

## **EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION BRIEFING NO 29 THE 2009 EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC, JUNE 5-6 2009**

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### **Key points:**

- The complete failure of the small parties, the confirmation of most important position of two biggest parties - the Civic Democratic Party and Czech Social Democratic Party - in the poll (9 MEPs for each of them), together with the representation of the existing parliamentary parties only (Communists and Christian Democrats who have been in the legislature since 1990).
- The failure of the Greens due to an internal split within the party in 2008-2009 - three different Green lists competing in the 2009 European Parliament (EP) election, with the most successful winning only 2.06 % of the votes.
- Domestic issues dominated the campaign; no attention was paid to Europe. This helps to explain why Eurosceptic parties failed.
- The 'second order elections' theory was confirmed in regard to the domestic focus of the campaign and the lower turnout, but not in terms of the performance of the minor parties.

The period between the first EP elections in the Czech Republic held in 2004 and the recent elections was rather turbulent in terms of political development. Elections to both chambers of the Czech Parliament took place during this period, as well as presidential and regional elections. Many interesting shifts could be observed in Czech political parties.

The results of the 2004 Czech EP elections were more favourable for the Czech right.<sup>1</sup> The conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS) was the winner with 30% of the vote. The Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU–ČSL) demonstrated a solid performance with 9.6% of the vote. The Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) also ran very well with a 20.3% share. Meanwhile,

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<sup>1</sup> See: Marketa Rulikova, , 'The European Parliament Election in the Czech Republic, June 11-12 2004', *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network 2009 EP Election Briefing No 9* at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epernep2004czechrep.pdf>.

the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) faced a debacle with only 8.8 % of the vote. The result led to the replacement of former party chair Vladimír Špidla (who later became the Czech member of the European Commission) with the young and popular politician Stanislav Gross. Gross' position was, however, already disputed in spring 2005 because of unclear financing of his new flat and the dubious economic activities of his wife. The 'Gross affair' expanded into a crisis for the coalition government, which was only settled by Social Democrat Jiří Paroubek taking over the position of prime minister and party leader. Paroubek maintained the ruling coalition of Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, and the liberal Union of Freedom, but in parliamentary voting, he co-operated more frequently with the Communists.

In this situation, ordinary elections to the House of Deputies took place in summer 2006.<sup>2</sup> The electoral campaign was extraordinary in some regards. Firstly, it was the first fully professionalized campaign using the full spectrum of political marketing tools. Secondly, it demonstrated the emergence of a clearly bi-polar structure of Czech public opinion. The campaign was a duel of the two strongest parties, the left wing Social Democrats and right wing Civic Democrats. The bi-polar structure was completed with the election results; both of the main parties improved their positions with increasing electoral support. Three smaller parties obtained seats in the House of Deputies as well, namely: the Communist Party, the Christian Democrats, and, as a newcomer, the Green Party (SZ), which was, in part, a reaction in part to and increasing demand for the representation of post-material values.<sup>3</sup> However, the distribution of seats in the House of Deputies resulted in a stalemate between the left (Social Democrats and Communists) and centre-right (Civic Democrats, Christian Democrats and Greens), both of them controlling 100 in the chamber. The process of creating a coalition government was thus complicated and lasted a very long time. As late as September 2006, three months after the elections, Mirek Topolánek's minority government was appointed with only the support of Civic Democrat deputies. However, the government failed to obtain a vote of confidence in the House of Deputies. In the meantime, Topolánek negotiated with the Greens and Christian Democrats on the composition of a coalition government. This coalition government was appointed in January of 2007, and thanks to the votes of two Social Democratic deputies (one of whom, Michal Pohanka, gave up his seat in November 2008, to be replaced by another Social Democrat), the House of Deputies expressed confidence in the new Topolánek government.

These two renegade deputies faced enormous pressure from the Social Democrats, which demanded their resignation, but they did not do so and effectively held the balance of power in the House of Deputies. Internal organizational cohesion among the parliamentary groupings was also a problem for the governing parties. In the Green Party, relations between two deputies, Věra Jakubková and Olga Zubová, and party leader Martin Bursík became strained. These clashes corresponded to some

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<sup>2</sup> See: Sean Hanley, 'Europe and the Czech Parliamentary Elections, 2-3 June 2006,' *European Parties Elections and Referendums Network Election Briefing No 27* at [http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern\\_no\\_27.pdf](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/sei/documents/epern_no_27.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> The electoral success of the Green Party could not be explained only by the rising importance of post-material issues. The Greens have been divided by internal clashes among various factions and became a marginal party in the 1990s. After an unsuccessful performance in the 2004 EP elections, its radical leaders were replaced by a moderate chairman, Martin Bursík, who re-branded the party as more centrist and liberal, so that it was also able to appeal to economically liberal centre-right voters who used to support parties like the Union of Freedom or Civic Democratic Alliance in the past.

extent with a deeper cleavage inside the membership base of the party. Many radical members of the Greens criticised the party's inclusion in the centre-right government, or at least disputed some of the cabinet's most important programmatic priorities. Media attention focused mainly on the issue of plans to establish components of the US anti-missile system on Czech land, an issue that polarised public opinion and the entire Czech political scene until the 2008 US presidential elections calmed the hottest phase of the debate. The clash within the Green fraction ended in November 2008 with Jakubková and Zubová resigning. When the two were suspended from the Green Party in March 2009, part of the membership and leaders reacted by establishing a new party called the Democratic Green Party (DSZ), opposing Bursík's course of environmental politics. As we shall see, however, the Democratic Green Party failed completely in the EP 2009 elections.

The Civic Democrats faced a similar problem. Deputy Vlastimil Tlustý became a strong opponent of Topolánek's cabinet despite the fact that he was one of the main architects of the party's financial and economic policies before the 2006 elections. Tlustý traditionally belonged to the faction close to Czech President Václav Klaus, who did not support Topolánek as a party leader. Despite expectations, Tlustý has not become a member of the second Topolánek cabinet (he was finance minister in the 2006-7 minority government, so he started to oppose the government's policies. Tlustý not only criticised the government's economic policy; he also disputed its positive stance on ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, in the same vein as Klaus. In the summer 2007, Tlustý declared the foundation of the 'reform parliamentary platform' inside the Civic Democrats, followed quickly by other two deputies, Juraj Raninec and Jan Schwippel, who left the party in September 2008. Tlustý was finally expelled in March 2009 after he supported a no-confidence vote against Topolánek's cabinet. Tlustý and Schwippel were to run on the list of Czech Libertas in the 2009 EP elections.

The cohesion of the government coalition, as well as that of the main important governing party (the Civic Democrat), was also challenged constantly, for example during the January 2008 presidential election. The President of the Czech Republic is elected indirectly in a joint session of both chambers of the Czech Parliament. The 2008 presidential election was remarkable because of very stormy discussions concerning the question of whether the vote should be held in secret or public. Eventually, it was agreed to hold the vote in public. In order to elect the President, it was necessary to repeat the three-ballot procedure twice. Finally, Václav Klaus was re-elected but his opponent Jan Švejnar, supported by Social Democrats as well as smaller parties in the government coalition, also scored quite well. The atmosphere of the election was damaged by a long and rather confusing procedural debate, as well as elements of intimidation of un-decided voters. The Civic Democrats and Topolánek personally supported Klaus in the elections, despite increasing tensions concerning European integration issues, namely the Lisbon Treaty.

Topolánek's position was strongly endangered after the regional and Senate elections held in October 2008. The results of the Senate elections were disastrous for the Civic Democrats, which obtained only 3 seats out of 27. 23 senators were elected from the

Social Democratic nominees and one communist.<sup>4</sup> The regional election results demonstrated the increasing power of Social Democrats as well. The party won 35.9% of the vote and the Civic Democrats only 23.6%. The Social Democrats now controlled 13 out of the 14 regional executives. In comparison to the parliamentary election, the Greens performed worse (3.2%) as did the Christian Democrats (6.7%), while the support of Communist Party increased to 15%. Both the Senate and regional election campaigns boosted the Social Democrats, which organized a centralized campaign anchored in domestic issues, largely concentrated on a critique of the unpopular health care system reform pushed forward by the Civic Democrats as the flagship of the party programme. The campaign and results proved that in this kind of second-order-election, the polarization of the party scene and electorate between Civic and Social Democrats plays a crucial role while smaller parties are relegated only to subordinated parts.

Topolánek reacted to the debacle by calling a party congress in Prague in December 2009 to elect a new leadership. The atmosphere before the congress was tense and a very severe duel between Topolánek and Prague mayor Pavel Bém was expected. Bém's nomination was anchored not only in the strength of the party's Prague regional branch, but also in his demonstration of ideological and programmatic proximity to Václav Klaus. Bém emphasized his rejection of the Lisbon Treaty and the maintenance of the party's moderate Euroceptic orientation of the in the future. An especially dramatic moment was provided by Klaus, the honorary chairman of the party. This was the peak of the dispute and tensions between Klaus and Topolánek over the style and programmatic orientation of the Civic Democrats, which started almost immediately after Topolánek's election as party chair in December 2002. In his brief statement Klaus rejected the political course of Topolánek's leadership as a policy, which is in conflict with Klaus' idea on the party's orientation and declared that he would give up the honorary chairman title that he obtained in 2002.

However, the party leadership election confirmed Topolánek's supremacy: he obtained 284 votes compared to Bém's 162. However, the congress also demonstrated that the Lisbon Treaty and generally EU-related issues had created a deep cleavage *inside* the party.<sup>5</sup> The party elite was divided after the congress between followers of Topolánek's moderate approach counting on the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (apart from anything else, to smooth the process of the up-coming Czech Presidency of the EU Council) and the Euroceptic wing embodied by Bém and Tlustý, and supported by Klaus. Civic Democrat MPs in both the House of Deputies and the Senate were also divided on the issue. Some of the party's Senators sent the Lisbon Treaty draft to the Czech Constitutional Court in April 2008 before the ratification process started, in order to examine its accordance with the Czech Constitution. More precisely, they wanted to assess whether the creation of exclusive powers and the shift

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<sup>4</sup> One third of the members of the Senate (27) are elected every two years for the six-year period. Some senators elected from the Social Democrats' lists in 2008 were actually non-partisan candidates. See [www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz) for the complete results of elections.

<sup>5</sup> The Civic Democrats were traditionally divided on the European integration issue; both pro-integration and Euroceptic wings have been part of the party in the 1991-1997 period. The crisis was connected to the party's split and the emergence of the Union of Freedom, which opened the gate for a more Euroceptic profile for the party (from 1997/8-2002). Klaus' departure from the office of party leader in 2002 meant, in this respect, a renewal of the internal split between the Euroceptic and more moderate wings (2002-2009 period), but the importance of EU-related issues has increased dramatically in comparison to the 1990s.

to some shared powers with the EU did not approach the model of a federal state. Furthermore, the senators disputed the constitutionality of the *passerelle* because it would, among other things, drain the power of the Czech Parliament. President Klaus agreed with the objections raised by these Senators and, during the Constitutional Court hearing on the Lisbon Treaty, expressed the view that it invalidated the material core of the Czech Constitution. However, the Constitutional Court decided on November 26 2008 that the disputed parts of the Lisbon Treaty conformed to the Czech constitutional order.

On May 6 2009, 54 senators (including 12 Civic Democrats) approved the Treaty, while 19 Civic Democrat Senators voted against. The House of Deputies approved the Treaty on February 18 2009 by a vote of 125 deputies, including 36 Civic Democrats. Despite this fact, the ratification process has not yet concluded in the Czech Republic because it requires the signature of the President (and there is no deadline stipulated in the constitution as to how quickly this should be done), who declared that he would not sign it before the second Irish referendum.

One remarkable, fact confirmed by the Lisbon Treaty debate and its complicated ratification in the Czech Republic, is that, on one hand, EU-related issues divided the Civic Democrats deeply, yet, on the other; they were generally of only marginal importance for Czech voters' allegiance to political parties. The 2006 parliamentary election campaign omitted EU-related issues almost entirely, as did the 2009 EP election campaign. The Czech public is not radically Eurosceptic, and the stance of Civic Democratic Party voters in particular towards the EU, is much more positive than the party's soft Eurosceptic image suggests. According to public opinion polls provided by the Center of Public Opinion Research (CVVM) in April 2009, 58% of Civic Democratic Party voters supported ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. The long-term trends in public opinion surveys show that Civic Democrat voters are the most 'Euro-optimistic' even compared to voters of decisively pro-European parties like the Social or Christian Democrats. European issues play only a marginal role in Czech voters' decisions about which party to support. This is the reason why the pro-European electorate of the Civic Democrats doesn't care about the party elite's soft Eurosceptic stance.

How does one explain the shift of the Civic Democrat mainstream and Topolánek's leadership from a soft Eurosceptic to a moderate pro-EU position? The certain explanation is the fact that it was Topolánek's cabinet, which arranged and began the Czech Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2009. Fear of the Czech Presidency was expressed from abroad; especially by the last presiding country, France, which declared several times their doubts about the Czech Republic as a new member, and thus an in-experienced country, and how it would perform the presidential role poorly during the complicated times of economic recession. Topolánek's cabinet however faced the challenges of the Presidency rather well. In this respect, the no-confidence vote in Topolánek's cabinet by the House of Deputies during the course of the Czech Presidency of the EU Council was all the more surprising.

The explanation for this event, barely understandable from a foreign perspective, must be seen in the context of Czech domestic politics. Topolánek's government was weakened by secession of the above-mentioned Civic Democrat and Green deputies.

At the same time, pressure from the opposition Social Democrats grew constantly. On several occasions, the Social Democrats raised the question a no-confidence vote on the parliamentary floor.<sup>6</sup> Social Democratic and Communist deputies voted systematically against the cabinet, Topolánek was supported by deputies belonging to coalition parties but the votes of independent deputies who seceded from the Civic Democrats, Social Democrats, and the Greens during the parliamentary cycle - six deputies in total - were uncertain. According to the Czech Constitution, the opposition needed 101 votes to vote down the cabinet, which was un-achievable without the support of at least some independent deputies. In the vote held on the March 24 2009, 97 Social Democrats and Communists voted against the government together with the four 'renegades' from the Civic Democrats and Greens.

The emerging governmental crisis was solved by a deal between the former coalition parties and the Social Democrats concerning early elections. According to the deal, a new interim government would be assembled. The new prime minister was to be the president of the Czech Statistical Office, Jan Fischer. Fischer consulted about the nomination of ministers with both former coalition parties and the Social Democrats, which set some limits on the goals listed with the cabinet programme. The House of Deputies decided on the vote of confidence for Fischer's cabinet on Sunday the June 7 2009, one day after EP elections. The cabinet obtained the support of 156 deputies (of 200), namely the Social Democrats, Civic Democrats, and Greens together with part of the Christian Democratic party. A majority of the Christian Democrats and the Communists abstained from the vote. Only independent deputy Melčák expressed a negative vote against the interim government, which will be in office until early parliamentary elections in October 2009.

## **2009 EP election programmes**

The stance of the Civic Democrats on European integration is traditionally complicated and ambiguous. This ambivalence was confirmed by its 2009 EP manifesto. The party manifesto was not clearly Eurosceptic, but it still stressed that European integration is only a tool for defending Czech national interests, not an end in itself. It rejected the federalist perspective of EU development, preferring that the EU should develop as a "flexible, economically open, and expanding aggregate that will lead to the concept of 'flexible' or 'various' integration" instead. The core of the manifesto was not, however, devoted to European political issues but to domestic (mainly economic) problems under the motto 'Solution instead of Fear'. In this respect, the party's EP manifesto was not, as such, a Europeanized document. Domestic and European issues were not connected to each other even though the second half of the manifesto devoted much space to the party's position at the level of the EU. Among others, it positively assessed the Czech EU Presidency, described the activities of Civic Democrat MEPs in 2004-2009, and recalled the effort to create a new faction in the EP together with the British Conservatives. This part of the manifesto sounded rather like a soft Eurosceptic document.

The Social Democrats, Christian Democrats, and the Greens constituted the group of traditionally 'Euro-optimistic' parties. The Social Democrats proposed a fairly

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<sup>6</sup> The opposition had previously tried to oust Topolánek's cabinet four times without success: in June and December 2007, and in April and October 2008.

extensive manifesto before the EP elections which was, however, presented as an integral part of the Party of European Socialists' (PES) manifesto 'People First: a New Direction for Europe'. At first glance, the party's manifesto looked like a Europeanized one with the party declaring that "(E)uropean policy became part of domestic policy and we became an integral part of the European Union." The manifesto generally rejected the 'neo-liberal' politics of the Czech right, with particular attention paid to the spheres of economic and social policies in the context of the recent economic recession (the manifesto talked about the European social model implemented by socialist parties). The key items of the manifesto did not, however, deal with EU-related issues. The manifesto was based on criticisms of the domestic policies of Mirek Topolánek's centre-right cabinet; its key elements were addressed solely as problems of domestic politics and were conceptualized as a critique rather than a positive programme. All in all, we can assume that the Social Democratic programme focused on domestic issues and its Europeanization, in the sense of interconnection of EU and domestic issues, was only on the surface.

The Christian Democrats explicitly declared their membership of the European People's Party (EPP) in their manifesto. It declared its conservative orientation, which would compete with both the liberal and socialist visions of the EU. The EP election manifesto repeated traditional programmatic features common to European members of the Christian Democratic party family such as: the social market economy, a balanced state budget, and the introduction of the common Euro currency in the Czech Republic. The manifesto also dealt with the issues of fighting illegal migration, fostering of family and children's protection, tools for fostering fertility etc. The manifesto covered EU energy security, including the possibility of further use of nuclear energy in the future. The Christian Democratic programme was rather short and general in terms of EU-related issues. Turkish membership of the EU was explicitly rejected. The EU should play a more important role in global politics, according to the manifesto. Our conclusion on the Christian Democrats' is that it fitted into the general patterns of EPP priorities, but the level of connection between domestic and European politics remained surprisingly low. Thus, no Europeanization, in this sense of the word, occurred.

The EP election manifesto presented by the Green Party could certainly be labeled as "Euro-optimistic". The Greens called themselves the most pro-European among the Czech parties. The key points were climate protection and environmental issues more generally. Even their economic policies were seasoned with an environmental flavour. All the issues contained within the manifesto were Europeanized in the sense that the party's programme priorities were introduced both in the domestic and EU contexts. So, far as European integration was concerned, the Green manifesto supported strengthening the ESDP, the Lisbon Treaty, and, especially, strengthening the EP's role. The Greens' manifesto was the most Europeanized of all the Czech parties' 2009 EP programmes.

The left wing of Eurosceptic politics was traditionally embodied by the Communists. The party's manifesto declined to use the term 'Europe' in all possible cases (the term EU is mentioned only three times in the brief document) but its substance only repeated the traditional domestic priorities of the party, like rejection of the market economy, rejection of NATO, elements of social populism, etc. The party had no explicit stance on European integration in the manifesto but reading between the lines,

we can find disagreement with the contemporary state of integration and rejection of any further deepening. The party did not openly express its closeness to the Party of European Left (PEL), the manifesto only vaguely declared that the Czech Communist party “is not alone in Europe”.

The electoral manifestos of small right wing Eurosceptic parties were only a bit more specific on the European integration question. The manifesto of the Party of Free Citizens (SSO) relied on stressing the diversity and the role of sovereign states in the EU. The notion of sovereignty was labeled as one of the most important achievements of European civilization. The party’s goal was to oppose the Lisbon Treaty and the contemporary state of the EU as such. Its manifesto contained other classical Eurosceptic issues, such as a critique of the over-inflated bureaucracy, a rejection of member states’ contributions to the EU budget, a rejection of the CAP system, and an argument that there should be a referendum on Czech adoption of the euro. Its economic policy was classic market liberalism.

The Czech list of Libertas embodied the improbable mixture of several Eurosceptic ex-Civic Democrat politicians and the marginal party of former private TV channel director Vladimír Železný, called the Independent Democrats (NezDem). In their speeches, Libertas candidates rejected the Lisbon Treaty and declared conformity with President Klaus’s position on the EU. Their electoral campaign was based on a couple of simple slogans that rejected making decisions on Czech issues “in Brussels” and also contained allusions to the alleged possibility of property restitution to Sudeten Germans after the Lisbon Treaty takes effect. A detailed, original manifesto was not produced by Czech Libertas. The basic manifesto of the Independent Democrat party adopted in 2005 contained many classic Eurosceptic themes, such as the rejection of the European Constitution, opposing Turkish EU membership, rejection of the Euro currency, etc. In contrast to the Party of Free Citizens’ manifesto, the Independent Democrats’ manifesto featured much populist rhetoric.

The extremely brief pell-mell manifesto of the Sovereignty coalition led by Jana Bobošíková (an MEP in 2004-2009) was also populist. Rejection of the Lisbon Treaty was explained by stressing the key importance of state sovereignty and mainly by the threat of the possible return of Sudeten Germans. Items like the protection of seniors against harassment and the abolition of summer time could also be found in the manifesto.

## **Election campaign**

The election campaign can be characterized by several key points: negativity, mutual hostility and focus on domestic issues. Most of them are connected to each other; their influence comes from the domestic context, which has been introduced above.

The negative election campaign was introduced into Czech politics by the Social Democrats several years ago. The Civic Democrats, after they had evaluated this strategy as being successful (helping the Social Democrats to win both the local and senate elections in autumn 2008) also adopted it. Its campaign, especially in its visual form, was based upon a contrast between the Civic Democrats as a party offering solutions and the Social Democrats as a party representing a non- specified threat.



After all, the main theme of the Civic Democrats' campaign was 'Solution instead of Fear'. During the campaign, the Civic Democratic Party set up a special team of volunteers (called the Blue team), which prepared meetings and created a special party section on the community website Facebook, as well as a website called 'The Czech Social Democratic Party against you'. Several candidates, especially those at the threshold of eligibility, used personal campaigns as well. In these campaigns, especially those run by current MEP Hynek Fajmon<sup>7</sup> and Ivo Strejček, European issues were also mentioned. In Fajmon's campaign, for example, warnings about the speedy adoption of the Euro were expressed.

The Civic Democrats relied on its current MEPs; they alone were found in the first places of the candidate list. Two rare exceptions were former North Moravian Marshal Evžen Tošenovský, placed as number two, and director of eStat think tank Edvard Kožušník at number seven. The party campaign had little to do with European integration. At the end of May it was backed by British Conservative leader David Cameron's visit to Prague. Meeting Cameron, Mirek Topolánek confirmed that the Civic Democrats were going to leave the European People's Party-European Democrat's party group after the election and form a new conservative and 'Euro-realist' faction. At the same occasion, he provided an interesting change of opinion on the Lisbon Treaty. After backing its ratification by the Czech Senate several weeks earlier, he stated that the document was, from the viewpoint of EU needs, dead and useless.

The Social Democrats focused on domestic issues and rhetoric. The party did not try to hide the fact that it considered the election a litmus test before early national elections in the autumn. Its 'European' campaign could be seen as the start of long national campaign as the issues discussed were: the national economy, welfare state, health care system and pension reform. The party continued to criticize Topolánek's former government and its reforms.

The Social Democrat's campaign, and the campaign as a whole, was spiced up by the egg attacks, which also attracted international attention. Young voters in particular expressed several times their disagreement with party chairman Jiří Paroubek by throwing eggs on him at party rallies. The series of egg attacks started on 14 May at a party rally in Central Bohemia and culminated on 27 May at the same occasion in Prague where not only Paroubek, but other party representatives were pelted with hundreds of eggs. Afterwards, the whole case dispersed into speculation about who had organized the attacks (or if anyone at all, as the egg throwers had communicated via Facebook) and which party could profit from them at the election. It is also unclear whether this (for Czech politics) non-standard form of protest expressed only disagreement with one specific politician or if it indicated latent displeasure with the general development of the Czech political system. At the very end of the campaign, the Social Democrats used the egg attacks as a weapon against the Civic Democrats and blamed it as a provocation and an attack on democracy. However, despite of the seriousness of this allegation, articulated especially by Paroubek, the Social Democrats had neither direct nor indirect evidence for such claims.

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<sup>7</sup> Fajmon was mentioned as one of the twelve 'terrible candidates' in a list compiled by the Party of European Socialists (PES), see: [http://www.pes.org/files/u1/12\\_TERRIBLE\\_CANDIDATES09.pdf](http://www.pes.org/files/u1/12_TERRIBLE_CANDIDATES09.pdf). Fajmon's was included on the because of his vote against the EP resolution on a future EU climate change policy.

As the Social Democrats were represented in the previous term by only two MEPs (Richard Falbr and Libor Rouček), the party had to select candidates with limited or no experience with European politics. Altogether, they chose either second order domestic politicians, or unknown candidates with roots in regional politics. As in the case of the Civic Democrats, the Social Democrat campaign was also backed up by a foreign star, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.

In comparison with the two main parties, the Communist Party, the third strongest force in Czech Parliament, spent the pre-election period in quiet, peace and invisibility. The party chose politicians who had represented it in the outgoing EP: the first five names on the list were current MEPs. The Communists also emphasized domestic issues. The campaign leaflet 'First Five Points against the Crises' contained traditional Communist solutions on the economy inserted into candidates' mouths.

The smaller parties which had, until March 2009, taken part in the Topolánek government, were in crisis when the campaign began. At the end of May, the Christian Democrats elected a new Chairman, Cyril Svoboda, who replaced the unpopular and scandal-tarnished Jiří Čuněk. However, Svoboda, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs, took over leadership at a time when the party was affected by internal disputes and weakening voter support. From the European campaign point of view, the party drew attention with unusual projects (e.g. the 'Fences' project when party members offered the fences of their houses for party propagation) rather than ideas. The party list relied on its current MEP (Jan Březina and Zuzana Roithová as being its leaders) and several young local politicians.

The Green Party, another group affected by internal and long-lasting disputes, tried to present itself as a truly pro-European party. However, voters were more interested in quarrels between than party leaders than words, and the new Democratic Party of Greens, founded by two former Green Members of Parliament. In spite of the declared support of former President Václav Havel or the popular former foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg, by the eve of the elections the Greens' support had declined to below the 5% threshold.

Several parties without parliamentary representation created expectations, especially the new established Eurosceptic formations: Libertas.cz and the Party of Free Citizens. The first party, referring to Declan Ganley's Libertas movement, selected current MEP Vladimír Železný (from 2004-2009 a member in the Independence/Democracy group in the EP) and two former Civic Democrat Members of Parliament, Vlastimil Tlustý and Jan Schwippel. The party tried to catch voter attention by simplified and populist rhetoric. However, in contrasting the EU to defending national interests, the party 'decorated' one of its billboards with two howlers in Czech grammar. At the beginning of June the party was supported by the head of the Presidential Chancellery Petr Hájek, who expressed his intention to vote for the party, referring to the similarity of its ideas with those of President Václav Klaus.

Hájek's statement came as a surprise, as Mr. Klaus, the fabled guru of Czech Euroscepticism, had earlier leaned towards the Party of Free Citizens. When it was established at the beginning, the party generated great expectations (Petr Mach, its

founding father, served for a long time as director of the Centre for Economy and Politics, a think tank founded in 1990 by Mr. Klaus), but succeeded in neither acquiring respected politicians, nor in gathering sufficient funds. The party campaign was thus limited to faint and vague critiques of the EU's current trajectory.

Bustling activity could be observed on the far right. The nationalist and xenophobic National Party (NS) used the campaign for an outright expression of anti-Roma racism. Its clip titled 'The final solution of the Gypsy problem' evoked disapproval both in the Czech Republic and abroad. The Czech public television (ČT), which had to comply with the law that orders it to air all received clips from political parties, stopped the ad after the first day of campaign and entered a lawsuit against the National Party. The party countered with a statement that, in this case, it would weaken the legality of the election. However, through discussion of the ad, the more aggressive and assertive party succeeded in making itself more visible than, for example, the aforementioned Party of Free Citizens.

Almost invisible was the new party 'Sovereignty' (S), a coalition purposely built to support MEP Jana Bobošíková. This two-month old coalition consisted of Bobošíková's 'Politics 21' party and the Party of Common Sense (SZR), both marginal groupings relying solely on Ms. Bobošíková's popularity. 'Sovereignty' based its campaign on a rejection of the Lisbon Treaty and defending national interests. For the entire campaign this bloc was invisible, becoming interesting only at the very end of the pre-election period when one opinion poll predicated it would win more than 10% of votes.

European issues were, therefore, strongly drowned out by domestic problems in the Czech pre-election battle. The campaign as a whole had little to do with the EU, despite the fact that the Czech Republic held the EU Council Presidency. The clear emphasis on national politics fully confirms Reif's and Schmitt's 'second-order election theory' in relation to EP elections.<sup>8</sup>

## **Election results**

The outcome of the election is summarized in **Table 1**. Only 4 of more than 30 candidate parties, movements and coalitions gained representation in the EP. All the successful parties can be described as relevant actors in Czech party politics, as they have been continually represented in both chambers of the Czech Parliament. In comparison with the 2004 EP election, none of the minor parties succeeded. Electoral turnout reached 28%, which equals 2004 EP voting (28.32%). However, Czechs stayed well below the EU average, which was 43%.

More interesting than the numbers is their interpretation, even more so in the Czech context as this vote is widely seen as the beginning of a campaign for early elections next autumn. If, six weeks before the election, Social Democratic leader Paroubek expected a landslide gain of more than 35% of the votes, then one month later the situation began to change. The popularity of both of the strongest parties started to

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<sup>8</sup> See: Karlheinz Reif and Hermann Schmitt, 'Nine second order national elections: A conceptual framework for the analysis of European election results, *European Journal of Political Research*. Vol 8, 1980, pp.3-44.

converge, with the Civic Democrats gaining a slight upper hand over the Social Democratic Party. The final outcome of the election confirmed this trend – the Civic Democrats won with an 8% lead over the Social Democrats.

**Table 1: European Election results in the Czech Republic 2009**

PARTY	VOTES (%)	MEP
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	31,45	9
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	22,39	7
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM)	14,18	4
Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL)	7,65	2
Sovereignty (Suverenita)	4,26	0
Others	20,06	0

Source: Authors calculations on the basis of [www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz)

The clear triumph over the Social Democrats could be just a Pyrrhic victory for the centre-right. Topolánek’s comeback has, presumably, been influenced by low turnout and the specificity of the EP elections. The traditional and average Czech voter opting for the Social Democrats does not consider EP elections an important contest: ‘Mr. Novak’ knows perfectly at which level social standards, taxes, or health care systems are decided at. However, taking into account the spring confidence vote defeat and the 2008 regional and Senate election disaster, the Civic Democrat have bounced back in quite good condition.

The Social Democrats interpreted the election cleverly. Shortly after the election, following the obvious finding that the autumn 2008 ‘orange typhoon’ would not be repeated, party leaders started to stress that their performance was also a victory. Paroubek focused on comparing the 2004 and 2009 elections and has emphasized that Social Democrats increased both their share of voters and EP representation. ‘The campaign was pretty good, but the voters failed,’ Paroubek stated the day after the election<sup>9</sup>. On election night the Social Democratic leader also announced the beginning of the national election campaign.

The performance of the Communist Party, despite its weaker outcome than in 2004, can also be seen as a success as the un-reformed party confirmed its position as the third strongest force. Taking into account the possibility of a reduction in the number of parliamentary parties from 5 to 4, its prize may emerge after early parliamentary elections. One undoubtedly pleasant finding for the Communists was the long-lasting stability of its electorate. Despite the coming twentieth anniversary of the ‘Velvet Revolution’ this ‘old school party was still able to play an important role in Czech politics.

The Christian Democrats hit their ceiling by securing two MEPs.<sup>10</sup> With regard to their previously described internal problems and weakening public support, the party’s results were interpreted (by party leaders, at least) as a success. However, the party’s future existence will probably be decided in the autumn election. Higher

<sup>9</sup> See: ,Paroubek: Kampaň byla dobrá, zklamali voliči,‘ at <http://aktualne.centrum.cz/domaci/politika/eurovolby/clanek.phtml?id=639387>.

<sup>10</sup> 7.5% of the votes were required to secure a second mandate and the Christian Democrats crossed this threshold by only 3,500 votes.

turnout can send the party to the political ‘under deck’ together with the concurrent ‘TOP 09’ party led by former Christian Democrat leader Miroslav Kalousek.

Looking at the minor parties, only ‘Sovereignty’ seemed to come close to achieving EP representation. The party of former MEP Jana Bobošíková finally missed out by only 18,000 votes. In spite of this quite remarkable result, the party’s future is foggy. With no real structure, programme or sufficient funding, Sovereignty will hardly play a significant role in national politics. The same can be said for dozens of other minor parties. A few of them have come close to 3%, but the majority oscillated around or below 1%. Crossing the 1% threshold would have secured the minor parties eligibility to receive funding for votes received (approximately 30 CZK, 1€, for 1 vote cast). Except for ‘Sovereignty’, the other eight marginal parties – including the far-right Workers Party and the Eurosceptic Party of Free Citizens - will be entitled to sums worth hundreds of thousands of CZK.

For the Green Party, the election turned into a nightmare. This former partner in Topolánek’s government obviously suffered from internal bickering and subsequently lost popularity. The party’s weak results were immediately followed by the resignation of Chairman Martin Bursík and it will, in all probability, face the same fate as in the 1990s when it hovered around the 2% mark.

**Table 2** offers a very brief comparison of the 2004 and 2009 EP elections. The failure of minor and Eurosceptic parties has already been mentioned. For twenty years the imaginary political centre in Czech politics has battled with the problem of ‘too many generals and a small army’; in other words, the personal antagonisms and ambitions of too many leaders led to the result where 20% of voters were contested by more than twenty very similar parties.

**Table 2: Comparison of European Election in the Czech Republic in 2004 and 2009**

PARTY	VOTERS 2004 (%)	MANDATES 2004	VOTERS 2009 (%)	MANDATES 2009
Civic Democratic Party (ODS)	30,04	9	31,45	9
Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM)	20,26	6	14,18	4
Party of Independent Candidates– European Democrats (SNK-ED)	11,02	3	1,66	0
The Christian and Democratic Union– Czechoslovak People’s Party (KDU-ČSL)	9,57	2	7,65	2
Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)	8,78	2	22,39	7
Independente (Nezávislí)	8,18	2	0,54	0

Source: Authors calculations on the basis of [www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz)

Both the Civic Democrats and Social Democrats confirmed their positions as the two strongest parties. Bearing in mind the fact that Topolánek’s government was already voted down in March 2009, the Social Democratic Party could not effectively use the weapon used by the Civic Democrats in 2004: a massive critique of the government and its policies. With an interim government in the process of forming, the Social Democrats and their rhetoric missed the point. It seems to be obvious that shooting down the government during the EU Presidency (no matter if this hurt the reputation of the Czech Republic) was a tactical mistake. If Topolánek had continued as a prime minister, it is likely that Social Democrats would have won the EP elections.

**Table 3** shows that, as far as voter turnout was concerned, the Czech EP elections fully confirm Reif and Schmitt’s second order thesis on voter behaviour.

**Table 3: Turnout in selected Czech elections since 2002 (%)**

<b>EP 2009</b>	SENATE 2008	REGIONAL 2008	SENATE 2006	<i>HOUSE OF DEPUTIES 2006</i>	SENATE 2004	REGIONAL 2004	<b>EP 2004</b>	<i>HOUSE OF DEPUTIES 2002</i>
<b>28,22</b>	39,52	40,30	42,09	<i>64,47</i>	28,97	29,62	<b>28,32</b>	<i>58,00</i>

Note: Senate figures are the turnout in the first round Source:

Authors calculations on the basis of [www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz)

## Conclusion and future prospects

The 2009 EP elections in the Czech Republic and their results show the continuity of several trends already demonstrated in the 2004 EP elections. Some elements of the second-order-elections theory were confirmed, for example: lower turnout or dominance of domestic issues over EU-related issues in the campaign. However, the assumption that smaller parties would get better results thanks to ‘voting by heart’ was not confirmed. On the contrary, the 2009 EP elections in the Czech Republic demonstrated the clear dominance of the long-term parliamentary relevant parties. At the same time, the tendency towards a bipolar structure of party competition (not necessarily a tendency to two-party system!) was confirmed. With respect to the specific situation of the Czech Republic – a country lacking a government with the confidence of the House of Deputies during the election period – the hypothesis of voters ‘punishing’ the governing parties in the second-order-elections could not have been tested in a proper way.

Actually, the former main component of the ruling coalition, the Civic Democrats, mobilised more voters who demonstrated dissatisfaction with the way that the cabinet was voted down by the Social Democrats and Communists. The outcome of 2009 EP elections in the Czech Republic could be seen as a kind of test before the national parliamentary elections in October 2009. The results of the EP elections must, however, be interpreted in rather moderate way because Social Democracy was challenged by the lack of political support in any kind of second-order elections (EP, regional, local). This trend is changing now as the results of 2009 EP elections demonstrated as well. The structure of the Czech party system composed of two major and at least two minor poles has been confirmed as well as the prevalence of social-economic cleavage delimiting the political left and right in the Czech Republic.

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