

CZECH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS MAY 2010

ČSSD's performance was well below expectations, and its chairman, Jiří Paroubek, has resigned. Bohuslav Sobotka will serve as interim leader until a new leader is chosen, possibly not until early 2011. There are likely to be two candidates: Sobotka himself and Michal Hašek.

The poor **ODS** result was expected. The party has less room to manoeuvre with Petr Nečas as leader given his principled approach to politics. At least 15 ODS MPs, who had been placed high on the party list, were not reelected. Many of these, such as Ivan Langer (see below), are old guard ODS that Nečas will be pleased to see the back of.

A surprising 60% of MPs are in parliament for the first time. A pattern affecting all parties emerged of voters giving their preferential vote to candidates lower down the parties' lists in protest at party leaders. The highest profile victims of this were Ivan Langer, ODS leader for Olomouc, who plunged to 8th position on the list, and Pavel Severa, TOP 09 leader for Pardubice and the closest and oldest political ally of TOP 09's founder and de facto leader, Miroslav Kalousek. Both Langer and Severa failed to win a parliamentary seat,

Party		In %	Seats
ČSSD	Social Democratic Party	22.1	56
ODS	Civic Democratic Party	20.2	53
TOP 09	TOP 09	16.7	41
KSČM	Communist party	11.3	26
VV	Public Affairs	10.9	24
Turnout		62.6	200

Importantly, ODS lost its leading position in Prague to TOP 09. Pavel Bém resigned as Prague ODS chairman and was replaced by Pavel Klega (his close ally) as ODS's candidate for City Mayor. Elections in Prague are due in October 2010.

TOP 09 achieved 17% of the vote, very largely thanks to the popular appeal of its chairman, Karel Schwarzenberg, who collected a remarkable 46 000 preferential votes, twice that of any other politician, and to the support for independent candidates on the party's list. The great majority of TOP 09's MPs are newcomers to parliament.

They are either local mayors or professionals such as doctors and academics.

It is important to stress that established political figures in the party (all close allies of Miroslav Kalousek) did badly. For example, Vlasta Parkanová, ex-defence minister and longtime Christian Democrat, only just scraped in. Three former deputy ministers on the party's list, including Pavel Severa (see above), failed to be elected, having been overtaken by candidates lower down the list. The party's extreme dependence upon the popularity of its chairman and upon independent MPs will certainly pose a serious challenge to its future stability and even survival.

VV won 11% of the vote, despite the fact that 6 months ago, it enjoyed a mere 1% support. It has none of the attributes of a political party and will likely disintegrate in the next year or two.

The **Christian Democrats** and **Greens** both failed to make it into parliament, with 4.4% and 2.4% of votes cast (the requirement is 5%).

Short term: ODS, TOP 09 & VV.

President Klaus has decided not to appoint Petr Nečas of ODS as prime minister but rather he has asked him to try to put together a government. And though the three likely governing coalition parties –ODS, TOP 09 and VV, have agreed in principle “to agree to form a government”, little to no progress will be made until after the ODS party congress on June 20 at which Nečas’s position as acting party leader may or may not be confirmed. Until it is clear whether Nečas has a mandate from his own party (there is considerable opposition to him, especially from among the Prague wing of the party), his ability to negotiate the details of a government is extremely limited.

So no government will be formed until early July. The biggest disagreement remains between ODS and TOP 09 over who should get the finance and interior ministries. De facto leader of TOP 09 Miroslav Kalousek appears very anxious to become finance minister but there is strong resistance to him from ODS, notwithstanding the fact that ODS has no credible candidate for the post at this time (the party’s economic expert, Martin Kocourek, is not being proposed for the post). There is talk of bringing in a non-partisan figure to fill the position. ODS would like Kalousek to take the labour & social affairs portfolio (where, presumably, he could put his pre-election rhetoric about the need to cut the social budget into practice.)

All ODS efforts are now directed at the party congress on June 20. And in the meantime, TOP 09 and VV will simply have to wait. This may explain why Kalousek has become visibly nervous. He had assumed that the finance post was his for the asking.

Such a coalition, if formed at all, is unlikely to last long. There is resistance forming within ODS and TOP 09 to sharing government with VV. VV is more a special purpose vehicle for various businessmen close to Prague’s powerful clans than a political party. It is possible that its role is limited to soaking up protest votes and to facilitating the formation of a grand coalition between ODS and ČSSD. Nečas’s supporters within ODS suspect VV of being a Trojan horse for his enemies in the Prague chapter of the party. And relations between Kalousek and VV leaders are particularly bad. Indeed it is not unrealistic to expect that VV will pull out of coalition talks if Nečas fails to win the chairmanship of ODS on June 20, or even just before the party congress to weaken his position, and in this way bring closer a rainbow coalition of ČSSD, ODS and TOP 09.

In any event, ODS’s short term goal will be to reclaim the voters it lost, not to ČSSD, but to TOP 09 and VV –some 27% of those who voted. One third of Senators, almost all from ODS, face election in October 2010, as do all municipal governments. The question is whether forming a coalition government with these two parties will help ODS achieve or undermine this objective.

It can be argued that bringing TOP 09 into an ODS-led government is the best way of cannibalizing it. This is because the loyalty of TOP 09 MPs is to an idea and a personality, not to a party, at least at this early stage. The idea is that the party will fix public finances and eliminate corruption. The personality is that of Karel Schwarzenberg. De facto party leader Miroslav Kalousek is vulnerable on both issues. The question remains of how long the force of Schwarzenberg’s personality can glue this group of independents together. When the parliamentary party is put to the policy test in government and parliament, it is hard to imagine the grouping being able to resist divisive offers from ODS. ODS, the Christian Democrats (who only narrowly failed to get elected) and the Greens will all work hard to drive a wedge between Schwarzenberg and Kalousek in an effort to

reclaim voters lost to TOP 09. The moment Schwarzenberg even hints at any doubts about Kalousek, the party could fracture.

Long term: ČSSD, ODS & TOP 09

It is clear that President Klaus would like to normalize the situation, by which is meant return to a parliament dominated by ODS and ČSSD. The formation of a grand coalition with TOP 09 is necessary to provide cover. ČSSD and ODS have 109 seats in the 200 seat parliament but a coalition without the credibility of Schwarzenberg is unthinkable at this time.

The challenge here is rapidly to raise ČSSD's coalition potential and destroy VV's credibility, presumably with VV's help. Paroubek's resignation increases the space for ODS and TOP 09 to justify a grand coalition with ČSSD at some stage in the near future. So does the highly dubious character of VV. But the real obstacle here is Petr Nečas himself. A more pragmatic and less principled ODS leader would make the formation of a grand coalition much easier. We may expect tensions to grow between Kalousek and Nečas, with mounting pressure on Nečas to step out of the way of the preferred Klaus solution.

The combined force of ČSSD, ODS and TOP 09 would give the coalition a strong constitutional majority, which would allow them to change the electoral system and introduce direct presidential elections. This last change may be important to TOP 09, which sees Karel Schwarzenberg as the natural next president and a direct vote as the best way to achieve it. And perhaps more to the point, it would allow Klaus to run for a third term as president.