



The Czech Republic's Political Scene in 2010: A Political Earthquake and its Aftershocks

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While the turmoil on the Czech domestic political scene in the first half of 2009 received great attention from both academics and media, the political events that occurred throughout 2010 – and which were equally worth analyzing – were largely left unexplained. Additionally, whereas the implications of the fall of the coalition government midway through Prague's EU Council Presidency in 2009 were scrutinized in terms of its impact on both domestic political culture as well as on EU policy-making, little has been said about the new government that came into power in 2010. Yet, the events leading up to the 2010 parliamentary elections, the election itself, and its aftermath were truly fascinating and merit a closer look. The purpose of this article, then, is to assess the political earthquake that has struck in the Czech Republic in 2010 and its aftershocks in terms of both domestic and European implications of the new domestic political realities that emerged with the new government led by Petr Nečas.

Before examining why the Czech electorate *en masse* voted for only recently established parties, whose political programs often were less than straightforward, it is necessary to understand the voting patterns of Czechs since gaining ideological independence in 1989. In other words, have the Czechs taken advantage of the plurality of political groupings that formed simultaneously with the fall of communism as the only official doctrine, or are they still rather conservative voters that align their preferences along the program of the two greatest parties that claim to represent the majority of the Czech population? Whereas the first fifteen to twenty years were characterized by an interplay between the right centrist and left centrist party, in recent years, the electorate seems to be looking for alternatives. But first things first.

The first free, democratic elections into the Czech National Council (the Czech parliament within then Czechoslovakia) took place in June 1990, with an overwhelming 96.8% of eligible voters casting their ballot. This – to date highest – voter turnout since the Velvet Revolution stands as evidence for several matters. First, voters



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appreciated and wanted to make use of the possibility of choosing their political representatives among multiple political parties, as opposed to picking these from the only running party, which was the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia for more than five decades. Second, the electorate was well aware of the fact that with the communist regime gone, these first elections would be determining Czechoslovakia's - and the Czech Republic's - fate in the years to come, as they would set the framework for the transformation that would follow. Third, the voters were used to go and vote, this being a relic from the communist period, during which casting the ballot was mandatory, resulting in the voter turnout attacking the 100% mark. Yet, while more than sixty parties had registered, and twenty-three parties actually participated in the elections, the clear winner was the Civic Forum, which received 49.5% of all votes (in the Slovak part of the federation, the Slovak counterpart of the Civic Forum - the Public Against Violence party - received 29.34% of all votes). Thus, the Czechs unambiguously supported the grouping of intellectuals, democrats, and dissidents that has taken control over the events surrounding the Velvet Revolution and led the country through a peaceful power transfer in 1989. With such a strong mandate, the first democratically elected government embarked upon the road to transform the country's political and economic system.

However, the political consensus in the Czech Republic was short-lived, as already in 1991, the Civic Forum fragmented, with Václav Klaus - then finance minister - establishing the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which would later position itself as a right centrist political party. During the 1992 parliamentary elections, Klaus led his ODS to victory, receiving 29.7% of all votes in the Czech Republic. More interestingly, the previously strong Civic Forum now received less than 5% of the votes and thus did not surpass the threshold for entering the Chamber of Deputies. Thus, only two years after the first elections, rather than welcoming a holistic, pluralist approach to governance that would oppose oppressive regimes, Czechs began to think and vote in terms of one matter only - what the extent of the state's involvement in their daily life should be. In addition, by voting Klaus into the Prime Minister's office in Prague (and Vladimír Mečiar as his counterpart in Bratislava), the voters also - rather unconsciously - set the scene for Czechoslovakia's peaceful break-up into two sovereign republics, which finally occurred on January 1, 1993.

With the creation of an independent Czech Republic, its domestic scene for the next ten years can be described as steady and predictable (some would describe it as boring). Indeed, four major political parties have profiled themselves as "fixed stars" along the left/right axis; besides ODS, it was its biggest rival, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL), and the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM). Whereas parliamentary elections were won by either ODS (1996) or ČSSD (1998 and 2002), subsequently establishing coalition governments, both KDU-ČSL's and KSČM's voter base stabilized at ten to twenty percent of the Czech electorate. While considerable



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differences as to *how* to govern the state existed both within and among the individual parties, the framework of *where* the country should be heading was clear and undisputed by the major domestic players. Broad consensus across the political spectrum dictated that internally, the Czech Republic would need to be transformed into a *functioning* parliamentary democracy with a stable market economy. Externally, the motto driving the Czech Republic's foreign policy agenda can be subsumed under the heading "return to Europe." This notion implied that the individual state representatives (and the citizens themselves) believed that their rightful place laid within the West, which should be manifested by the Czech Republic's accession to both NATO and the European Union. Ultimately, whether (now very Euro-skeptic) Klaus (ODS) or Miloš Zeman (ČSSD) led the government, the state bureaucracy worked towards achieving these goals.

Although the occasional scandal brought down the government - such as Klaus' in 1997, following a corruption affair and resulting in the establishment of a caretaker government - the domestic political scene between 1993 and 2004 was rather stable. In 1999, the Czech Republic became full NATO member and on May 1, 2004, it joined the European Union with Vladimír Špidla (ČSSD) as Czech Prime Minister. One month later, Czechs were for the first time able to vote in Europe-wide elections into the European Parliament. However, only 28.32% of eligible voters casted their ballot, with the ruling Social Democrats suffering a blow after receiving less than nine percent of all the votes. This devastating EP election result led to Špidla's resignation and the nomination of very young Stanislav Gross (ČSSD) as the country's new Prime Minister. Yet, his government did not provide much needed stability, as he personally was involved in numerous financial affairs, leading to his resignation after only ten months in office. He was succeeded by Jiří Paroubek, who managed to subdue internal disputes ravaging the Social Democrats and established himself as a strong party leader for the years to come.

The upcoming - 2006 - parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic would be significant in several ways. First, with the *leitmotif* of Prague's foreign policy - namely EU accession - successfully completed, the individual parties increasingly had to present their political programs along domestic issues. Second, these elections would determine what government would lead the country through its first EU Council Presidency, which was to be held in the first half of 2009. Third, the elections would indicate the level to which the Czech electorate was concerned with (as opposed to indifferent to) the political scandals ravaging the previous social democratic government. Particularly with this last point in mind, ODS's victory (led by Mirek Topolánek) did not come as too big a surprise. Yet, besides the two biggest parties - ODS and ČSSD - having consolidated their power, coming in first, respectively second, the elections launched a trend that would reveal itself fully only in the 2010 elections; the success of new political parties. Indeed, for the first time since 1989, the Green Party (SZ) has exceeded the five percent threshold (obtaining 6.29%),



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not only making it into the Chamber of Deputies, but also becoming one of ODS' governmental coalition partners.

However, the Greens' first-hand participation in Czech politics was not to be long-lived, as Topolánek's government surprisingly lost a no-confidence vote in the Chamber of Deputies midway into the EU Council Presidency in March 2009. The result of the no-confidence voting came as a major shock to most and ultimately started the political earthquake that would fully unfold only in 2010. First, of course, the government itself was astonished, particularly as four members of the coalition parties (two of which came from ODS itself) voted against the government. Second, the opposition, which has initiated the no-confidence voting, was surprised by its own success, as this has been the opposition's (ČSSD and KSČM) fifth consecutive attempt at overthrowing the government, with all the previous ones ending unsuccessfully. Third, the European Union, then headed by the Czech Republic, was forced to cope with a new situation of a government change during an EU Council Presidency. Moreover, in the eyes of some member states (such as France), this only confirmed their fears that they voiced before Prague took over the helm as to the Czech Republic's unpreparedness and incompetency to successfully preside over the European Union. Fourth, academics were challenged with assessing what impact the collapse of a national government that currently holds the EU Presidency has on EU policy-making. Finally, domestically, the Czech electorate was sincerely taken aback by the opposition pursuing a no-confidence vote during times when international attention is being directed towards Prague.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative calls from both domestic and international commentators as to the deadlock the EU would now find itself in, the caretaker government, led by non-partisan Jan Fischer, succeeded in bringing the EU Council Presidency to a close, largely due to the well-prepared civil service that kept working on the individual agenda-points as set by the previous government. Thus, while not much has changed on the external front, domestically, a real political earthquake was about to be set off, involving practically every major political party in the Czech Republic. Fischer's cabinet was expected to set the ground for early elections, which the major parties agreed should be held in October 2009. Consequently, the Chamber of Deputies has adopted a constitutional bill that shortened the Chamber's electoral term. As this bill was signed off by President Klaus, the parties launched very intensive campaigns as the time frame for campaigning would be rather short. In September 2009, thus shortly before the elections, however, the Czech Constitutional court acted upon an official complaint brought by several members of the parliament and has ruled that the constitutional bill adopted was unconstitutional, with the new election date being set for June 2010. At this point, political parties have depleted most of their campaign funds and now faced the decision as whether to continue campaigning for an extra year, which would lead to massive indebtedness, or whether to interrupt the campaign and launch it again shortly before the June 2010 election date.



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Most political parties chose for a hybrid; they slowed down their campaigning efforts to the minimum over the winter and inflated these again in the spring. Additionally, besides these legislative setbacks, the traditionally strong parties had to cope with intraparty difficulties. The Civic Democrats, led by a weakened Topolánek, have been dealt numerous blows. Besides several party members being involved in corruption scandals, Topolánek's political career came to an abrupt end after he gave an informal interview to a journalist during a photo shoot for a gay magazine, which was leaked to the press. During this interview, he made several controversial statements, in which he criticized Christian churches and insulted both gay and Jewish people, claiming they lacked moral character. After his statements have been made public, Topolánek stepped down as both ODS chairman and election leader in April 2010. Petr Nečas, a rather inexpressive, but also unblemished politician became the party's chairman and would lead ODS into the elections, having less than two months to cleanse the party from its negative image. However, ODS was not the only party experiencing difficulties; the Social Democrats were still led by Paroubek, a man with a rigid way of ruling over his party. Paroubek certainly polarized the Czech public, with his opponents becoming very vocal, making use of new technological possibilities of voicing their criticism (such as Facebook), but also not shying away from the customary egg-throwing. Moreover, many could not forgive him for initiating the no-confidence vote that brought down the government in 2009, resulting in the Czech Republic being humiliated in front of international observers. Yet, Paroubek was convinced that he would steer his ČSSD to a landmark victory, holding on to power and dismissing any intraparty criticism.

On top of both ODS and ČSSD experiencing internal difficulties, the Christian Democrats were at the brink of falling apart. Indeed, one of their most prominent members, Miroslav Kalousek, decided in June 2009 to establish a new conservative party together with previously independent Karel Schwarzenberg, who acted as Minister of Foreign Affairs in Topolánek's government - TOP09 (Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09). Nevertheless, TOP09 was not the only newly created political party trying to lure away voters from the traditional parties described above. In 2009, the previously locally active political group Public Affairs (VV) decided to establish itself on a nation-wide scale under the leadership of investigative journalist Radek John. VV, whose election slogan "away with the dinosaurs," referring to the fact that the Czech Republic's political scene largely consisted of the same people for the past two decades, immediately caught the attention of a rather large group of the Czech public. However, it was unclear where VV was standing in terms of their political agenda; their political program was ambiguous, combining elements of traditionally conservative policy-making with a generous social welfare system, leaving it to the imagination of the voter to decide whether the party's goals were mutually exclusive or complementary. Finally, besides TOP09 and VV, former Prime Minister Zeman in October 2009 founded a new political party - SPOZ (Party of Civic Rights - Zemanovci)



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- after disappearing from the Czech political scene seven years ago after unsuccessfully running for President.

With this short assessment of the events preceding the 2010 parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic in mind, the election was to stir up the rather predictable political waters and certainly did not disappoint those that were longing for change. While it is true that Paroubek led his ČSSD to victory, this was pyrrhic rather than glorious - in fact, ČSSD's lead over the runner-up (ODS) was less than two percentage points (22.08% against 20.22%). Nation-wide, the relatively new TOP09 came in third, with 16.7% of all votes; however, in some voting districts, such as Prague, they convincingly won the election, displacing ODS from its traditional pole position. The Communists came in fourth with 11.27% and the last party to surmount the threshold was VV, after obtaining 10.88% of the votes. Therefore, the Chamber of Deputies would now consist of two new political parties that have been created, or became active, only within the last year. The third new party - SPOZ - fell short of meeting the 5% threshold, when it received 4.33% of eligible votes; considering the fact that the party existed only for nine months, not a disappointing result. Nevertheless, the political earthquake was not over yet; the Christian Democrats, for the first time since 1990, did not receive enough votes to enter the Chamber of Deputies, and neither did the Greens, which until a year ago were a party to the coalition government.

With such election results, the fate of the future government was in the hands of VV - having a loose political agenda, they could swing left from the center, supporting the winning party (ČSSD) and relying on tacit support from the Communists, or swing right from the center, entering a coalition government with ODS and TOP09. VV decided for the latter option, resulting in the winner of the parliamentary election falling short of establishing a government - something that has never happened before in the Czech Republic. The final coalition - consisting of the Civic Democrats, TOP09, and VV - secured 118 seats in the 200-seat chamber, the greatest majority since the establishment of an independent Czech Republic in 1993.

After this political earthquake that has struck the Czech Republic in 2010 and has stirred up the country's political waters, analysts were interested to see what the aftershocks would be as the implications on both the domestic and international level would be significant. Domestically, the first aftershock came when Paroubek resigned as ČSSD's leader, after holding this position for four years. While he can be credited with uniting his party amid internal difficulties, many have criticized his authoritarian style of ruling, which they claim has reflected in the worse-than-expected election result. Second, both TOP09 and VV need to profile themselves on the Czech political scene and establish some long-term worthiness. Hence, both parties became very vocal about their demands and opinions, sometimes making coalition negotiations more difficult than if these only happened behind closed doors. Third,



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the most tangible domestic consequence is the liberal economic orientation of the coalition government, which is introducing rather rigid austerity measures (helped by the hype surrounding the Greek, Irish, and other economic crises). Yet, whether the almost 11% of voters who voted for VV were expecting this, or whether they expected VV to swing more left from the center, remains unclear.

Besides these domestic implications, the 2010 election year has also impacted the voting culture in the Czech Republic. Frankly, voters have been frustrated with the domestic political scene, which was adrift with corruption and other scandals. Hence, they gave their votes to newly emerging political groupings, which proclaimed to be unblemished and that would bring order into the country's daily political life. Yet, when studying opinion polls conducted since the installation of the new government, one can see that voters have once again been disillusioned, fearing that not much has changed. One cannot dismiss the voter's worries as unsubstantiated, as at the time of writing this article, for instance, another corruption scandal implicating VV's leader John as well as ODS's Nečas quakes Czech domestic politics. Finally, on the international - or European - level, the consequence of the 2010 election year is that the Czech Republic - traditionally a fierce supporter of deeper European integration - is now headed by a more Euro-skeptic government that finds its allies in countries such as the Netherlands or the United Kingdom.

In summary, then, 2010 has been a very interesting year for Czech politics. The Czech electorate proved that it is more than a passive by-stander and wants to actively shape both domestic and international politics. Whereas the political parties that have formed the modern Czech Republic have suffered great losses with regard to the number of seats they occupy in the Chamber of Deputies (or did not pass the required threshold at all), new political groupings entered domestic politics and are now engaged in establishing themselves. However, what remains to be seen is whether this political earthquake is going to have long-term consequences, or whether some of the new parties are only one-trick ponies that will disappear from the scene as quickly as they emerged on it. If we base our prediction on the recent elections into the Senate (coupled with regional elections) that took place in October 2010, the outlook is mixed. Whereas TOP09 succeeded to place itself in the Czech parliament's upper chamber, Public Affairs failed to obtain even one seat. Considering the time span between the elections into the lower and upper chamber of the parliament was only five months, this is quite a remarkable result. Finally, the fact that the political earthquake is far from over and the domestic political scene is less than stable is illustrated by yet another attempt of ČSSD to overthrow the government by instigating a no-confidence vote for December 21, 2010. This time, however, the opposition did not succeed. Nevertheless, only time will tell whether this has been the opposition's last attempt to topple the government, or whether the political earthquake on the Czech domestic political scene is to continue.



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Further Readings

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