

Babis and the Czech vote: the end of the Viségrad group?

On Saturday, the Czech Republic took a decisive political turn as about 30percent of voters chose to endorse Andrej Babis, the second richest man in the country and leader of the anti-establishment and populist Action for Dissatisfied Citizens party (ANO).

Andrej Babis has been linked to the likes of Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi. As a businessman, he's worth about 3,5 billion euros, being the owner of an agricultural empire and several media companies.

As *The Guardian's* [Robert Tait](#) reports, Babis has been accused of using his media influence to promote his image and curb criticism during his campaign; at that time, the previous government even created the EU's first anti-fake news unit, in the fear of foreign influence and the spread of disinformation (a climate not unlike that of the immediate pre-Trump era in the US).

Back in May, that same government forced Babis to resign from his seat as Finance minister amid allegations over his taxes, and the accusation of diverting €2 million worth of EU subsidies to his business conglomerate, as *Politico* reports.

All of this didn't seem to bother voters (an interesting analysis on *The Conversation* by [Jean Culik](#) sheds light on Czech voters' disillusion towards mainstream parties), as the billionaire managed to rack up almost three times the votes of the now second biggest party in Czech parliament, the Civic Democrats (ODS).

Stripped of his immunity in September, Babis *de facto* regained it through his victory, attenuating the risk of being prosecuted.

Babis and the EU integration process: a European debate

Babis left his opponents in the dust by promising he would not do "politics as usual" and embracing anti-immigration and eurosceptic arguments.

Yet, ANO was not the only unconventional party to fare well in the elections. The pro-EU Pirate party (Piráti) reached the third position overall with 10.8 percent of votes, closely followed by far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigration Freedom and Direct Democracy party (SPD) with 10.6 percent.

Consequently, although the overall situation may suggest a definite embrace of eurosceptic and anti-immigration ideas, what is really on the rise (and common throughout the major parties) is the populist, anti-establishment speech.

Yet, many editorialists across Europe dealt with the consequences of the Czech electoral result on the EU integration process.

On *Politico*, [Siegfried Morkowitz](#) writes that, disregarding the anti-EU policies brought forwards during his campaign, Babis took a pro-EU stance during his victory speech.

Babis knows all too well the Czech Republic derives a great deal of stability and security from the EU, starting from the fact that 80% of the exports go to the Eurozone. According to Morkowitz, it is unlikely that the existing anti-EU sentiment will translate into anti-EU policies.

Yet, on *The New York Times*, [Jochen Bittner](#) argues that the Czech vote is another demonstration of how Eastern EU Member States are drifting away from Western liberal political values. Babis is seen as another right-wing populist leader featuring just a more “business” tailored world-view.

Bittner explains the success of populist, right-wing and eurosceptic forces in the East drawing upon the history of the fall of the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding the process of EU integration, over the past twenty years, Eastern and Western States failed to create a common ground, Bittner claims. As a consequence, intra-EU alliances such as the Viségrad group (an informal entente between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia and Poland to exert influence on the EU integration process) risk to tear apart the Union.

On *The Independent*, [Philip Heijmans](#) shares a similar point of view. The editorialist argues that Czech voters elected their very “own Donald Trump”. As a result, the East-West divide within Europe is going to run ever deeper. Nonetheless, the EU policy stance of the next Czech Government will ultimately depend on what kind coalition will stand.

A radically different interpretation can be found on *EuObserver*, where [Wojciech Przybylski](#) takes a more fine grained look at the influence of the Czech vote on the prospects of the Viségrad four.

Przybylski writes that Babis’ success in Prague is likely to weaken the ties among the four Central and Eastern Member States. Together with the newly elected Austrian Chancellor, Sebastian Kurz, and the Slovakian Prime Minister, Robert Fico, Babis is expected to prioritize the so called “Slovak Triangle”. According to Przybylski, Babis’ election represents, most of all, a threat to Warsaw’s leadership in the region.

Finally, according to [Lukáš Macek](#), Babis’s EU positioning remains an open question. In a long analysis published on the website of the *Foundation Robert Schuman*, Macek argues that Babis shares traits with leaders belonging to very different traditions, such as Emmanuel Macron, Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi. As a consequence, it is difficult to understand the real stance of the Czech leader, behind his tactical behaviours.

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