

Right-wing populism in the Czech Republic

Martina Poliakova

As a brief introduction let me explain you the current situation in Czech Republic after the elections in October 2017.

So far, we only know that we have the most right-wing Chamber of Deputies since 1989. If all right-wing officials realize it, they can get what they have never dreamed of before. We can expect the reform of the Labour law aimed at limiting the protection of workers' rights, the pension reform towards privatization and individualization of protection, an introduction of tuition at universities and reduction and withdrawal of social benefits.

There is only one reason why right-wing parties are not joining a coalition that would best fulfil all their interests. The obstacle is the disrespectful attitude towards Andrej Babiš and his movement ANO. But the following months will show whether this attitude is more of a pre-election watchword that the party leaders want to get rid of, or indeed a basic attitude that only distinguishes Babis, ANO and its critics. Because otherwise they fit programmatically very well.

Whoever make a better story of why he and his party can go to the government with Babiš could be a winner. We have seven right-wing parties in the Chamber and as usual they know each other very well. Former Prime Minister from ODS (Civic Democratic Party) Mirek Topolánek even offered a sort of "four-coalition", that could enter the government with Babiš as a single block. He said that this should guarantee a democratic organization and stability. But the feeling of "anti-babišism is strong and on the other hand the only one party, that declared, that would go with Babiš to the coalition, was SPD (Party of the Direct Democracy). Right-wing political party of another political businessman Tomio Okamura, who is persona non grata for all the others including Andrej Babiš.

It is certainly not without curiosity that the left-wing parties in the Chamber of Deputies have only 30 seats out of 200, and the fact that 37 seats belongs to parties that are anti-systemic and nobody is discussing their share of power, worsens the position of left-wing opposition.

In the Czech Republic, we have several types of right-wing populism. The ANO Movement set its first electoral success in 2013 on a strict separation from so-called traditional political parties. Without particular ideology, their motto was "we are not politicians, we are workin' hard". Instead of democratic and lengthy procedures, ANO offered the vision of the state that would be manage as a company. This rhetoric has deepened in the pre-election struggle of 2017. For four years in the coalition with social democrats Andrej Babiš faced a permanent conflict of interests, thus the criticism of the consequences of such a conflict of interests did not work before the elections. Moreover, Babiš managed to articulate the positive results of the government as its own results, as a result of the beneficial effect of the ANO movement on so-called traditional politics.

As we can see on the following graph ANO took votes mainly from its coalition partners, Social and Christian Democrats. Moreover, ANO movement gave voters the feeling they did not have to worry about giving their voices to idealistic dreamers or politicians scorned underneath. People voted for Babiš although they knew he was accused of subsidizing fraud (it is under investigation of EU OLAF),

immoral trading with crown bonds or influencing public through his media houses. Seems that steeling from EU funds for private ZOO Čapí hnízdo is OK, people bought his interpretation that “everybody steals” and “sorry man” that it’s OK not to tell public summary of all his income. Why? What does the populism by Babiš look like?

The most important is success, no strict ideology, technocracy and economical superiority over his opponents.

The second in a row ended the Civic Democratic Party, which is one of the traditional, right-wing political party, which was during 90’ and 00’ another story of a success of pro-Communist transformation. But they made a huge mistake: their proponents slowly become a synonym for a fraud on a communal level. For the last four years they were marginal and not visible. ODS is rather economically neoliberal and socially conservative. In the pre-election struggle, however, she rushed very strongly on the anti-immigrant note and is also among the loudest critics of the EU. As you can see, they bought votes mainly from another right-wing party TOP09, which were in previous years the strongest critique of Babiš. TOP09 came up as a symbol of everything Babiš is against: intellectual elitism and anticommunism with austerity program of individual responsibility. But Civic Democratic Party is stronger in regions and TOP09 has success only in Prague. Graph.

Due to the theme of our workshop, the success of the Pirate Party is very interesting. They represent an ideologically non-partisan side of the solution to the challenges society is facing in the context of the digital revolution. Best of all, on the right side of political spectrum, they were able to articulate anti-corruption and anti-bureaucratism, and with the emphasis on technical aspects of governance they’re pretty much similar to what the ANO movement is trying to look like. It was also the only one party that gained its votes.

Immediately following the Pirate Party came the Freedom and Direct Democracy Party (SPD, in its Czech acronym), a xenophobic, extreme right-wing party comparable to Germany’s Alternative for Germany or France’s National Front (it was supported by M. LePen before the election). Interestingly though, the party is led by Tomio Okamura, a quarter-Japanese demagogue who rails against cosmopolitanism and immigration. He became famous as a judge on a “reality show” on Czech television about aspiring entrepreneurs and their projects. His image on election posters was edited to make him look a bit less Asian. He is the hero of periphery, his party is full of non-intellectuals, people without higher education, but with will to articulate fear and feeling of exclusion from the power and influence. He promised direct democracy, promised that he will dig the politicians from their positions, that SPD will promote leaving EU and nationalization of public television and radio.

As the conclusion I’d like to move closer to the topic of our workshop and try to answer the question, whether we are moving towards the right? I think the answer is not simple but rather complicated. It’s more about moving from democratic values of free competition of ideas and values in a democratic procedure to more effective and less democratic technocracy, in which the expert is not politician, but manager ruling state employees. This is the answer to the disillusion of ideas. The other is revolt of the periphery, where there is still a chance for left if it starts to articulate the frustration of the neglected.

Otherwise there is strong movement driven by hatred and fear that has the potential to win next time.