

Czech Republic: the Pirates have fallen overboard from the government

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On 1 October, the left-liberal Czech Pirate Party (Pirates) exited the government coalition. This development was a direct consequence of Prime Minister Petr Fiala's (of the right-wing Civic Democratic Party, ODS) decision to remove the party leader, Ivan Bartoš, from the government. This action aligned with the outcome of an online vote in which 79% of the Pirates' members endorsed the party's plan to leave the ruling coalition. The day prior, Bartoš concluded his role as Deputy Prime Minister for Digitisation and Minister of Regional Development. Fiala's main accusation against him pertained to delays in the digitisation of procedures related to construction projects. On 1 October, the other two government members representing the Pirates—Minister of Legislation, Michal Šalomoun, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Lipavský—submitted their resignations. Subsequently, only Šalomoun's resignation was accepted. Lipavský, having resigned from the party, will continue his role as Minister of Foreign Affairs by agreement with the remaining coalition parties. The cabinet still maintains its majority in the Chamber of Deputies.

Regardless of the formal reasons behind this move, the removal of the Pirates' leader from the government and the subsequent departure of other party members from the Fiala cabinet should primarily be viewed in the context of the parties' tactics ahead of the key election in the Czech political cycle—the election to the Chamber of Deputies, scheduled for autumn 2025. The poor results obtained in the recent elections and party support polls have prompted the ruling coalition parties to revise their strategies (see *'Czeskie wybory regionalne: triumf Babiša rok przed wyborami parlamentarnymi'*).

Commentary

- **The election results have undermined the Prime Minister's standing within the ODS, the largest party in the governing coalition. Should this trend persist until the end of the year, it may result in the Prime Minister's replacement**, according to sources within the party. The removal of Bartoš from the government, precipitating the departure of the Pirates from the coalition, has enabled the ODS to win the support of the party's electorate, which has become discouraged due to the government's unpopular decisions, at a relatively low cost (see *'Fiala's government halfway through its term: security reinforcement overshadowed by economic problems'*). The four seats controlled by the Pirates are not essential for the government to sustain a majority in the lower house of parliament. Concerning ODS and Pirate politicians who are not cabinet members, recent years have seen frequent ideological disputes, particularly over European policy. Ahead

of the local government elections in Prague, the ODS even attempted to differentiate itself from “the anarchy of the Pirates”, while the Pirates emphasised corruption scandals involving right-wing politicians.

- **Fiala’s decision to remove Bartoš from the government was unexpected for the Czech public and may be a harbinger of changes as the main ruling party aims to counteract negative trends.** Over the past three years, Prime Minister Fiala, known for his consensual approach, successfully united three centre-right parties to form a coalition for the elections. Subsequently, despite numerous external challenges, such as the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis, and high inflation, he maintained the cohesion of a relatively diverse five-party alliance, managing internal disputes discreetly. This time, however, he breached the coalition agreement which mandates seeking support from the appointing party before dismissing a government member. This unprecedented decision has triggered speculation among Pirate politicians, publicly suggesting that it could stem from pressure from the ODS’s business base, as well as other factors.
- **For the Pirates, exiting the government was a logical decision in light of their electoral defeats, necessitating a significant shift in strategy.** The party saw disappointing results not only in regional elections, where it retained only three of its previous 99 seats, but also in the European Parliament elections in June, securing just 6% of the vote compared to 14% five years earlier. Given the upcoming Chamber of Deputies election, operating as an opposition party may better suit the Pirates to regain voter support and aligns with their origins as a protest movement. Despite digitisation being one of the party’s main slogans, their governance in this area is generally regarded as a failure, prompting questions regarding the ability of similar movements to co-govern the country. Additionally, the party’s role in an unpopular government may have contributed to the loss of their youngest voter base. Meanwhile, Lipavský, until recently a Pirate Party member, was highly appreciated and displayed a staunchly pro-Atlantic stance, which contrasted with early party leadership declarations. However, towards the end of his time in office, he increasingly distanced himself from the party’s left-leaning base. In November, the party will elect its new leaders, and Bartoš, the founder and 15 year-leader, will not seek re-election. The emergence of numerous protest parties, which achieved good results in the European Parliament election due to their new status and lack of government involvement, combined with the absence of a strong candidate for the new party leader and the loss of a valued politician like Lipavský, does not bode well for the party’s chances of regaining its political position.