



## Strong leadership and change is what Czech voters asked for

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What would be the likely impact on the Czech EU policy? As the negotiations about the new government are at their start, it is not yet clear what the new government coalition will look like or whether these negotiations will be successful at all.

Yet what has to be in my view considered, is that the practical politics will be much less eurosceptical than expected.

The main goal of the political actors had been to win the elections by all means available, including using the widespread euroscepticism of the Czech population (according to the 2017 Eurobarometer survey, only 25 % of Czechs perceive the EU in a positive way). This euroscepticism has been fueled by the migration crisis and the EU proposed solutions based on relocation mechanisms, which were adopted by the Council despite the opposition from some member states, including the Czech government.

Acceptance of such a majority decision in the Council has been perceived and promoted as weakness of the government, which was associated particularly with the responsible social democrats, as well as their moderate position not to challenge this decision appealing to the EU court like Slovakia and Hungary did. Another EU decision, which turned into a political case, has been the control of firearms directive seen as a dangerous and non-competent decision weakening the security of Czech citizens.

In such an atmosphere, other issues contributed to the euroscepticism of the public as well, such as the rise of prices of some basic food commodities like butter, recent dual quality tests in the EU, debates about the national economy performance, persistent huge socioeconomic differences, including of wages in relation to productivity, or the transfer of capital from the economy. The widely shared opinion is that the post-communist era meant robbery of national wealth, and the so-called traditional parties are responsible for the misery, no difference whether they are left or right.

'No new empty promises, there has to be a fundamental change of this system, which does not serve the people.'

Such a change in the view of the voters was represented by the Czech billionaire movement ANO (YES), which has skilfully presented itself in the government as the competent part of the coalition (unlike the social democrats). For the purpose of campaign, its boss Andrej Babiš introduced a dream vision of the country's future. Not a programme, just dreams. And that means hope.

Another hope has been associated with the Pirates party as a fresh air into politics, focusing on transparency and digitisation of the country with a general pro-EU stand. However, they are cautious about the most controversial EU-related topics, such as adopting the euro or



proposals for further integration. The third winner of the parliamentary elections, as a hope for change, has been the SPD (Party of Direct Democracy) of Tomio Okamura. This party is a political ally of e.g. French Front National, with a strong anti-migration and anti-Islam rhetoric and a political agenda demanding a law that would enable decision making by general referenda on all kinds of issues, including on the EU membership.

The policy direction of other actors elected into the Chamber of Deputies is more or less predictable. The ODS (Civic Democratic Party) is a member of the ECR Group and consistent in its rather eurosceptic (or as they present it - eurorealistic) positions, demanding opting out from the common asylum policy and a referendum on euro; however, it is also business-oriented, which makes it pro-EU internal market and free trade. It is critical towards the EU; however, it does not see any other alternative to it.

Business orientation is what is also common to ANO and its EU policy. Mr. Babiš, fulfilling the expectation and image of a strong leader, would want to be vocal in defending the national interests, meaning the interest of the Czech business. The business of Mr. Babiš is one of the biggest recipients of EU subsidies throughout the EU. In this sense, his policy towards the EU will be in fact pragmatic and business-oriented. That is an approach the EU is used to work with. Rhetoric at home towards "Brussels" will be much harsher.

What can be expected? No fast integration, a two-speed EU as an accepted reality, no adoption of euro in the near future. If there is going to be a deeper and more serious debate about the introduction of the euro, it will be a business, not politically driven debate, as 70 % of the population oppose it.<sup>1</sup> Referendum on leaving the EU may be a reality in some scenarios and in that case, Czechxit may be a serious option. However, most political actors including ANO and ODS will not endorse such an idea. We can expect tougher positions on migration, including continuous refusal of any relocation mechanisms and no enthusiasm for ideas such as the social pillar of the EU. Left pro-EU policy has suffered a devastating defeat. Recovery will not be an easy task.

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<sup>1</sup><http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Survey/getSurveyDetail/search/euro/surveyKy/2157>