

## THE CONVERSATION

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Andrej Babiš speaks at a press conference after the election results suggested defeat. EPA/Martin Divisek

# Czech election: an oligarch defeated and a president in hospital – what on earth happened?

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A dramatic general election in the Czech Republic seems to have ended the rule of the populist oligarch Andrej Babiš.

Babiš's movement ANO (the Association of Dissatisfied Citizens) has been a part of the coalition government in the Czech Republic since 2013, and Babiš himself has been prime minister since 2017, having campaigned on an anti-corruption ticket. However, Babiš is an oligarch whose Agrofert conglomerate benefits from significant support from European Union funding and has faced investigation by the EU for potential conflict of interest.

### A prime minister mired in controversy

A few days prior the election, Babiš was named in the Pandora Papers leak that brought to light the questionable financial activities of multiple world leaders. Before then he had appeared to be strengthening his grip on the nation.

Similarly to some other East European oligarchs, Babiš controls two major daily newspapers which of course supported him in the election campaign. Aligning himself with Viktor Orbán, the authoritarian ruler of Hungary, Babiš ran a nationalistic campaign, criticising the European Union and constructing an artificial campaign against “waves of refugees” allegedly threatening the Czech Republic.

Although the Pandora Papers accusations may have dented his support base a little, Babiš’s ANO party still came away with 27.34% of the vote and 72 seats in parliament. This was largely thanks to his support base of older voters and the more deprived regions of northern and western Bohemia and northern Moravia.

It is not quite clear why Babiš has actually lost. Some commentators argue that his mendacious pre-election propaganda may have been counterproductive. Perhaps it was not a good idea to invite Orbán for a visit to Babiš’s constituency shortly before the election. Perhaps that served to help people realise that they really do not want the Czech Republic to turn into Hungary.

This may have mobilised some younger voters who often do not turn up on election day. There is a generational conflict in the Czech Republic and not many younger voters support Babiš. His pre-election campaign excesses may have energised them.

## **A complex coalition**

With these losses, the next Czech government is therefore likely to be made up of a partnership between two different right-of-centre coalitions. The Spolu (Together) coalition, which brings together three traditional, right-of-centre political parties, squeaked past ANO with 27.56% of the vote to secure 71 seats in the parliament. Within this coalition, the strong electoral support for the Civic Democratic Party was particularly surprising, given its association with the corrupt politics of the 1990s and the fact it was brought down by scandals as Babiš rose.



Opposition leaders look set to form a coalition.

The other coalition, that of the Pirate Party and an association of local mayors, seems more liberal. It gained 15.43% of the vote and 37 parliamentary seats. However, here the election brought another surprise.

As an individual entity, the recently created liberal Pirate Party, primarily made up of middle-class professionals, flopped. It had 22 MPs in the parliament before this election and now has just four. Nevertheless, the huge success of the mayors mean that the Pirates, as a coalition partner, are expected to be rewarded with two ministerial posts.

It should also be noted that while the Pirate Party is perhaps the most liberal part of the five winning political groups, it still cannot be really regarded as left wing.

## **A president in intensive care**

Given the narrowness of the race between the ANO and Spolu, Babiš had appeared to be holding out hope that he would still be appointed prime minister by populist president Miloš Zeman. Babiš is technically the leader of the largest party because Spolu is an alliance of multiple parties. But if Zeman did appoint his close ally Babiš, as he appeared to promise ahead of the vote, it would be hard to imagine that the prime minister could win the parliamentary vote of confidence needed to secure the position.



President Milos Zeman is rushed to hospital, where he remains in intensive care. EPA

However, an even bigger question mark now hangs over the whole political process itself since Zeman, already in serious ill health, collapsed as the results came in and had to be rushed to hospital. He was sent to intensive care, and it's now unclear what the future holds for either him or the parties relying on his word as kingmaker in this tight race.

Is the Czech Republic firmly back on the road to liberalism and western democratic values? There are several serious reasons to doubt it. The disappointing result of the Pirate Party means that most of the actors in the new Czech parliament sit on the right of the political spectrum, with the Civic Democratic Party in a relatively strong position. These right-wing parties have, in the past, pushed through social welfare cuts.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the Czech Social Democrats failed to meet the 5% vote-share threshold to win any seats in parliament, because most of the original social democratic voters voted for Babiš. As a result of this, there is a large constituency of Czech voters who will not be represented in parliament.

Populist and nativist parties are supported by up to 30% of Czech voters. If the right-of-centre parties which are now en route to power are not sensible and do not listen to these disenfranchised voters, populism will return with a vengeance at the next general election.