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Jan Rovny

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Three lessons from the Czech presidential election



*Miloš Zeman won a second term as Czech President on 27 January, narrowly defeating opposition candidate Jiří Drahoš. **Jan Rovny** writes that the country is now sharply divided between two political blocs that cut across old left-right allegiances, with identity politics playing an increasingly important role in shaping support. The presidential election also underlined that Czech politics is likely to take another step closer to Poland and Hungary, but with the key distinction that the country's liberal opposition has shown an ability to unite against Zeman and garner almost 50% of the vote.*



Miloš Zeman speaking at the European Parliament, Credit: © European Union 2014 – European Parliament (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The 2018 Czech presidential election concluded on 27 January with the reelection of Miloš Zeman by a relatively narrow margin of 51.4% to 48.6% in the second round of voting. The first round results, returning lower scores for Zeman than expected, infused his younger, mostly urban, opponents with high hopes of sending Jiří Drahoš, the counter-candidate, to Prague Castle.

The incumbent Zeman, a self-styled representative of the common folk, who peppers his speeches with occasional profanities while cozying up to Moscow and Beijing, did not formally campaign largely due to ill health. However, in the context of a complicated government formation process after the **October 2017 parliamentary election**, Zeman often appeared in the media as a political broker. An effective campaign was run by parties close to him, by his supporters, and his advisors.

Drahoš, a political outsider coming from the Academy of Sciences which he led in the past, based his campaign on the promise to return dignity to the presidential office, and to reassert the Czech Republic as a modern democracy anchored in the European Union and NATO. The polls suggested a neck-and-neck contest, and the two presidential debates in the days prior to the second round were closely observed for Drahoš's ability to withstand Zeman's renowned unscrupulous wit, and Zeman's ability to stand the physical strain.

But despite the excitement of a final campaign marked by nail-biting uncertainty, and despite the great disappointment of the Czech liberals who were hoping to demonstrate that central Europe can break the populist spell and elect a pro-European leader, this tight election would have entailed the same lessons had Drahoš carried the day. The contest demonstrated three important developments in Czech politics that resonate far beyond the small country, and far beyond central Europe.

Building blocks

The presidential election underscores the formation of two blocks in Czech politics. These blocks draw together electorates and bind some seemingly odd bedfellows among political parties. The anti-Zeman block combines: the established conservative party ODS, the historical Christian democrats (KDU-ČSL), the more recently founded right-wing TOP09, and the political novices — the party of mayors (STAN), and, to a lesser extent, the Pirate party.

This is a very diverse group that ranges from social liberals (Pirates) to religious conservatives (KDU-ČSL), from economic centrists (KDU-ČSL) to staunch neo-liberals (ODS), from Euro-enthusiasts (KDU-ČSL) to profound Eurosceptics (ODS), from entrenched parties with long governing experience (ODS) to populist upstarts (Pirates). What unites this camp is their opposition to Zeman, his political style, as well as his geopolitical orientation towards the east. The parties in this block tend to be supported either by the urban educated (Pirates), the wealthier (ODS, TOP09), or the religious (KDU-ČSL).

The second block, defined by support for Zeman, brings together the less educated, poorer, secular, and rural voters. These are the electorates of the historical Communist party (KSČM), as well as of a recent radical right challenger (SPD), and, increasingly, of the populist ANO — the party of the oligarch, Andrej Babiš, that won the 2017 parliamentary elections in October, and has been struggling to form a government since.

ANO's placement in this camp has been unclear. At its debut in 2011, and in the 2013 parliamentary elections, ANO presented itself as the right-wing party of a 'successful businessman,' and largely drew from the voters of the conservative ODS. In a [previous post](#), I described their 2017 strategy as purely populist, rejecting any meaningful aggregation of political proposals, and defying any comprehensible political labelling. The strategy brought them many less affluent and less educated voters on the left. In this presidential election, first the leader Babiš, and finally the party as an organisation endorsed Zeman, thus openly declaring their left-wing, nationalist affinities typified by Zeman. In the long run, ANO will face difficulties in marrying their original right-wing electorate with the support of traditional Zeman voters.

Interestingly, the social democratic party (ČSSD), unseated from its government position in the 2017 parliamentary elections by ANO, stands between the blocks. The party is torn between its social democratic legacy implying some cultural openness and pro-European orientation on the one hand, and its dwindling electorate of the poorer, and less educated, who are drawn to Zeman's nationalist discourse and brutish demeanour, as well as to the other parties of the pro-Zeman block. While its previous leader and ex-prime minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, publicly supported Drahoš, the current interim leader, Milan Chovanec, spoke out in favour of Zeman. The presidential election thus emphasised the ongoing battle for the soul and survival of the party.

Intruding identity

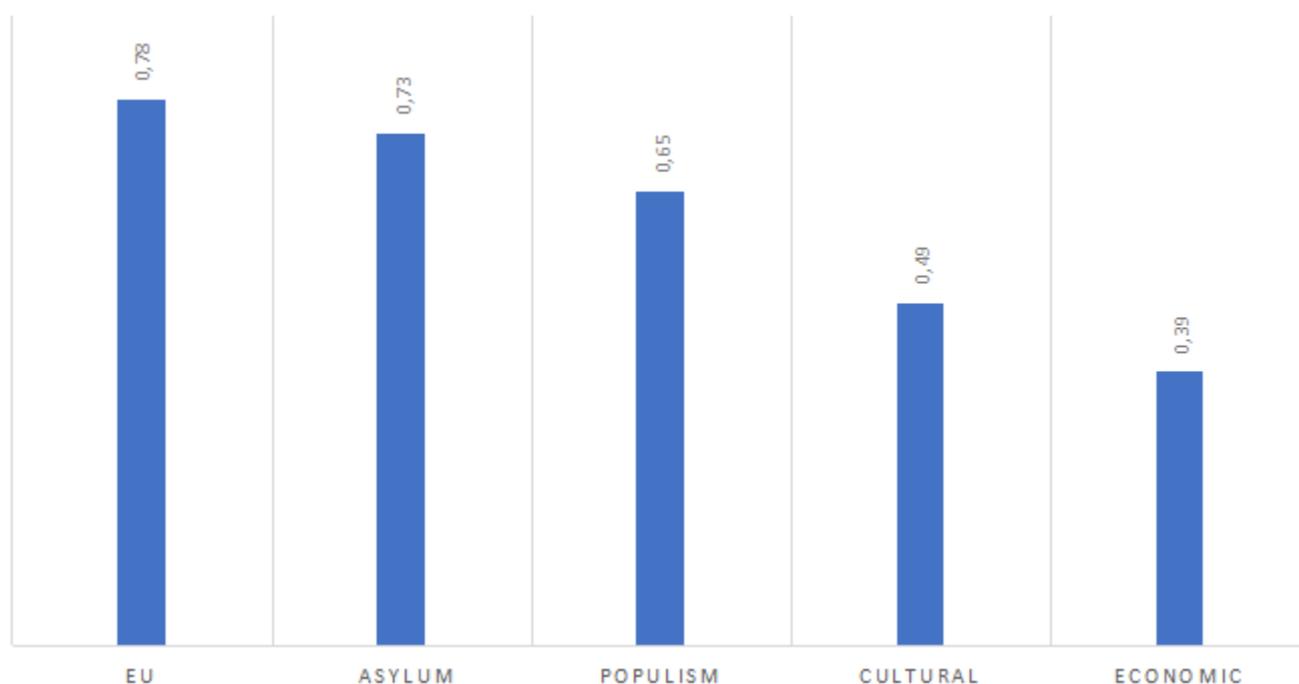
The rise of block politics, coupling seemingly odd bed fellows, such as the Communists and the radical right, or the Christian Democrats and the Pirates, redefines the orientations of Czech politics. My previous research has demonstrated (see [here](#) and [here](#)) that political competition in the Czech Republic has been traditionally defined by a contest between the economic left, represented by KSČM and ČSSD, seeking progressive taxation, increased social protection, and wider publicly funded services, and the economic right, represented primarily by ODS, espousing to limit the welfare state, deregulate, and privatise the economy. Most other actors of the political

system found their place in this economically defined space, while other divides — such as over religion, or over the legacy of communism — were relatively marginal and generally fused with the economic cleavage.

The current blocks have little to do with economic outlooks. Indeed, both sides include forces that have little in common as far as economic programmes are concerned. The presidential campaign highlighted the hyper increased salience of identity politics, revolving around the acceptance of migrant quotas from the European Union. While the Czech Republic effectively did not accept any migrants in the recent migration wave (no migrants cared to stop on their way to Germany), the political debate has revolved around the highly hypothetical question of migration and the 'Islamisation' of Czech society (which has little to no Muslim population). While virtually all parties and both presidential candidates rejected EU migration quotas, Zeman's supporters tried to paint Drahoš as a threat to the country's ability to control migration. One Babiš-owned newspaper ran a [story](#) of a Prague imam suspected of Syrian terrorist connections three days before the second round.

Despite their uniform rejection of EU migration quotas, the two political blocks that arose from the 2017 parliamentary election and were clarified in the presidential election differ in their approaches to migration in particular, and to the EU in general. While the anti-Zeman block is largely pro-European and open to cooperation on the migration issue – the exception is ODS which holds a British Tory-inspired Eurosceptic line – the Zeman block is predominantly Europhobic and staunchly anti-migrant, while ANO, true to its purely populist character, fudges the matter. Preliminary data from an ongoing [Chapel Hill Expert Survey](#) of party positions in the Czech Republic in 2017, summarised in the figure below, show that it is primarily placements on the EU and EU asylum policy that correlate with partisan endorsement of Zeman, while populism (believing that 'the people' rather than politicians should decide important matters), cultural issues, and the economy lag significantly behind.

Figure 1: Correlates of Zeman support with party placement (2017)



Source: Preliminary Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2017

Polarisation

The crystallisation of two political blocks, and the rise of identity politics focused around migration and the acceptance of common decisions at the EU level underpin a creeping polarisation of

Czech politics. Identity politics slowly exchanges shades of grey for sharper contours of black and white, and each political block adopts its narrative which becomes increasingly foreign to the other side. While Drahoš voters emotionally decry the victory of xenophobic bumpkins, Zeman's boorish acceptance speech, **suggesting that his opponents now "shut their mouths,"** lashed out at urban liberals and the media.

The presidential elections suggest that Czech politics is likely to take another step closer to Poland and Hungary. This will revolve around a deepening, identity-infused contest between traditionalists touting their new-found patriotism, and cosmopolitans seeking to maintain the country's westward orientation. While this division, pitting wealthier, educated urbanites against the poorer periphery, is profoundly economic, the election demonstrated that framing it in terms of identity vis-à-vis Europe, migration, and Islam, is much more effective.

Ultimately, the presidential election also demonstrates the ability of Zeman's opponents to unite behind a candidate, and bring him very close to victory. Unlike Hungary, the Czech Republic has been shown to possess a liberal opposition that can propose an alternative with the capacity to garner almost 50% of the vote. The charm of political competition, after all, is that it requires at least two sides. The two blocks that crystallised in the presidential election now form two opposing groupings in parliament and in society. The Zeman block will likely form and support the government, while the other block constitutes the opposition. Although divided by much, the ability of the anti-Zeman block to coordinate their work and check the government will be key for the health of political competition, and the continuation of Czech democracy.

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About the author



Jan Rovny – Sciences Po, Paris

Jan Rovny is an Assistant Professor at Sciences Po.

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