

Czech municipal and Senate elections: a warning for the governing coalition

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A week-long series of elections to the Czech Senate (the upper house) and local councils concluded on 17 October. One-third of the Senate is elected every two years for a term of six years. Of the 27 seats contested, the liberal Mayors and Independents (STAN) won 10, followed by the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) with seven. The ODS will therefore retain the largest parliamentary group in the Senate, formed jointly with the liberal TOP 09 party, as well as the Senate presidency. All three parties are in opposition in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house). Meanwhile, the governing coalition's parties failed to win a single seat.

In the municipal elections held on 9–10 October, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's ANO received the most votes, *but performed worse than in 2022*. Its share of the vote fell from 16.6% to 14.3%, while the number of councillors elected dropped from 1,748 to 1,650. ANO came first in six of the 13 regional capitals, including Ostrava, but its support declined in 12 of them, with Plzeň being the only exception. A change of mayor is also likely in Prague, where STAN won the election and is best placed to secure the post. The new city council is expected to elect STAN's lead candidate in Prague, Petr Hlaváček, to replace Bohuslav Svoboda of the ODS. In smaller municipalities, independent candidates once again dominated, winning more than 81% of the seats.

Although municipal and Senate elections tend to favour the centre-right opposition, the governing coalition's parties performed markedly worse than in previous years. This can be interpreted as a negative assessment by voters of the coalition's first year in office. These results could prompt the coalition to step up social support measures, but may also deepen tensions within its ranks.

Commentary

- **The governing coalition's parties have received a warning in their first major electoral test a year after the Chamber of Deputies election.** Although ANO might have anticipated defeat in Prague, where it has struggled for years, its worst-ever result in the capital is a cause for concern. Another major setback was the loss of its stronghold in Ústí nad Labem, where it had won every municipal election since first contesting one in 2014. The party also performed poorly in other towns in the region and lost support in most regional capitals, including by almost 13 percentage points in Ústí nad Labem, 10 points in Zlín and nearly nine points in Liberec. The prime minister described ANO's failure to win a

single Senate seat as 'a catastrophic result'. The party last suffered such a defeat in its electoral debut in 2012, having secured between one and eight seats in subsequent elections. While these results suggest growing dissatisfaction among some of ANO's voters and a shortage of strong local leaders, the party continues to enjoy a clear lead in national opinion polls. Its support this month ranges from 28.8% in an NMS Market Research survey to 31.3% in a STEM poll. Senate elections, held in single-member constituencies with a possible second round of voting, have long posed a challenge for ANO, which remains a deeply polarising political force. The system instead encourages the anti-Babiš opposition to unite. The results also partly reflect public dissatisfaction with high fuel prices and rising mortgage interest rates.

- **The junior partners in Babiš's governing coalition may regard the election results as a crushing defeat.** The xenophobic Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) lost 326 local council seats, or 76% of its previous total, while its share of the vote fell from 4.5% to 2.8%. None of its 17 Senate candidates reached the second round. The Eurosceptic Motorists for Themselves party won its first-ever local council seats, but its failure to field any Senate candidates exposed its limited pool of potential candidates. Despite an intensive campaign involving senior party figures, it also suffered a resounding defeat in Prague's municipal election, securing just 2.9% of the vote. Within SPD in particular, there are calls to draw lessons from the defeat. This could prompt the party to assert greater independence within the governing coalition, potentially undermining government stability.
- **STAN emerged as the biggest winner of the elections, consolidating its position as the leading opposition party.** It won the most Senate seats and secured a narrow, largely unexpected victory in Prague. With the next Chamber of Deputies election three years away, its main challenge will be to build lasting loyalty among voters, given its relatively small core electorate. STAN is often seen as a second-choice option among opposition voters and currently polls at 13–17%. For now, it is benefiting from instability and unclear messaging among its opposition rivals, particularly the ODS, as well as the waning appeal of the left-liberal Czech Pirate Party.
- **The elections highlighted the stagnation of the ODS, the leading party in the governing coalition until last year.** The party is struggling to find a new direction under Martin Kupka, who replaced former prime minister Petr Fiala as its leader in January. It also faces internal tensions following the collapse of its alliance with the Christian Democrats and TOP 09. After falling poll ratings cost the ODS its position as the leading opposition party in recent months, the election results have dealt a further blow to its new leadership. The party lost the mayoralties of Prague and Brno and saw its representation decline in nine regional capitals. In Liberec, it failed to win a city council seat for the first time in its history. The Senate offers an opportunity to regain political ground: the ODS has slightly increased its representation in the chamber, while Miloš Vystrčil, an ally of Kupka, is likely to retain the Senate presidency.