

## **ELECTION BRIEFING No 74 EUROPE AND THE 2013 CZECH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, OCTOBER 25-26 2013<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Key Points:**

- This was the second early election in modern Czech history.
- Traditional parties faced serious internal quarrels that resulted in an electoral disaster for the Civic Democrats and a victory by a small margin for the Social Democrats, and to severe post-electoral internal feuding inside the Social Democratic Party.
- The political scene looked set for massive turmoil and fragmentation of the party landscape, as two new populist parties entered the House of Deputies.
- The election campaign, as well as the changing ownership of some media, called the independence of media into question, potentially moving Czech political culture towards a more “Italian” style.
- Electoral returns and the resulting fragmentation of the House of Deputies made composing of government a very complicated process and strengthened the role of President Zeman.

### **Context: the years of political turmoil**

The period after the 2010 parliamentary election was full of political turmoil. Some commentators were talking about an “electoral earthquake,” but the changes in the composition of the House of Deputies were smaller in comparison to changes that occurred after the early elections of 2013. In 2010, incumbent parties fared obviously worse than in 2006, and the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak Peoples’ Party (KDU-ČSL) did not even manage to get into the parliament. Additionally, one of the newcomers, Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 (TOP 09), replaced previous attempts to create an alternative to the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) on the right. The truly “new” party obtaining

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parliamentary seats was the protest business-firm party called Public Affairs (VV).<sup>2</sup> After the election, a coalition government of right-wing parties (the Civic Democrats, Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 and Public Affairs) led by Petr Nečas (Civic Democrats) was established, backed by comfortable majority of 118 out of 200 deputies. The government embarked upon an ambitious programme of far-reaching reforms and with a promise to change the political style of previous governments, especially in terms of fighting corruption. The personality of the Prime Minister, sometimes, nicknamed “Mr Clean,” together with presence of Public Affairs claiming to fight corruption and to “sweep out the political dinosaurs” appeared, at first sight, to provide a sound basis for such a change. The reality was, however, very different.

First of all, the government lacked stability and perhaps stronger leadership. Prime Minister Mr Nečas spent a lot of time dealing with the Civic Democrats’ internal problems, in many cases lacking sufficient support from within his own party. His position within the party was quite weak as he simply did not manage to acquire strong allies either in the party headquarters or among regional politicians. The second major problem could be identified in disputes between Mr Nečas (and by extension, his party) and the Minister of Finance and the most influential politician of Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09, Miroslav Kalousek. Mr Kalousek tried to eclipse Civic Democrats with a reform drive and present Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 as the strongest guarantor of the government’s reform course. Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 politicians controlled not only the Ministry of Finance but also the Ministries of Social Affairs and Health, and it was precisely these ministries that were to be core topics for reform-oriented policies. The realisation of reforms was capped by the slogan of balancing the state budget or, more accurately, cutting the budget deficit in the future to meet the Maastricht criteria for Eurozone accession. However, during a period of economic crisis, the government’s austerity policy proved to be a double-edged sword. The government more or less fulfilled its main goal concerning reducing the budget deficit but the political price to be paid for this was higher than expected. The right-wing coalition not only made some un-popular restrictions in many policy areas, including welfare expenditure but also increased indirect taxes (including VAT), contrary to both parties’ pre-electoral declarations (Civic Democrats and Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09). The reform of the health care and pension systems went in the same direction but proved to be only half-finished and met with very strong political and public criticism. Even the adoption of the brand new Civil Code, replacing the extensively amended Code dating back to the Communist period, was accompanied by too many disputes to be marked as a real success. To put it bluntly, the final balance for the government was very negative in the eyes of the average Czech citizen.

The third problem was the most complicated one because it dealt with stability inside the coalition and one of its pillars: the Public Affairs party. This grouping was established in 2002 as a party operating in Prague local politics. In 2009, it moved towards developing a nationwide profile by running for seats in the European Parliament (EP) elections. Since 2010, the main person behind the party was businessman Vít Bárta. Public Affairs’ main problem was caused by the fact that the official party leader, Radek John, was in fact steered by a secret committee chaired by Mr Bárta. Together with the peculiar relations between Mr Bárta and some deputies, that even led to accusations of him bribing them, the ‘business-firm’-like party structure raised controversies from the very beginning of its parliamentary activity. In April 2011, a document called the “TOP Managerial Ethics Codex+Strategy 2008-

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<sup>2</sup> See: Vít Hloušek and Petr Kaniok, ‘The Absence of Europe in the Czech Parliamentary Elections, May 28-29 2010’, *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing* No. 57 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-election-briefing-no-57.pdf>.

2014” produced by Mr Bárta was published in one of the leading Czech quality daily newspapers. This document was used by Mr Bárta to outline a strategy for the White Lion Security Agency’s (ABL – owned by Mr Bárta) managers for increasing the company’s share of public tenders. Mr Bárta’s project saw the connection between political and economic power as the way to fulfil the goals of ABL’s development and Public Affairs was to be a specific tool for achieving this objective. The document also outlined the option to unofficially “remunerate” Public Affairs members for their activity as well as outlining the party’s management structure, which minimised the impact of elected bodies and maximised the central role of Vít Bárta.

When Mr Bárta’s strategy was revealed, public trust in the party plummeted - and this, in turn, led almost immediately to a crisis in the coalition government. The presence of Public Affairs, however, also created other problems in the meantime; problems related to particular policy reforms such as: Public Affairs’ disagreement with the austerity measures proposed in the proposed 2011 budget announced in June 2010, demands for changes in the Public Prosecutor’s office in September 2010, and constant criticisms of the pension and fiscal reforms proposed by Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09. After the publication of the “Ethics Codex,” Mr Bárta and Mr John resigned from the government. The crisis reached its peak in spring 2012. After condemnation of Mr Bárta, the Public Affairs parliamentary club split into two factions. The main one (the rump representing the Public Affairs party), led by Mr John and Mr Bárta, went to opposition, and a smaller one led by Karolína Peake continued to be a part of the government coalition, creating a new minor party called the Liberal Democrats (LIDEM) in the process. The governing coalition’s co-operation with Public Affairs was thus terminated on April 27 2012. On the same day, Mr Nečas’ government survived a vote of confidence requested by the Prime Minister.

With a much less secure majority in the House of Deputies, Mr Nečas’ government tried to muddle through the remaining two years before parliamentary elections were due to have been held. Tensions inside the coalition accompanied the entire period of the government’s existence, especially between Civic Democratic Party and Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09, but the rivalry fuelled by a prospective fight for the same voters increased. Commentators on Czech politics predicted the end of the coalition on a number of occasions during the second half of 2012 and the first half of 2013. The bitter end finally came in June 2013.

On behalf of Public Prosecutor Ivo Ištván, police raided the Office of the Government on June 12. Three former deputies representing the Civic Democratic Party were arrested and accused of corruption because they resigned from parliament at the end of 2012. Their resignation allowed the governing parties to pass the 2013 state budget the very last possible moment. In addition to these three, the police detained the Chief Secretary of the Cabinet of the Prime Minister Jana Nagyová (who was also the Prime Minister’s mistress, later marrying him after he had divorced) as well as former and current directors of the military secret service, who were charged with spying illegally on the Prime Minister’s wife Radka.

Mr Nečas’ resignation followed very soon after the police raid at the Office of the Government. On June 17, Mr Nečas resigned from both the position of Prime Minister and Chairman of the Civic Democratic Party. This also meant, according to the Czech Constitution, the end of the entire government. Politicians of the coalition parties, including the Liberal Democrats, declared that they were ready to continue under a new Prime Minister. After a set of negotiations these parties declared that Miroslava Němcová (from the Civic

Democrats), who served for years as a chair of the House of Deputies, would be designated as new Prime Minister. However, the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and remaining Public Affairs deputies declared that they would vote for the dissolution of parliament and early elections. In such a situation, the key was in hands of President Zeman. Mr Zeman declared openly that he would not support the renewal of the right-wing coalition so as “not to disappoint” the voters who had supported him in the January 2013 presidential elections, which he won in part by promising to “stop Nečas and his cabinet”. Mr Zeman announced that favoured establishing a caretaker government composed of “experts”, which would bridge the period until the early election.

On July 17 2013, a special session of the House of Deputies decided not to dissolve parliament. Only 96 deputies supported the dissolution (all members of the Social Democrats, Communists and Public Affairs clubs and 5 non-aligned deputies), while 92 deputies voted against the proposal (all the Civic Democrats and Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 deputies plus majority of the non-aligned deputies, including the Liberal Democrats). The quorum required to dissolve the House was a qualified majority of 120 deputies. This left room for manoeuvre was for President Zeman.

Despite the declaration of the incumbent coalition parties that they would be willing to continue co-operation under a new leader, and that they had the power to veto a vote of confidence in any Prime Ministerial nominee in the House of Deputies, Mr Zeman designated Jiří Rusnok as the new Prime Minister and assigned him the task of composing a non-partisan caretaker “expert” cabinet. Mr Rusnok had once been a close political ally of Mr Zeman’s; he served in 2001-2002 as Minister of Finance in the President’s single-party Social Democratic minority government, and was Minister of Industry and Commerce briefly at the beginning of the Špidla government until 2003. He resigned his membership of the Social Democratic Party in 2010. The composition of Mr Rusnok’s government corresponded well to the basic idea expressed by Mr Zeman. Some close political allies of the President could be found among the ministers, such as Marie Benešová (Justice) and Martin Pecina (Home Affairs). Five members of the government were previously members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia before 1989, and five ministers were members of Social Democracy in the past. One interesting, and slightly surprising, nomination was that of Jan Fischer to the position of Minister of Finance. Mr Fischer was an unsuccessful candidate in the January 2013 presidential election who did not manage to qualify for the second round. Only a day after being nominated for governmental office, he somehow managed to obtain the 5.5 million Czech crowns (roughly €220,000) he needed to cover the outstanding debt for his presidential campaign. He never explained where the money came from, and the reason why he was sponsored just after being nominated. Mr Rusnok visited the House of Deputies on August 3 2013 to request a vote of confidence. In his rather brief programmatic manifesto, Mr Rusnok heavily criticized the economic policies of the previous government, declared that his administration would “support action aimed at deeper integration and strengthening the European Union’s political and economic weight in the world”, and discussed in some detail the economic policies of his government.

Debate on the Rusnok government clearly showed how deeply the Social Democratic Party was divided concerning its relations with Mr Zeman. Social Democratic Chairman Bohuslav Sobotka a couple of times clearly rejected supporting Mr Rusnok’s cabinet and he declared repeatedly that he wanted to be charged with the task of putting together a left-wing government when Mr Rusnok had failed to win the vote of confidence. Some other leading Social Democrats who were closer to Mr Zeman openly supported Mr Rusnok. The dramatic

debate was followed by a voting procedure in which Mr Rusnok did not succeed in the vote of confidence. Altogether 93 deputies supported the government (in the end, the Social Democrats supported the vote of confidence, along with the Communists, Public Affairs and three non-aligned deputies), while 100 voted against (the Civic Democrats, Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09, Liberal Democrats and 3 non-aligned).

The vote and related debate showed that the fragile 101-seat majority of the Civic Democrats, Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 and Liberal Democrats, that would have been sufficient to establish a new government, was over. Two Civic Democrat deputies dissented and it was obvious to all that there would be no solution other than the disbanding of the House of Deputies and calling early elections. The new vote on dissolution took place on August 20 2013 and 140 deputies (the Social Democrats, Communists, Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 and Public Affairs) voted in favour. Most of the Civic Democratic parliamentary club left the chamber while seven of its deputies voted against. The Czech Republic was ready for a new election.

To conclude, the party spectrum was in great flux in the period before the presidential and early parliamentary elections. Both the Civic Democrats and the Social Democrats faced internal disputes, complicated in the case of Social Democrats even more by the fact that one of two competing factions (led by Michal Hašek) enjoyed the support of President Zeman. In addition to the incumbents and the Christian Democrats hoping for a return to the House, two newcomers hoping to get into the parliament also had an impact on the campaign. These two will be described briefly before we come to the analysis of the election campaign.

The history of the first of these, ANO 2011, started in autumn 2011. One of the leading Czech businessmen operating in the chemical and food industries Andrej Babiš,<sup>3</sup> initiated the foundation of the ‘Action by Discontented Citizens’ political movement,<sup>4</sup> which was registered officially by the Czech Ministry of Interior in 2012 as the political movement ‘ANO 2011’. Roughly 17,000 citizens signed the movement’s original petition in November and December 2011, supporting a protest voice raised by Mr Babiš against the political elite. The organisational structures of the movement were, however, only minimally developed during 2012 and the first half of 2013 because Mr Babiš, who has been the head of the movement since the very beginning, concentrated his efforts on organising his weekly newspaper 5+2, and later on to investing in and buying leading quality media (see below for details); this led to his occasionally-used nickname of “the Czech Berlusconi”. The activities of the movement increased prior to the 2013 early parliamentary elections 2013. Mr Babiš succeeded in engaging some popular political as well as non-political figures to back his movement.<sup>5</sup> ANO 2011 pumped lots of money (provided mainly by the different companies of Agrofert Holding, owned by Mr Babiš) into the campaign and this, together with a perfect political marketing strategy and a brief ‘protest’ manifesto focusing on corruption, catapulted this newcomer without any previous significant political impact to the position of the second

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<sup>3</sup> Andrej Babiš’ career illustrates a relatively common pattern of transformation of communist elites in the post-communist period. Mr Babiš was a member of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and he worked as a manager for state-owned petrochemical companies during the communist period. Then he was successful in the privatisation process and turned to one of the strongest ex-communist members of the business elite.

<sup>4</sup> ANO stands for “Akce nespokojených občanů”. The word “Ano” means “Yes” in the Czech language; usually, only the abbreviation “Ano” was used to describe the party.

<sup>5</sup> These included people such as: Věra Jourová, a former officer of the Ministry of Regional Development falsely accused of corruption who became a kind of symbol of fighting corrupt politicians; the popular actor and former diplomat Martin Stropnický; and former journalist Martin Komárek, known paradoxically in the past for a very critical stance toward the political activities of Andrej Babiš himself.

largest parliamentary club. Still it was unclear what the programmatic priorities of his party would be, because Mr Babiš' most typical answer of to any question related to his movement's precise positioning on any given issue was something like "I have to ask the experts". It was even difficult to assess the movement's exact position on the left-right spectrum. We can undoubtedly say that ANO 2011 did not represent the political left, but it was also difficult to say that the party's programme fitted with what one might call the 'typical' political right. However, the tycoon's rhetoric against traditional "lazy" politicians (who certainly knew how to run large businesses) proved to be impressive in eyes of many Czech voters.

Evaluation of the Dawn of Direct Democracy (Úsvit) party's position was a much easier. The party was on the far-right of the Czech party system, not inevitably extremist but approaching some issues in ways close to political extremism, such as its stance on the role of Roma in society. The political movement, the full name of which read the "Dawn of Direct Democracy of Tomio Okamura" was founded at the beginning of 2013 by the Senator and aspiring Czech presidential candidate Tomio Okamura. Mr Okamura, who was popular since 2010 when he was a part of Czech version of the 'Dragons' Den' television competition, was excluded from the presidential race because he delivered an incomplete petition in support of his candidacy. The movement was registered as late as June 2013, yet was still able to recruit supporters, leaders and candidates for the early election in October. The main message of the Movement - under whose umbrella, incidentally, some politicians from the Public Affairs Party found a new political home, was clear from the very beginning. Mr Okamura supported a substantial switch from representative to direct democracy (including popular recall of politicians at all levels of decision making) as a panacea for everything that was wrong with Czech politics. Beyond this surface, however, many extremist undertones could be heard such as Mr Okamura's support for creation of "the Roma state". All accusations of racism were fended off with a single argument that, as a man of Czech-Japanese origin, Mr Okamura simply could not be a racist. Observing the positioning of Mr Okamura and his movement, we can, however, conclude that he was to fill the niche of the "missing" relevant party on the Czech far-right.

## **The Campaign**

Compared to previous elections, the 2013 early election campaign was characterised by an absence of substantive topics. Most of the relevant parties bet on simple slogans containing no substantial political message. Rather than specific party campaigns, several interesting general features shaping the Czech political landscape are worth mentioning first, as they had (if they prevailed) the potential to change Czech politics.

First, and probably most importantly, was the role of media. From the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of the Czech "serious" daily press was owned by foreign investors, mainly those coming from German-speaking countries. In fact, of the most stable and widely-read dailies, only *Právo* was owned by a Czech company, while *MF Dnes*, *Lidové noviny*, and *Hospodářské noviny* were in the hands of German publishing houses. In 2008, *Hospodářské noviny* was bought by a company owned by Zdeněk Bakala, one of the Czech Republic's richest investors. Although Mr Bakala had always been close to Karel Schwarzenberg, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and presidential candidate, this did not challenge the independence of the newspaper substantially, as the new owner was never interested in active political career. Thus, although the Czech media has been far from being perfect "watchdogs

of democracy”, they largely remained independent from party politics since 1989. In spring 2013, the situation began to dramatically change. A publishing house called Mafra, which managed both *MF Dnes* (the most-read quality daily in the Czech Republic for last 20 years) and *Lidové noviny* (a quality daily, whose tradition goes back to the era of inter-war Czechoslovakia) was bought from German owners by Andrej Babiš. Mr Babiš, who provided jobs to more than 25 000 people, had entered the media business before this purchase as he had funded the analytical server *Česká pozice* (Czech Position) and owned the weekly newspaper 5+2. However, none of these journals had a major impact and, moreover, Mr Babiš had bought them before he announced his intention to participate in politics explicitly.

Shortly after Mr Babiš bought both newspapers, their independence and integrity began to be questioned. For example, a few days after the transactions, Mr Babiš himself telephoned one of the journalists working for *Lidové noviny* and asked why his movement’s press conference had not been mentioned in the newspaper. Despite Mr Babiš apologizing afterwards, his words at the end of call - “I hope that the guys know what they are doing. They probably have no idea who I am” – send a rather significant message about his approach. Indeed, during the campaign, the journals owned by Mr Babiš did not act impartially. The weekly 5+2 supported him explicitly: regularly publishing long interviews with his movement’s candidates and columns written by Martin Komárek, the former *MF Dnes* commentator and one of the movement’s leaders. *MF Dnes* and *Lidové noviny* helped Mr Babiš more implicitly. Both journals repeatedly published the results of polls that favoured ANO, used suggestive headlines and, in particular, remained silent about allegations that Mr Babiš was a secret police agent during the communist regime. As there was serious evidence against Mr Babiš, ignorance of this topic by both dailies was incomprehensible.

The second important influence shaping the whole campaign could be spotted in the role of the opinion polls. Already before the campaign started, it had been obvious that there would be several parties hovering around the 5% threshold - the magic number whose crossing qualified a party for getting parliamentary seats in the Czech Republic. These parties included the Greens (SZ), the Christian Democrats, the Party for Citizens Rights-Zemanovci (SPOZ), Dawn of the Direct Democracy and, at the beginning of summer, ANO as well. Bearing in mind that there was a traditionally significant bloc of un-decided voters in the Czech electorate, it became crucial for each party which numbers were revealed by specific polls. Unfortunately, there were so many different polls using different methodologies and interpretations that each party and newspaper could pick up the favourite one and use it as evidence of increasing or declining support. It was sometimes comical how both politicians and commentators were obsessed by analysing these frequently dubious numbers.

If we proceed to specific parties and their performance in the campaign, one has to make one general comment: the majority of the traditionally relevant and parliamentary-represented parties faced their own internal problems and refrained from delivering important political messages to the voters. None of the parties succeeded in offering (or even tried to offer) a comprehensive solution covering, for example, issues such as the economic situation, pension system reform, education. The campaign as a whole was rather a battle of adverts rather than a discussion of substantive topics.

The Social Democrats appeared to be the clear winners of the election long before the campaign started. However, the party itself did not seem to recover from the presidential election of January 2013, when many Social Democratic politicians and voters supported

former party leader Miloš Zeman rather than the official party candidate Jiří Dienstbier Jr.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Mr Zeman's victory actually exacerbated existing tensions within the party with one wing strongly allying itself with the President and the other, surrounding party leader Mr Sobotka, opposing him. When the Rusnok government was installed, the party lost several visible politicians – such as former Minister of Interior Martin Pecina and shadow Minister of Justice Marie Benešová - who agreed, against the wishes of the party leadership, to participate in the cabinet. The Social Democrats ran their campaign under the slogan “A functioning state can only be secured by strong government” and issued several populist commitments, such as promising a 50% increase in the minimum wage by 2018. However, party leaders seemed to be nervous, a nervousness that was exacerbated by an apparent drop in the party's support during the last days of the campaign.

If the Social Democrats seemed to be nervous and un-prepared for victory, the Civic Democrats were helpless. The party lacked clear leadership as it focused upon both Miroslava Němcová as “Election Leader” and Martin Kuba as acting Chairman, which confused the voters to some extent. Despite having an election platform (in which the Civic Democrats dropped several previously salient topics, such as university fees), during the most intensive part of the campaign, the party stake everything on using very simple and non-confrontational rhetoric - it is difficult to imagine an emptier slogan for a major party than “I vote for the right!” The Civic Democrats' dire situation was exemplified by the fact that in one region the party list was led by an independent candidate, Petr Fiala, an idea that would have been unthinkable previously.

Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 again used its leader Karel Schwarzenberg as a trump card. Mr Schwarzenberg played a key role in the campaign, where he was portrayed in James Bond-style. Even his omnipresent pipe was used - reminiscent of a famous quip about Václav Klaus' tennis racket winning the election for Civic Democrats in Prague (!) - as Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 placed it on the first page of its election manifesto and used it in the banner on the party's website. On the other hand, Miroslav Kalousek, the actual leader of the party, was practically invisible due to his enormous unpopularity among voters. On substantive matters, the party emphasized its conservative profile, advocated the previous government's reform plans and tried to present itself as the only stable right-wing political force.

The Communist Party remained quite silent during the campaign, which was the party's usual tactic. After having secured a place in several regional governments after the 2012 regional elections, the Communists simply waited for their turn at the national level as well. Thus, the party just repeated its stress on social issues and even dusted off its promises from previous election campaigns: for example, as in 2010 the Communists promised a ‘right’ to a first job and an increase of the minimum wage to 50% of the average wage level.

Although Public Affairs, having risen meteorically in the previous election, largely disappeared from political life, it was obvious that a new ‘rookie’ was emerging. ANO 2011 – which, during the campaign, changed its name to “Yes, it will be better” – drew on the same rhetoric as Public Affairs had: fighting against corruption, ‘new faces’ replacing ‘lazy and corrupt politicians’ etc. ANO added to this dimension a stress on the business competences of its leaders stating that the “state must be governed as a company”.

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<sup>6</sup> See: Vit Hloušek and Petr Kaniok, ‘Europe and the Czech Presidential Election of January 2013’, *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing* No. 72 at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern-election-briefing-no-72.pdf>.



Parties that were not represented in the House of Deputies prior the election but had a chance of success could be divided into two groups. The Greens and Christian Democrats represented established parties, developing their campaigns by stressing their cleanness and traditional role both in the Czech and European context. The second group was represented mainly by the Party of Citizens' Rights-the Zemanovci and by Dawn of Direct Democracy; these were both quite new and strongly populist parties. The former party, originally established as a fan club for Miloš Zeman with the intention to bring him back into politics, tried to profit from the incumbency of several party leaders serving in the "expert" cabinet and from the support of President himself. Dawn of Direct Democracy, with its slightly xenophobic rhetoric and populist solutions (for example, the party demanded direct recall votes of politicians), was reminiscent of the radical right Republican Party of Miroslav Sládek that was represented in the Czech parliament during 1992-1996 period. In addition to the standard tools, non-parliamentary parties tried to attract both media and voter attention by various means. Among the most bizarre included "electoral anthems"; in one, Ondřej Liška, the leader of the Greens, turned into a rapper!

### **European issues – again a Cinderella of the Campaign:**

If we are to evaluate the importance of European issues in this campaign, we could simply 'copy and paste' what we wrote when analysing the 2010 election: European issues were somehow present in party manifestos, but they did not echo in the campaign. Taking into account the general condition of the Czech political parties, it was hardly surprising – the parties that had enough difficulties in offer solutions to domestic problems so could have hardly presented their visions of the future of the Eurozone or European integration.

Significantly for Czech EU supporters, in its condensed manifesto, the Social Democrats, rhetorically the party with the strongest pro-European views, mentioned the EU only in the framework of money for agriculture and underdeveloped Czech regions. The same priority framing was used in the complex version of the manifesto, where the party again emphasised EU funds. An independent EU section was placed as the final part of the manifesto; there the Social Democrats stated explicitly that the euro should be adopted when it would be advantageous for the Czech Republic.

The Civic Democrats devoted much more attention to the EU than their main counterpart. The party repeated its Eurorealist stance towards European integration, stating that membership brought both advantages and burdens. Concerning the euro, the Civic Democrats claimed that, in the current situation, the Czech Republic should not aspire for Eurozone membership and called for a referendum if such potential situation were to transpire.

Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09, another pro-European party, framed EU issues in two ways. Firstly, a strong European dimension was present in the "Economy" chapter of its programme, where the party called for Czech accession to the "Fiscal Compact" and support for euro adoption during the 2018-2020 period. Secondly, general EU issues, such as enlargement and what the Czech position should be within the Union, were also mentioned in the "Foreign Policy" chapter. However, compared to the economic sections of the programme, the party only presented its arguments in a very general and vague way.

The Communists almost omitted the EU in their manifesto, as the only remark referring to it concerned a call for fair representation of member states in EU institutions, and for a reduction in the EU's "democratic deficit." Unlike other parties, the Communists did make any comment on the euro or the EU's economic situation.

As ANO recruited Pavel Telička, the first Czech EU Commissioner, as one of its leaders,<sup>7</sup> one might have expected a well-structured and argued stance on the EU to have been evident in the party's manifesto. However, the EU was only mentioned occasionally and mainly in the context of procuring EU funds effectively. Like the Communists, ANO remained silent on the euro.

Concerning the traditional but non-parliamentary parties, the Christian Democrats seemed to slightly modify their Euro-enthusiastic approach, as the party framed the EU issue from a particularly Czech perspective. It thus called for policies such as better procurement of EU funds and accession to the Eurozone only when it was felt to be advantageous. Thus, only the Greens remained committed to a position of full support for further deepening and widening of the European integration project, as the party called for the full political integration of the EU.

The populist formations - especially Dawn of Direct Democracy but also 'Head Up', the new party of Jana Bobošíková, criticised the EU heavily, portraying it as an over-regulated and bureaucratized entity. While Dawn of Direct Democracy only called for referendums in any cases of state sovereignty being transferred, and did not call for the Czech Republic to leave the EU outright, the Head Up bloc – supported by former President and one-time Civic Democrat prime minister Václav Klaus – called for the transformation of the EU into an organization solely for the co-operation of independent states.

## Results

Unlike in 2010, the results of the 2013 Czech early parliamentary election could have been relatively well predicted on the basis of opinion polls. Generally, incumbents (including the Social Democratic Party) were expected to be challenged by the ANO movement that showed a clear and impressive trend of increasing electoral support in the run-up to polling day. The Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party returned to the House of Deputies following a period of not being represented there. The Civic Democrats lost as much support as opinion polls had predicted and changed their status from having been one of the main Czech parties to a minor play on the right. As Table 1 shows, their final result, less than 7% of the vote, can be hardly described by any other terms than a debacle. What was more surprising were the disastrous electoral returns for both of the parties supported by contemporary and former Presidents. Mr Klaus' in the campaign of the Eurosceptic "Head Up" bloc - albeit distant and indirect - "helped" them to collect less than 0.5% of the votes. The Party of Citizens' Rights-the Zemanovci collected only three times more votes than "Head Up", despite the fact that Mr Zeman's face, taken from the official "presidential" stamp of the Czech Post and used on the party's billboards, conveyed a very clear message who the voters should consider as representing the "presidential party". The election results of the main parties are summarised in Table 1 below.

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<sup>7</sup> Although Mr Telička did not run in the election, he was expected to be leader of ANO list in the 2014 European Parliament election.

Table 1: Result of the 2013 early election to the House of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic

Party	% vote	Votes	Seats <sup>8</sup>	Seats +/- compared to 2010 election
Social Democrats	20.45	1,016,829	50	-6
ANO 2011	18.65	927,240	47	+47
Communists	14.91	741,044	33	+7
Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09	11.99	596,357	26	-15
Civic Democrats	7.72	384,174	16	-37
Dawn of Direct Democracy	6.88	342,339	14	+14
Christian Democrats	6.78	336 970	14	+14
The Green Party	3.19	159 025	0	0
Czech Pirate Party	2.66	132 417	0	0
Party of Free Citizens	2.46	122 564	0	0
Others	4.31	211 025	0	-24

Source: www.volby.cz

The electoral turnout, representing 59.48% of eligible voters, was the second lowest in the history of the Czech Republic. As usual, the Czech Republic was divided into 14 electoral districts designed according to the Czech regions; with different magnitude based on population (ranging from five seats assigned to the Karlovarský Region to 25 seats distributed in the Středočeský Region); any political party needed to cross a nationwide electoral threshold of 5% to secure parliamentary representation. The Social Democrats Party won in nine regions, (in South and East Bohemia, as well as all of Moravia and Silesia). ANO 2011 won in four regions in Western, Central and Northern Bohemia. Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09 achieved its best result in the capital Prague (which is also a region). More than 12% of voters supported a party that failed to secure parliamentary representation. Among these unsuccessful parties, the Greens, Pirates, and the Eurosceptic classical-liberal Party of Free Citizens achieved the best results.

A somewhat surprising result was the level of support for Tomio Okamura and his Dawn of Direct Democracy. This populist movement polled slightly better in Northern districts than in Central and Southern Bohemia and Moravia, which was a logical consequence of the more problematic economic and social situation in these parts of the country.

The roots of Christian Democratic success were found mainly in Southern and central Moravia and the South and East Bohemia regions. Somewhat surprisingly, the party obtained more than 5% of the vote in Prague as well. The Civic Democrats obtained their best returns in the West Bohemia region (where the capital was Pilsen, where their popular leader Jiří Pospíšil ran as a candidate) and, generally, the larger the city the better the party fared (with the exception of Ostrava). Urban voters also preferred Tradition-Responsibility-Prosperity 09. The Communist Party scored its best result in Northern Bohemia and in Northern Moravia. Electoral support for ANO 2011 was more or less evenly distributed with slightly better returns in Bohemia than in Moravia. We can, simplifying a bit, state that the reverse applied to the Social Democrats.

All in all, many expert and journalist observers of the 2013 Czech early election claimed that the traditionally dominant left-right axis of competition was replaced with the quest for a new

<sup>8</sup> Some small formations succeeded in winning seats in the House of Deputies standing on the lists of some of the larger parties. There were, for example, three Public Affairs deputies who ran on the “Dawn” list and couple of other deputies representing regional parties or movements.

shape of the Czech political system. We would not go so far to deny any significance of the left-right cleavage, but we must observe that the protest voting in favour of ANO 2011 and (at least to some extent) Dawn of Direct Democracy proved to be a stronger mobilising factor in this election, reacting to the crisis of established parties and a general dissatisfaction of the voters with the performance of the incumbent political elite.

## **Further developments and outlook**

For both of what had previously been the Czech Republic's leading parties, the Social Democrats and the Civic Democrats, the outcome of elections was hardly a pleasant surprise. The Civic Democrats evaluated the outcome as a disaster and a call for massive personal changes at the top of the party. Acting chairman Martin Kuba declared that he would not be candidate for the position of party chair. At the time of writing the party congress that would elect the new leader had not yet taken place and only Miroslava Němcová had explicitly declared her willingness to run for chair. The Southern Moravian region in particular supported former minister of education Petr Fiala as a new face of the party although his position was complicated by the fact that he only joined the party only few weeks after the elections. Either way, the Civic Democrats found themselves in opposition after the elections.

For the Social Democrats, the victory was a bitter one. The party had expected a much better result return and as a consequence of not fulfilling its expectation (it had counted on Social Democratic and Communist majority in a new House of Deputies), long-term internal disputes between the leader Bohuslav Sobotka and influential popular deputy chair Michal Hašek turned into open conflict. Mr Hašek who believed that he would obtain the support of those members of the Social Democratic Party elite who were dis-satisfied with the election result and who blamed it upon Mr Sobotka's strategy as well as President Zeman demanded immediately after the election that Mr Sobotka has to step down. After the revelation of a "secret" meeting between Mr Zeman and the Social Democratic rebels clustered around Mr Hašek, Mr Sobotka succeeded in winning over a majority of the party presidium and Mr Hašek and other leading rebels were forced to resign from their party functions. It was, however, premature to declare total victory for Mr Sobotka; perhaps an armistice was a more suitable metaphor.

Every observer of Czech post-electoral developments eagerly awaited the next moves of President Zeman whose political activity since January 2013 left no doubts about his willingness to control as much of post-election negotiations as possible. At the end of the day, however, for various reasons Mr Zeman proved to be a less efficient driver of governmental formation than many expected. First, his party was completely defeated in the election. Second, the pro-presidential faction within the Social Democrats lost the battle with Mr Sobotka. And third, a couple of days after the election Mr Zeman accidentally injured himself thereby de-activating himself to some extent.

From the very beginning of post-election talks, the Christian Democrats declared that they were ready to support in some way a coalition formed by the two strongest parties: the Social Democrats and ANO. The composition of the parliament almost required some kind of deal between the two strongest parties and both negotiating teams began talks on that basis. There were many divergent policy positions dividing the Social Democrats and Mr Babiš' movement such as taxation policy, budget policy, or policy measures stimulating or fostering the return to economic growth. Another problem arose due to the unwillingness of the

Christian Democrats (without whose support the Social Democrats-ANO cabinet would not secure a majority in the lower house) to re-open the question of church restitution. Having been a question of more or less intensive negotiations for more than 20 years, restitution was finally approved by Mr Nečas' cabinet and heavily criticised by the Social Democrats in the election campaign. However, the parties involved in coalition talks appeared to overcome these disputes and the government by Bohuslav Sobotka composed of the Social Democrats, ANO (with Mr Babiš as finance minister and the first deputy prime minister responsible for economic affairs) and the Christian Democrats obtained the House of Deputies' approval on February 18 2014. The coalition programme was a compromise among three relatively distant visions, particularly of economic policies, and it remained an open question how coherent the coalition would be.

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