

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair



Controversial oligarch Andrej Babiš could be about to win the Czech election

October 18, 2017 12.25pm BST

EPA/Martin Divisek

The Czech Republic is holding an election on October 20 and 21 and, so far, the campaign has been characterised by extreme voter frustration and anger.

Up to 50% of Czech voters have not yet decided which way to vote. However, the most likely candidate for prime minister is the controversial oligarch Andrej Babiš, who heads the ANO movement, which is currently supported by some 25% of Czech voters.

The Czech Social Democrats, the senior partner in the current coalition government, have been victim of a spectacular fall in fortunes over the past year. They are currently supported by only 12.5% of voters and, according to some opinion polls, their support is even lower. What is also remarkable is the almost total collapse of the once highly popular right-of-centre parties TOP 09 (now supported by 6% of voters) and ODS (9%).

The frustration among the Czech voting public has manifested itself not only in the collapse in support for the traditional mainstream parties. Both the left of centre and the right of centre are

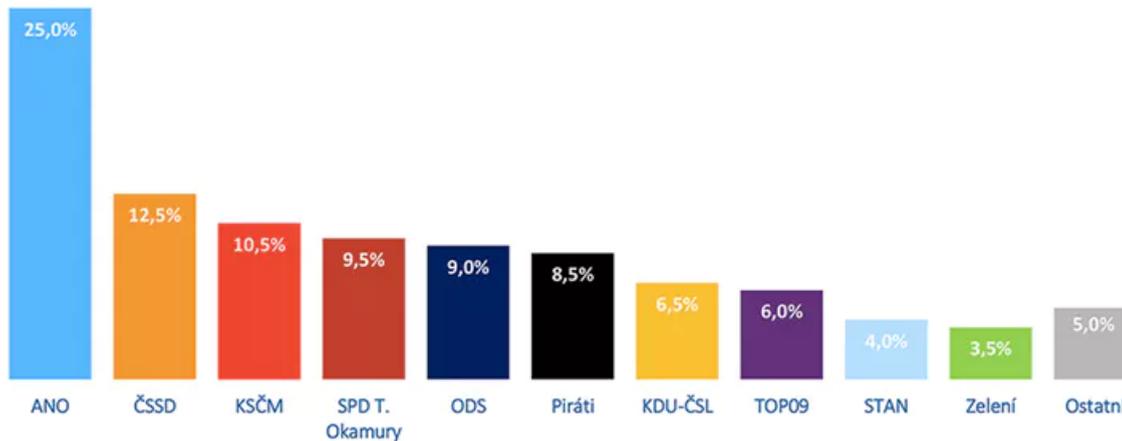
Author



Jan Culik

Senior Lecturer in Czech Studies,
University of Glasgow

suffering. And the ANO is not the only beneficiary. Other openly anti-establishment parties are on the rise, too. The Pirate Party currently enjoys 8.5% of voter support, while the sharply anti-immigrant, anti-refugee and anti-muslim SPD Party is on 9.5%. In the final days before the election, support for these anti-establishment parties has been on the rise. The SPD Party, which has plastered Islamophobic posters all over the country, has been predicted to win as much as 13% of the vote.



A projection of the election result from October 16. Median polling

Almost all the Czech political parties have jumped onto the anti-islamic and anti-refugee bandwagon and many are strongly eurosceptic – as is Babiš. Indeed, 11 out of the 20 parties standing in this election want the Czech Republic to leave the European Union. This hostility towards the EU is often connected with the refusal of Czech voters to accept EU refugee quotas.

While it's almost certain that Babiš's ANO will become the strongest party after the elections, due to the fragmentation of the political scene and the spectacular drop in support for the mainstream parties, it's unclear whether he will be able to form a government coalition. Many people are so disillusioned that they genuinely do not know who to vote for. The options could be for Babiš to form a minority government or for fresh elections to be held.

Who is Andrej Babiš?

Babiš grew up as the son of a highly favoured communist Czechoslovak diplomat. He spent his childhood and early adulthood in France and Switzerland and speaks French as a native. On graduating from university as an economist, like his father, he embarked on a diplomatic career. Before 1989, he worked as a diplomat for communist Czechoslovakia in Morocco for six years.

Thanks to his political connections, Babiš was able to set up Agrofert, an agro-chemical holding that has grown into an empire of agriculture, food producing and chemical enterprises. Babiš is now worth some \$4.1 billion and is the second richest person living in the Czech Republic. In 2013, Babiš also acquired the two most influential Czech daily newspapers, Mladá fronta Dnes and Lidové noviny.

Babiš entered politics in 2011 as a result of his dissatisfaction with the then highly unpopular right-of-centre government of Petr Nečas. After Nečas's government fell in 2013, Babiš and his ANO

movement scored a spectacular early success in the general election that year to become the second largest party in parliament.

Babiš and his ANO set up a coalition government with the Social Democrats and the catholic People's Party. Babiš became finance minister, despite continuing to own a huge business empire. He remained in the coalition government with the full support of his partners until the spring of 2017.

That's when electoral support for the Social Democrats started waning. Just as the ANO started to look like it could become the largest party in the next election, the Social Democratic prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka removed Babiš from office.



Czech president Milos Zeman points his stick at prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka. EPA

Sobotka cited accusations of financial misconduct when he fired Babiš, and these continue to raise questions. He is being investigated by the European Union for misusing subsidies for one of his properties and has been charged with fraud by the Czech authorities. In September 2017, the Czech parliament voted to deprive Babiš of his parliamentary immunity, so that he could be prosecuted.

So why is Babiš so popular despite the scandals and the fact that he is actually being prosecuted for financial irregularities? It's a bit of a mystery, although a Trump-like factor of total disillusionment with the mainstream, establishment parties seems to be playing a major role.

Commentators have been pointing to the fact that in the post-communist period, the Czech Republic has failed to create genuine political parties. Those political organisations that have been set up are more like businesses, selling their political influence and power to entrepreneurs. The majority of Czech voters therefore regard politicians from all the mainstream parties as basically corrupt. Many think it hypocritical that Babiš is the only one actually being prosecuted for his dealings.

Many people also seem to admire Babiš as a strongman who, when he gets to power, will finally “put an end to this post-communist chaos”, and maybe even “free” the Czech Republic from the “diktat” of Brussels.

 [Europe](#) [Czech Republic](#) [Eastern Europe](#) [Central Europe](#) 

Help combat alt-facts and fake news and donate to independent journalism. Tax deductible.

[Make a donation](#)