



BULLETIN

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COMMENTARY

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The Results of Parliamentary Elections in the Czech Republic

by Rafał Morawiec

The elections to the Czech parliament ended with a result that makes possible the emergence of a government composed of rightist parties. In the event, this will entail changes in internal policy, whose aims will include furthering reforms and at the same time continuing the main current foreign policy guidelines.

As expected, the elections were won by the socialists (ČSSD) of former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek, but the 22.08% of votes and the 56 seats out of 200 they won in the Chamber of Deputies meant a poorer performance than the polls had been indicating. Former Labor Minister Peter Nečas' conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which emerged from the race just behind the ČSSD (20.22% of votes and 53 seats) in fact stands a better chance of forming a government. The greatest surprise, however, came with unexpectedly high support for two new parties—the right-wing TOP 09 (16.7% of votes and 41 seats) and Public Affairs (VV, with 10.88% of votes and 24 seats). The communists (KSČM), who, as expected, won 11.27% of votes and 26 seats, lost their long-held position as the number three political force in parliament (to TOP 09), while the remaining political parties failed to cross the electoral threshold.

The leaders of the ODS, TOP 09 and VV have already begun discussions on forming a government coalition that would have 118 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, i.e. it would be just two seats short of the constitutional majority. The success of these talks will depend mainly on the stance of Public Affairs, a party whose image is ideologically unclear and whose program is full of contradictions. Its leader Radek John has declared that his party's participation in the coalition is dependent upon meeting by the ODS and TOP 09 of several conditions, mostly concerning the fight against corruption. Unless these are met, his party will not join the government, but will support a minority ODS/TOP 09 cabinet, which would then be backed by 94 deputies.

The new Czech government's ability to tackle the country's internal challenges, such as completing the necessary reforms (in health care, the retirement pension system and public finances) that have so far been blocked by the left-wing, will depend on the support that it will ultimately enjoy in parliament. It should be stressed that the new government will be able to count on the support of President Václav Klaus.

The emergence of an ODS/TOP 09—plus, possibly, VV—government will entail a continuation of the foreign policy pursued by successive Czech governments since 2006. Emphasis in this policy is placed on trans-Atlantic relations (including relations with the U.S.) and on energy security seen as the need to diversify energy supplies. It also means a critical stance with regard to Russia's activities and support for cooperation within the V4 framework. This is confirmed in the choice of the most likely candidate for the new foreign minister, TOP 09 leader Karel Schwarzenberg, who already held this post in 2007–2009 in a government headed by ODS chairman Mirek Topolánek.

The result achieved in the elections by TOP 09 and by Schwarzenberg himself (he won the highest number of votes of any candidate in the country) means that his position in the new government will be much stronger than it had been under Topolánek, when the prime minister's critical stance towards certain aspects of European integration had a decisive influence on European policy. As TOP 09 firmly supports the continuation of EU integration, the "Euro-skeptical" overtones in Czech European policy are likely to be corrected. Meanwhile, VV leaders have not been showing a great interest in foreign affairs so far, so their aspirations to exert an impact in this area now are unlikely, irrespective of whether they will join the new government or only support it from the benches.