

# ANTICIPATING THE CZECH EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS: AMBIGUOUS EU ATTITUDES, SOVEREIGNTY, SCEPTICISM ON GREEN POLICIES AND REFERENDUM ON THE GOVERNMENT

CIDOB MONOGRAPHS •88• 2024  
P. 99-103. ISBN:978-84-18977-22-0

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**T**he Czech government consists of a coalition between two electoral alliances formed before the 2021 parliamentary election. Differences in European Union (EU) positions among the parties making up the two alliances were evident.

The first alliance, *SPOLU* (Together), comprises three parties: the centre-right, liberal-conservative ODS (Civic Democratic Party); KSČM (Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party), a centre-right, Christian democratic party; and TOP 09, a centre-right party with a liberal orientation. The other alliance, *PirStan*, leans more centre-left and consists of the Pirates, a centre-left, progressive party, and STAN. All the parties generally hold pro-European views and support Czech membership of the EU. However, there are nuanced positions within the alliances. ODS, the senior government partner, is the most internally divided Czech party on EU integration. It has a strong Eurosceptic wing advocating for less political integration and a return to a focus on the internal market, resembling the pre-Maastricht era. Conversely, the Pirates and STAN hold the most pro-integration viewpoints, for example, advocating the extension of qualified majority voting to foreign and security policy. In essence, EU issues were expected to be a major challenge for the coalition due to their radically differing perspectives on the direction of European integration. The voice of the most senior coalition partner, ODS, prevailed in the current government’s programme priorities.

The other relevant parties ahead of the European Parliament (EP) elections are: ANO, which stands for “Action of Dissatisfied Citizens” and is often characterised as populist and centrist with an anti-corruption rhetoric; Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a Eurosceptic radical right populist party and with a nationalist rhetoric and an anti-immigration stance; and *Trikolóra*, is a newly founded (2019) right-wing, socially conservative and Eurosceptic party.

## The ballots and campaigns: are they Europeanised?

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These ideological differences regarding European integration will have an impact on the upcoming EP elections since the three parties forming the *SPOLU* alliance decided to run with a common list. The personal composition of their ballot was fraught with these ideological differences. Some potential candidates even considered not being included on the ballot due to ideological differences between them and other candidates. Ultimately, the *SPOLU* ballot is highly unambitious. Its main goals are to allow the three parties to draft a common list and to preserve the incumbent MEPs’ chances of getting re-elected. This means that no high-profile candidate, who could “jump ahead” due to preferential voting, other than the current MEPs, could make it onto the ballot, and some candidates were even withdrawn after the publication of the ballot. Overall, *SPOLU*’s ballot is incoherent regarding the candidates’ positions on EU issues.

Past EP elections in Czechia were highly nationalised and traditionally focused on domestic issues, despite an increased focus on Europe in the last EP election. The current campaign does not seem to break the rule of limited Europeanisation. The key issues, so far, are immigration, environment and security. All of these are relevant at the EU level. However, except for the latter issue, the political parties and candidates present these primarily from a domestic perspective. Their arguments concern how they will prevent more immigration into the EU or, for the more Eurosceptic ones, even how they will prevent the EU from bringing more immigrants into Czechia.

Similarly, the campaign revolves around how it is necessary to stop the Green Deal-induced “green madness”, which may hurt the Czech economy and ordinary citizens. The Green Deal has been called “green madness” by politicians from both government and opposition parties, but it is especially politicians from the opposition ANO and SPD<sup>1</sup> parties who use this expression. Both SPD and ANO, currently in the opposition at national level, portray themselves as key defenders of Czech interests in the EU. A critical issue for them is the protection of Czech sovereignty, which in practice means, for instance, the defence of unanimous decision-making. The transnational dimension is, by and large, lacking. The current campaign is nevertheless still more Europeanised than those of the first two elections after Czech EU accession.

In the campaign, political parties and candidates, with a few exceptions, do not highlight their activities at the EU level or their connections to EP party groups. The *SPOLU* coalition downplays this aspect as the three constituent parties sit in two different party groups. An exception to this silence on the transnational dimension is the Eurosceptic SPD, which promotes its transnational links with Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen and Geert Wilders, as well as the ID group, on its billboards.

They promote their joint efforts to “stop the dictate of Brussels” and “halt immigration into the EU”. No political party projected to win seats in the EP elections includes European party logos in their manifestos. In exceptional cases, European party logos can be spotted on other campaign materials, such as billboards. Similarly,

1. Affiliated with the Identity and Democracy Group (ID) in the EP.

the relevant Czech political parties do not actively promote the lead candidates of their respective European party federations. In a nutshell, the activities of political parties conform to the second-order election logic in which party activity for EP elections is lower than for the first-order elections, and the campaign largely focuses on the domestic [dimension](#).

The situation on the media front is not significantly different. While one can notice that EP elections are approaching, the intensity of media reporting is low compared to the intensity ahead of parliamentary or even local elections. Media, in contrast to political parties and individual candidates, do a better job of providing a Europeanised angle to the coverage of EP elections. For certain issues, such as immigration and the environment, journalists highlight the need for Europe-wide cooperation and reflect, at times, the different interests of individual EU member states. However, we see limited vertical and horizontal Europeanisation. In other words, media rarely feature either EU-level political actors, including the lead candidates, or political actors from other EU member states.

An exception is the relatively higher salience of the European Commission and the debate about the formation of the new College of Commissioners following the EP elections. Nevertheless, this debate is primarily nationally oriented as it revolves around who will be the Czech nominee and how to ensure a strong portfolio for the candidate. Overall, media coverage of the EP elections can largely be considered from the perspective of [second-order coverage](#). The activities of media and political parties in EP elections seem to reflect the demands of Czech voters, who primarily ask MEPs to defend national interests.

## **Navigating national priorities: themes in the Czech EP election campaigns**

As mentioned above, the campaigns revolve around several topics and policies, in line with the priorities and ideologies of the political parties. Overall, the campaigns seem to focus on how to defend national interests within the EU, with variations in the levels of consideration to the role that the EP has generally, i.e. addressing issues at the supranational level. The themes of the election campaigns revolve around security and sovereignty, environmental policies and the Green Deal, migration and integration and European identity, and cooperation to some extent.

Several parties, including [ANO](#), [SPD](#), and [Trikolóra](#), highlight national sovereignty and security as a priority. Specifically, there is a significant emphasis on illegal migration, the perceived threat of Islamisation and the importance of maintaining control over decision-making processes in national policies. [ANO's](#) platform demonstrates a commitment to stopping migration and preserving member states' sovereignty, utilising sentiments of protecting national identity and borders as a platform for success. [SPD](#) and [Trikolóra](#), seem to rely on refusing the Green Deal initiative, which they consider to be an infringement of national autonomy, to demonstrate their commitment to maintaining sovereignty extends to refusing initiatives such as the Green Deal.

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Environmental issues in general, and the European Green Deal in particular, are a common feature of the campaigns. *SPOLU* and the *Pirates* are likely to be in favour of sustainability and environmental protection, as they emphasise the importance of combating climate change and the transition towards a greener economy. *SPOLU*'s platform focuses on a "Green Europe for the People", which suggests they have a commitment to the environment as part of a broader economic prosperity agenda. Meanwhile, the *Pirates* are in support of a functional digital market and aim to introduce improvements to quality of life, while also taking into consideration the need for a comprehensive foreign policy that addresses environmental challenges.

A significant emphasis is placed on migration. Parties like ANO, SPD and *Trikolóra* demand stricter controls and measures as a tool for reducing illegal migration. Policies regarding migration are commonly linked to concerns over preserving cultural identity, and safeguarding national borders is portrayed as the top priority within these parties. However, the importance of diversity and inclusion is a topic that *SPOLU* and the *Pirates* advocate for, which is in line with broader debates around multiculturalism and integration in the EU.

While the discourse has a national-centric nature overall, there are also nods towards European identity and cooperation. *SPOLU*'s vision of a connected Europe through transport and information infrastructure, as well as its emphasis on a socially and culturally diverse Europe, suggests a recognition of the benefits of EU integration. Similarly, the *Pirates* focus on a strong foreign policy, which suggests that there is space to engage with global challenges on the international scene. However, these themes are often overshadowed by more immediate concerns about sovereignty, unanimity and national interests.

## Deciphering the Czech EP elections: anticipated results and political dynamics

In predicting the likely results of the EP elections and the explanations for them, several factors come into play, including historical voting patterns, public opinion polls and the prevailing political climate. Overall, ANO is emerging as the likely winner of the election, given its projected lead in the polls. However, there are speculations that a predominantly pro-European voter turnout, coupled with potential coalition dynamics, could provide a boost to the *SPOLU* coalition. According to *IPSOS*, ANO is projected to lead with 26.3% of the vote, followed closely by the *SPOLU* coalition with 25.2%. STAN is expected to secure 12%, while the *Pirates* are anticipated to receive around 10%. Further down, the SPD and *Trikolóra* alliance is expected to garner 7.7%, with *KSČM* trailing at 6%.

Several factors could explain the expected success of ANO in the upcoming election. First, this is in line with the pattern from previous EP elections, suggesting that governing parties are likely to face declining support. This is also in step with previous research which has suggested that voters tend to use the EP elections as a sort of appraisal of their national governments. Moreover, ANO's rhetoric, which seems to have adapted to reflect the mood of the population to maintain voters'

support, has somewhat shifted to resemble that of the far-right SPD and could be attractive to Eurosceptic voters. However, the role turnout plays is also to be kept in mind as this cannot be always precisely predicted.

When it comes to party group affiliations, it is likely that strategic considerations and ideological alignments will shape what happens after the election. For example, the Pirates' Markéta Gregorová pointed out that their choice of faction will depend on the support that they may gain from different groups to pursue their interests, which places the Greens or Renew in the state of play. STAN's association with the EPP could potentially move towards Renew, especially if differences in ideologies prompt Renew to exclude ANO. ANO's group affiliation is also subject to speculations ranging from the ECR to Renew. In summary, ANO, due to its ability to shift across the political landscape, is likely to be successful, but potential changes in affiliations could also affect the dynamics within the EP.

## **What consequences for Czech domestic politics and the EU?**

The upcoming EP elections are primarily understood as a litmus test for the next parliamentary elections scheduled for autumn 2025 and a referendum on the current government. This again attests to the second-order election logic of Czech EP elections, as they are perceived as a kind of prelude to elections that "really" matter. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that they will have any significant effect on the composition or stability of the current coalition government or significantly alter government-opposition dynamics. If parties currently without representation in the national parliament win seats in the EP elections, it may give them momentum ahead of next year's parliamentary contests.

Given the existing ambiguity of attitudes of the government parties towards the EU, one should not anticipate any significant changes to Czech EU politics following the EP elections. Their results will likely showcase popular support for parties sceptical of extensive policies in favour of environmental protection and tackling climate change. It is thus probable that this perspective will prevail in Czechia after the EP elections and will also be reflected in the work of Czech MEPs. A departure from the original EU-wide plans of green transformation is expected among Czech MEPs.

