it is not forbidden to combine the mandates of an MP and a councillor, many well-known politicians regularly run in local elections.