

# Fragmentation and Anti-Establishment Politics

## The Czech Party System in the 2020s

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### Introduction

The electorally volatile and highly unstable party systems in the post-communist countries of central-eastern Europe are associated with the constant (re)emergence of new parties. The Czech Republic had for a long time after the emergence of democracy defied these patterns of unstable party politics. In the first few decades following the fall of communism, the political competition was based on the clearly defined, ideology-driven conflict between two relatively stable and numerically limited blocs of political parties. The left-wing social democracy, with the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) as the main protagonist, and right-wing neoliberalism, with the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) as the key player, represented the two opposing views on how to run the country and economy that structured the country's political competition. Consequently, some referred to the Czech party system as institutionalized or consolidated (Berglund and Dellenbrant 1991), well established with a high level of programmatic crystallization, and not being fragmented into many smaller parties (Hanley 2008). The above characteristics made the Czech party system *de facto* an exception in the context of post-communist countries. Only a few other countries, such as Slovenia or Hungary, witnessed similar developments.

However, the Czech party system has registered fundamental changes in recent years in terms of the number of (new) parties that compete in elections and enter the parliamentary arena, as well as in the issues structuring the political struggle between the parties. Beginning with the 2010 elections, the relatively predictable pattern of party competition and the stable format of the party system started to unravel. No longer driven only by left–right

divisions, the conflict between parties started to be drawn along different lines: between the parties representing the political establishment and those profiled as anti-establishment (Cirhan and Kopecký 2019). Although the anti-establishment parties initially performed well in elections, their fortunes were often short-lived. Many of them made an electoral breakthrough utilizing their anti-establishment appeal but, with the notable exception of Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO) and the Pirate Party (Pirates), fell apart quickly afterwards, often consumed by intra-party organizational divisions and conflicts. This is how the Czech party system gradually transformed into the new more fragmented constellation with one bigger party that succeeded by running on the anti-establishment ticket (ANO) and several smaller parties. In the Czech context, anti-establishment and anti-corruption appeals may still help new parties to enter parliament, but it takes more than that to survive in the longer term (Kubát and Hartliński 2019: 107). The new parties that currently prevail in the Czech party system are those that avoided scandals associated with their participation in politics. Some scholars have noted that such scandals, especially those related to corruption, were a plague to the established parties in the past, and some of the new parties have learnt the lesson (Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015). Others observed that the anti-establishment stance among some of the leaders of new parties is only a product of party marketing. In reality, these individuals can be recognized as an elite with respect to their wealth or prominence (that they use to fund their political enterprises), and in many cases, their fortune is even a result of their political connections in the past.

In this chapter, we chart these recent transformations of the Czech party system, focusing on the surge of anti-establishment parties that exemplifies the most significant of these changes. We will start with a brief analysis of the institutional conditions that provide basic parameters for party development, followed by an analysis which will show how the Czech party system has fragmented as a result of the wave of anti-establishment politics. By further zooming on two new political parties—one short-lived (Public Affairs, VV) and one electorally and organizationally very successful (ANO)—we will also show some important trends in intra-party organizational development which further point to a general decline of partisanship and party strategies in Czech politics. Throughout the chapter, our empirical strategy is to highlight several organizational features of two new anti-establishment parties and, where possible, contrast them with the established parties which represent the ‘old party system,’ and which are still important players in the country’s party system.

## The Czech Party System and the Framework Conditions for Party Development

Parties play a fundamental role in Czech politics. This is certainly true for the first two decades of post-communist politics, but even the recent wave of anti-establishment politics did not fundamentally alter the overall strong role of parties in the system. Parties enjoy a near monopoly of representation, and alternative channels of representation such as social movements and trade unions are relatively weak (Kopecký 2001; 2007). Some of the longer established parties, like ČSSD and the Christian Democratic Union (KDU-ČSL) have been associated, even organizationally linked, with different social organizations, such as youth organizations, women's organizations, or labour unions. Although these different social organizations were significant with respect to their internal party democracy, they did not turn these parties into mass parties, nor did they strengthen the role of social movements in politics overall. Political parties have no challengers as selectors of candidates for key elected positions within the state: independent candidates stand no chance in lower chamber elections conducted according to the PR list system (see below); even the Senate seats (contested in single-member districts) are mostly divided on the basis of straight inter-party contests.

One important constitutional position which has gradually started to escape a partisan grip is that of the country's president. Until 2012, the president was elected by a joint vote of both chambers of the Czech parliament. Although one such elected president, Václav Havel (president for two terms between 1992 and 2000), profiled himself as a 'non-partisan' (if not anti-partisan) figure, even he could be not elected without strong backing from key political parties. Since the introduction of a popular vote for the president in 2012 (a two-round system, with a run-off between the two strongest candidates if no candidate reaches more than 50% of the vote in the first round), the losing candidate in the second round was always a non-partisan figure, indicating that presidential races might eventually produce results not fully under partisan control. However, while important in many respects (e.g. for constitutional court and other judicial appointments), the Czech president is part of a parliamentary system of government. The key position of executive power is the Prime Minister (PM), who is dependent for approval and survival on a majority in the lower chamber of parliament. With a few exceptions in caretaker governments, the Czech PM is always a partisan figure, coming from and often leading the largest party within a coalition government. The selection of ministers is similarly party centred in that, typically, the key source of recruitment for cabinet posts is parliamentary parties. Those

recruited to a cabinet post from outside of parliament are often party members or part of wider party networks; even the few non-partisan experts in coalition governments that Czech politics has known were pressured to act within the political guidelines of the nominating party. Finally, there are only very few regional governors (*Hejtman*), the highest administrative positions at the sub-national level, who are not members of one of the political parties.

There are at least two important institutional features that are responsible for the strong role of parties in Czech politics. The first one is a generous system of state subsidies which favours (registered) political parties over all other political actors. All parties that receive over 3% of the votes in general elections (the threshold for representation in the lower chamber is 5%) are entitled to public subsidies in two forms: as a permanent contribution for political activities of the party, and for mandates allocated to the party (for more details on party financing, see Pšenička 2019). As we shall see later, Czech parties would unlikely survive organizationally without such public subsidies, which moreover endow them with resources very few other actors can match.

The second feature is the electoral law for parliamentary elections, which stipulates that the lists of candidates can only be drafted by registered parties. Only party-selected<sup>1</sup> ‘independent candidates’ are therefore allowed to run for both the lower (the Chamber of Deputies) and upper (the Senate) houses of the parliament. This legal provision *de facto* turns the national elections into party races. The electoral system to the lower chamber of the parliament is a proportional representation (PR) list system. Voters choose in 14 multi-member districts between party lists of candidates. The d’Hondt formula that was introduced to distribute the seats in districts has been subject to several alterations throughout during the last three decades (Kopecký 2004). All these modifications had two main underlying reasons. The first reason was to limit the competition of new parties by increasing the barrier for entry into the lower house of parliament, especially for electoral coalitions. The second reason was to empower larger political parties by increasing the disproportionality of electoral results (Crawford 2001).

For nearly 20 years since the end of communism, these framework conditions for party development, together with their relatively predictable electoral performance, translated into the dominance of four political parties, ODS and KDU-ČSL right of the centre, and ČSSD and the Communist Party of Czechia and Moravia (KSČM), left of the centre (see Table 6.1 for details). A small liberal conservative party, first under the name of Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), later to be known as Freedom Union (US-DEU) and now competing as TOP 09, completed the picture. It is because of this

**Table 6.1** Electoral results to Chamber of Deputies (lower chamber; % of votes)

	1992	1996	1998	2002	2006	2010	2013	2017	2021
<b>ČSSD</b>	6.5	26.4	32.3	30.2	32.2	22	20.5	7.3	4.7
<b>ODS</b>	29.7	29.6	27.7	24.5	35.4	20.2	7.7	11.3	27.8*
<b>KDU-ČSL</b>	6.3	8	9	14.3	7.2		6.8	5.8	*
<b>KSČM</b>	14.1	10.3	11	18.5	12.8	11.3	15	7.8	3.6
<b>ODA</b>	5.9	6.4							
<b>US-DEU</b>			8.6						
<b>SRP-RSČ</b>	5.9	8.1							
<b>SZ</b>					6.3				
<b>TOP 09</b>						16.7	12	5.3	*
<b>VV</b>						10.9			
<b>Dawn</b>							6.9		
<b>ANO</b>							18.7	29.6	27.1
<b>SPD</b>								10.6	9.6
<b>STAN</b>								5.2	15.6**
<b>Pirates</b>								10.8	**

Source: [www.volby.cz](http://www.volby.cz) (accessed 15 December 2023)

\* result for SPOLU (Together) coalition (ODS, TOP 09, and KDU-ČSL),

\*\* result for PIRATSTAN coalition (Pirates and STAN)

relatively stable constellation of political parties—which, with the exception of the pariah KSČM, were also responsible for the formation of most coalition governments until 2010—that the Czech party system was for a long time ‘renowned’ for its relative stability, one would even say for its hostility towards new parties.

However, even before 2010 and the 2013 earthquake elections, there were signs that the dominant parties were starting to lose the trust of the electorate, which became increasingly frustrated with political and corruption scandals over the years. In fact, despite their strong institutional position and good electoral performance, political parties have repeatedly been placed among the least trusted institutions in the country (Čermák and Stachová 2010). Fuelled by strong anti-party sentiments and strengthened by every major corruption case that involved high-ranking politicians from one of the two major established parties—ODS and ČSSD (Klíma 2015)—the protest vote started to gather momentum and, in the 2010 elections, resulted in the electoral breakthrough of the populist and anti-establishment Public Affairs (VV) (see Table 6.1).

This tendency continued in the 2013 earthquake elections, when two new anti-establishment parties, ANO and Dawn of Direct Democracy (Dawn),

made electoral breakthrough, with ANO nearly winning these elections. The 2017 elections further strengthened this trend of anti-establishment parties' emergence and electoral success. Three other such parties succeeded electorally and performed above the electoral threshold—Pirates, Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), and Mayors and Independents (STAN). It was only in the 2021 elections that, for the first time in nearly a decade, no new political party entered the lower chamber of Czech parliament. However, two long-standing parties ČSSD and KSČM—disappeared from it, leaving the left-of-centre largely unrepresented in parliament.

What does this mean for the Czech party system? Ultimately, the numerous new anti-establishment parties' electoral breakthroughs translate into the fragmentation of the Czech party system, one could say its gradual 'Dutchification'. As can be seen from Table 6.2, the effective number of parliamentary parties (ENPP) has gradually risen since 2010 and only dropped to the levels observed around the turn of the millennium after the 2021 elections, largely thanks to the disappearance of two major left-wing parties. The more fragmented the party system, of course, the more difficult it is to form government coalitions. Indeed, as seen in Table 6.2, the vote and seat shares of the two largest parties have gradually declined since the 1990s, with 2013 representing an all-time low on both shares. Translated into executive

**Table 6.2** Czech party system competition

	ENEP*	ENPP*	Volatility	Turnout (%)	TLP* vote share	TLP* seat share
<b>1990</b>	3.38	2.24	-	96.33	62.74	78.50
<b>1992</b>	7.14	5.71	-	84.68	43.80	55.50
<b>1996</b>	5.14	4.15	28.20	76.29	56.00	64.50
<b>1998</b>	4.55	3.71	15.90	74	60	68.50
<b>2002</b>	4.14	3.81	16.30	57.95	54.70	64.00
<b>2006</b>	3.61	3.10	18.40	64.47	67.60	77.50
<b>2010</b>	6.38	4.62	32.60	62.60	42.20	54.50
<b>2013</b>	7.21	5.79	36.50	59.48	39.20	48.50
<b>2017</b>	6.49	4.81	28.30	60.84	40.96	51.50
<b>2021</b>	5.04	3.34	12.90	65.39	**	53.00

\* ENEP—effective number of electoral parties; ENPP—effective number of parliamentary parties; Volatility as the total volatility; Turnout as share of all registered voters; TLP—two largest parties; ‘-’—missing data

\*\* One of largest parties running under electoral coalition, cannot determine vote share

Source: Parliaments and Governments Database (Döring et al. 2022); Database on WHO Governs in Europe and Beyond, PSGO (Casal Bértoa 2022); Voter Turnout Database (IDEA 2022)

politics, government coalitions containing more than two or three parties has been the norm since then. Indeed, if we split two electoral alliances of SPOLU (ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09) and PiratStan (Pirates and STAN) into their individual parts, the government of Petr Fiala formed following the 2021 elections consists of five political parties, a record coalition size in the entire post-communist period.

## VV and ANO: The Background of Two Anti-establishment Parties

In this section we focus on two new political parties that perhaps best embody the recent changes in the Czech party system. VV was established in 2002 in Prague. Similar to other new parties, in particular Pirates, it was founded as a local party that was initially embedded solely in municipal politics. However, unlike some other new parties like US-DEU or TOP 09, VV lacked connection to pre-existing party structures or to individuals with political capital and, nationwide, made an electoral breakthrough only in the 2010 general elections. Together with TOP 09, it immediately participated in the government led by ODS. Nevertheless, VV's engagement in this government was marred by scandals, and thus short-lived, and the party fell apart not much later.

VV's ideology was always rather shallow, centred around anti-corruption and anti-establishment appeals, combined with calls for simpler laws and slim state administration. Initially, the party initially did not attract many charismatic individuals to lead it, but this changed in 2009 when some celebrities became associated with the party, in particular the investigative journalist Radek John, who became the party leader. Other individuals, like the businessman Vít Bárta, became highly influential within the party (ČTK 2011). Because of his prominence in VV and the closeness of his business and VV's politics, some researchers have referred to the party as to a business-firm party (Hloušek 2012). Indeed, a close proximity to business groups is what differentiates VV (and ANO) from the other new Czech parties, many of which were associated with different social groups. For instance, the Green party (SZ) was connected to various ecological initiatives and environmental organizations, while Pirates started around the community of the PirateLeaks website (the Czech equivalent of WikiLeaks) organizing online petitions promoting internet freedom. In contrast, VV's and ANO's electoral success can be seen as a part of the wider phenomenon of political entrepreneurs infiltrating the Czech party system (Hloušek et al. 2020).

Like in VV, in ANO the worlds of politics and business intertwine. ANO was established in 2012 by Czech businessman Andrej Babiš, and his personality and business background characterize the party to this day. Before founding ANO, the second-richest Czech, a billionaire and owner of the Agrofert business conglomerate, was virtually unknown to the public. Unlike VV, ANO did not have rudimentary party organizational structure from local politics to build on. However, using the vast economic and personnel resources of Babiš's business companies, ANO was from the beginning professionally organized, with input from external consultants and marketing experts. In that sense, ANO's background and origins are quite reminiscent of Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Similar to VV, ANO's initial appeal consisted mainly of a critique of the entire political establishment and widespread corruption. Ideologically, ANO offers a specific kind of technocratic populism, in which it combines anti-establishment rhetoric with centrist managerial-like technocratic policies (Havlík and Voda 2016); it involves the idea of running 'the state like managing a private business-firm'. This includes appeals for fixing and centralizing the state administration, tackling the incompetence and corruption of civil servants, and introducing vast infrastructure projects.

This mixture proved to be the winning formula for Czech voters, especially considering the timing of ANO's entry into Czech politics (Roberts 2018). In the course of the next seven years, ANO became the strongest political player in the country (see Table 6.1). ANO's electoral success in the 2013 general elections was unexpected by many, especially since the main opposition party (ČSSD) was supposed to win by a landslide, considering the major scandal haunting its main competitor (ODS). However, with the exception of the Senate elections, ANO has excelled in all successive elections since then, and this in different electoral arenas, including regional and European elections. As a result, the party has become fully implanted at all levels of public administration. After the 2013 elections, ANO formed a coalition government with ČSSD and KDU-ČSL. In the 2017 general elections, ANO received its largest share of votes to date and formed a minority coalition government with ČSSD, relying on the support of KSČM (Krumphanzl 2018). Although now weakened after losing the 2021 parliamentary elections (and Babiš in the 2023 presidential elections), the party seems firmly established on the Czech party scene, representing a populist alternative to ČSSD and KSČM on the left of the spectrum.



## Organization of New Anti-establishment Parties

Unlike other studies of these two parties which deal mainly with their ideology (e.g. Haughton and Deegan-Krause 2015; Hanley and Vachudova 2018), we now focus on their party organization (party membership and party elite) and financing. Both parties share a number of party organizational approaches, which differ from the established parties (ODS or ČSSD). We start by looking at party membership.

### Party membership and communication

As we can see from Table 6.3, the number of party members in ANO and VV is much lower when compared to the established parties (i.e. those established prior to or shortly after the 1989 revolution). The contrast is particularly stark when comparing ANO and VV to the two established parties with long historical roots: KSČM and KDU-ČSL (see also Rovenský 2018). Nevertheless, ANO's and VV's membership is fairly comparable with that of the other newer parties, such as Pirates, SPD, TOP 09, or STAN (see Mazancová 2018). All the newer parties in the country, that is those which have emerged in the last decade or so, register very few members compared to their established counterparts from the 1990s and before.

In a post-communist social environment hostile to partisanship and other conventional forms of political participation, extensive organization building

**Table 6.3** Membership of Czech parties

Party	M/E	Income through members (%)	Income through state funding (%)
ČSSD	0.23	50.60	44.10
ODS	0.17	2.35	20.17
ANO	0.04	1.30	87.43
KDU-ČSL	0.30	3.37	37.32
KSČM	0.45	15.13	62.93
TOP 09	0.03	4.07	71.70
Mean	0.26	12.80	53.94

Source: Political Party Database Round 2 V4 (Scarow et al. 2022), data retrieved for 2017; the reported income share refers to the total party income; M/E was multiplied by 100 and presents the percentage share of the electorate

and membership recruitment were never among parties' highest priorities, especially among these immediately involved in parliamentary and executive politics (Kopecký 1995, 2001, 2007; Biezen 2003). Most Czech parties have restricted their organizational efforts almost exclusively to the party in public office, often failing to establish a strong extra-parliamentary organizational structure. The only two notable exceptions in this regard are KSČM and KDU-ČSL, long-established parties with a pre-1989 history, which are by far the closest to the definition of a mass party in the Czech context (see, for example, their M/E values reported in Table 6.3; see also Biezen 2003). The parties established after the Velvet Revolution (mainly ODS and the recreated ČSSD) never matched them regarding the extensiveness of party organization. And parties even newer than ODS or ČSSD, like ANO, VV, Pirates, SPD, TOP 09, or STAN, do not seem to even attempt to match the parties established in the 1990s in this respect.

Overall, the trend in post-communist Czech politics is that the party membership as a percentage of the electorate (M/E ratio) is at a low level (see Table 6.3 for more details). This is especially the case in comparison to Western European democracies (see Delwit 2011: 35; Kölln 2014). The same can be observed for the size of party membership relative to the number of the individual party voters (M/V ratio): with the exception of KSČM and KDU-ČSL (both commanding M/V ratio of about 10%), the only other party with some, although minimal, M/V ratio is ODS (about 3–6%).

Interestingly, VV and ANO also display a strong emphasis on the alternative and limited forms of party membership (Cirhan and Stauber 2018). ANO cultivates a far more closed elite-like membership base, while VV was relatively open to recruit new members without setting any major restrictions. In ANO, screening of members' backgrounds and corresponding long probationary periods were a norm in the party at its inception. These restrictions on party membership resulted in numerous failed or pending membership applications. In order to compensate for the (self-)limited number of party members, both parties gradually started to focus on registering alternative forms of membership, in particular party sympathizers, who have no rights, nor any influence on their parties (in VV, sympathizers initially had voting rights but had them restricted later) (Cirhan and Stauber 2018).

The focus on alternative forms of membership is also crucial with respect to party communication. ANO, in particular, established a robust network of party sympathizers and online supporters who have been widely used for communicating the party message to its potential electorate. The party has

also invested in a specialized social media team in order to boost this important strategy of party marketing (Cirhan and Stauber 2018: 475). In contrast, VV did not invest so much in its online activities, most likely because the party emerged prior to the spread and popularity of social media

Arguably, the strategy based on alternative forms of membership is advantageous with regard to the maintenance of the party organization: both ANO and, to lesser extent, VV focus on the advantages of membership in the form of voluntary labour and restrict those types and aspects of membership that are not easily maintained organizationally (Cirhan and Stauber 2018). Similar developments can be observed in the case of other newer parties like TOP 09, SPD, Pirates, or STAN, which also register very limited numbers of party members and do not invest in building extensive party membership.

## Party elites

Another aspect of VV's and ANO's party organization that is crucial for understanding their involvement in Czech politics relates to the party elite. Previous research has established that the contrasting political and organizational fortunes of VV and ANO can be partially explained by the different composition of their party elites (Cirhan and Kopecký 2017). Concretely, the similarity in professional and career backgrounds among the party elite could act as one of the contributing factors for their organizational survival (by facilitating party cohesion). In theory, party cohesion is a crucial part of party unity (see Andeweg and Thomassen 2010); commonly shared career and professional backgrounds of party elites are variables that support party cohesion (Putnam 1973). ANO displayed a highly homogenous party elite, (67% of its party elite were managers), while VV's party elite included individuals with much more heterogenous career pathways (only 24% of its party elite shared the same career background). Also, in ANO a non-negligible proportion of the party elite (17%) was recruited from the Agrofert business conglomerate of the party leader. Many of these individuals associated with Babiš's business hold important posts within ANO (see Cirhan and Kopecký 2017 for more details).

For the ANO, party cohesion resulting from this organizational strategy of relying on Agrofert managers proved to be especially relevant and advantageous when it had to deal with major scandals. It was most strongly tested when Babiš began to be investigated by The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and by the Czech police for an alleged fraud in the application for

EU funding for one of his companies (Rankin, 2018). When the party faced serious scandals concerning the party leader, the party elite stayed firmly united behind him, and none of the party elite voiced any opposition towards Babiš in public (ČTK 2015). There was no publicly visible faction within ANO asking for his resignation, questioning his position, or even suggesting changes in the leadership. On the contrary, in the months and years following the scandal, all members of ANO's elite continued and continue to support Babiš publicly in the media and in parliament (Kosová 2018).

When VV went through a similar test concerning a scandal with much less significant magnitude, it failed miserably. The corruption scandal in VV involved an influential member of the party and one of its main donors, Vít Bárta (ČTK 2011). Bárta has been labelled by local commentators as the grey eminence of VV and the most influential individual in the party, who was de facto running the party instead of the party leader John. The organizational crisis in VV was complex; however, its trigger was rather straightforward—bribery and party financing scandals among its party elite. Bárta's ABL security agency and his relatives were involved in non-transparent party funding both to the party and to different individuals within the party organization. A trial took place in 2012, in which Bárta was sentenced for providing interest-free loans to members of the VV's parliamentary group (Cirhan and Stauber 2018: 464). Handing money to different MPs was considered bribery, and the scandal had a destructive impact on the party organization. VV quickly fell into internal conflicts and party divisions following the media coverage of Bárta's scandals. The party elites were divided and started to blame each other in the media; there were frequent changes in party leadership, and the party split into different factions.

This political strategy of targeting managers from outside of politics is not an entirely new idea in the context of contemporary post-communist Czech politics. A similar strategy was implemented in ODS in the 1990s. In this respect, Hadjiisky (2011) talks about an essential group of so-called post-normalization technocrats: individuals that formed the ideology and public image of ODS throughout this period. This ODS elite shared similar political attitudes based on their common professional past as managers or financiers and their educational profiles as economists. Hadjiisky (2011: 102) referred to ODS as a business enterprise because of the influence of these professionals on the party ideology. For similar reasons, Hanley (2008) described ODS as the tool of technocratic modernization, emphasizing the substantial impact these professionals had on the party. Although the difference between economists and engineers within the party leadership later led to widespread disputes and tensions and the struggle for control over the party,

in the 1990s it unified the party ideologically. The common ground on main policies and a common-sense technocratic approach shared by ODS's elite helped it to share common political attitudes which, in turn, protected the party organization from larger conflicts and the risk of disintegration.

While in ANO and ODS the parties' unity stemmed partially from the similarity in the career profiles of their party elites, other parties relied on connections to social groups (e.g. the Greens with environmental organizations) as their source of cohesion. The same cannot be said about some of the other Czech parties, notably ČSSD, where the conflicts between different party factions (stirring internal conflicts) were notorious throughout its history. The conflict was mostly visible between the faction standing behind the former party leader (and the former Czech president Miloš Zeman) and a more liberal wing of the party. The struggle between the two factions culminated after the 2013 general elections, when a faction around regional party leaders in Brno (the second-largest Czech city) organized an attempted leadership coup against the then party leader Sobotka. The conflict between the two factions took weeks to resolve. It severely weakened the position of party leader within the party, as well as the position of ČSSD in the newly forming coalition government with ANO. The conflict between the two different factions in ČSSD never fully disappeared and continues to this day. It re-emerged repeatedly during the period when ČSSD participated in Babiš's coalition government and ultimately could be seen as one of the major contributing factors for the weak electoral performance of the party in the 2021 elections and its exit from the lower house of parliament.

A similar fate of losing its presence in the Chamber of Deputies was also haunting TOP 09. Although a relatively united party that did not have many publicly known scandals or internal party conflicts, it has had issues of its own. A deficit of charismatic candidates, on one side, combined with the entry of new successful liberal parties (like Pirates), on the other, represent a serious problem for TOP 09, which relies on a similar type of voter to Pirates. Regarding the party elite, we can see a specific personnel continuity between previously mentioned minor centre-right liberal parties like ODA, US-DEU, and most recently TOP 09. Many of their elite have originated from the early days of Civic Forum and transferred through several of these parties.

For the other newer parties, like Pirates, it still remains to be seen how they will hold together now that they have become involved in the coalition government after the 2021 poll. From the very beginning, Pirates has presented itself as a party with a novel approach to party organization, relying on its grassroots structures and online forums for its internal decisions (Natrass 2021). It could then be expected that the relationships within the party

elite would matter less for such a party, as its source of party unity could be based elsewhere. However, research on Pirates indicates that although the so-called ‘member initiative’ theoretically gives members more power to influence the internal party functioning than in the established parties, its actual usage in the party is limited (Michalčák 2018). The party leadership of Pirates maintains autonomy in matters related to the programmatic priorities and organization of campaigns. Another limitation of members’ impact within the party is related to their relative passivity: the party members in Pirates seem to be much more active locally than at the national level. This shows that, even for parties that may on the outside appear less strictly hierarchical and more grassroots driven, the intra-elite relationships are probably the most important ingredient for their survival.

## Party financing

One can only speculate if Babiš learnt from the mistakes of VV when he established ANO and recruited its party elite. However, one aspect that most certainly contributes to any new party’s success, especially at the early stage of its formation, is the availability of party financing. There is no doubt that the vast financial resources of its party leader were an obvious advantage at the beginning of ANO’s existence, as nearly all of its total revenue before the party won parliamentary seats was donated by Babiš or by companies affiliated with his Agrofert business conglomerate. In this part of the chapter, we therefore pay close attention to how Czech parties are funded.

Between 1990 and 2012, Czech parties received over 40% of party funding from public subsidies (Kopecký and Biezen 2017); the data in Table 6.3 indicate that this percentage is now well over 50%, representing a very large proportion of their overall finances. In the context of the Czech party system, parties are highly dependent on public subsidies for their existence and long-term survival. Indeed, as can also be seen from Table 6.3, which reports some of the most recent data, public subsidies constitute the largest share of income for most parties. ODS and KDU-ČSL, which receive a sizeable proportion of their party finance from private donations and their own economic activities, are an exception. Most Czech parties represented in parliament depend almost exclusively on funding from the state. In some cases, like ANO or Pirates, public subsidies are almost the sole source of party income, with income from members in particular representing only a very negligible source of money.

However, as mentioned in the second section of this chapter, parties are only entitled to receive the funds from the state when they perform well in

elections (when the party receives at least 3% of the vote in general elections). The availability of private funding for a party at the time of its emergence (or, alternatively, at the time of a disastrous electoral performance) may therefore be a crucial aspect of its success, and indeed also an opportunity to control the party organization from the early days. Babiš seem to be the case in point here. As mentioned previously, ANO (unlike VV) depended highly on private sources during its emergence, in particular from Babiš and his companies. Importantly, this private funding from Babiš to ANO was made in the form of loans to the party. The fact that these loans represented a large proportion of this party's income meant that Babiš could directly exercise control over the party organization. One could argue that because ANO could not function without his financial support (and the party was highly indebted to him for it), this financial backing made it much easier for him to secure a dominant position within the party.

## Conclusion

The Czech party system in the 2020s is more volatile than in the late 1990s, with new parties making an electoral breakthrough and gaining seats in parliament while some of the seeming mainstays of the party system, like ČSSD and KSČM, have been forced to leave it. Simultaneously, it is more difficult for the parties to form a government, and coalition governments consisting of three or more parties are likely to become the norm. Some of the newcomers into the party system fall apart quickly after making an electoral breakthrough, while some appear to be here to stay. The comparison drawn in this chapter focused on two new parties with opposite political and organizational fortunes. The successful ANO has become one of the biggest and most important parties in the country, while VV has failed and disappeared despite a successful start. The focus of this comparison was on how these two political parties' organizational features have influenced their survival. On one hand, they are fairly similar in their approach towards party membership, although ANO is much more restrictive and closed, almost elite-like in this respect. Both parties rely on alternative forms of membership that provide the perks of having members without having to pay for their maintenance organizationally. On the other hand, the homogeneity of the ANO party elite, absent in VV, facilitated the party's survival even when it was severely tested in government. The overlap between the party leadership structures and private company networks seems to have facilitated unity within the party. In the absence of such unity, the shocks

triggered by scandals have proven to be organizationally fatal, as shown by the case of VV.

What has been the wider impact of ANO and VV on the development of democracy in the Czech Republic? VV was too short-lived to leave an impact, but when it comes to ANO, certain red flags appear. For instance, Babiš expressed ambitions to amend the constitution, ostensibly to make the system more ‘efficient’. He planned to abolish the Senate and the regional level of governance, and to reduce the size of the parliament. He repeatedly attacked the legislative process in the Chamber of Deputies as just endless twaddle. He presented himself as a pragmatic businessman with a real-life, hands-on approach, and who does not waste time on long discussions. This perspective of politics has been fully in line with ANO’s version of technocratic populism that reduces democratic governance to managing the state efficiently like running a private company. In this context, some well-known intellectuals warned that Babiš as PM (in cooperation with the then Czech president Miloš Zeman) might attempt to dismantle liberal democracy in a way parallel to the political changes seen in Poland or Hungary.

This turned out not to be entirely the case. ANO’s technocratic populism (rather than the nationalist and illiberal approaches of PiS or Fidesz in Poland and Hungary, respectively) and its shallow ideological anchoring meant it lacked zeal and purpose for systematic changes that would lead to the dismantling of democracy. Importantly, given the diffuse institutional structure of the Czech political system and a fragmented political class, ANO was frequently challenged by the Senate, the courts, media, and powerful regional governments, and it always lacked the parliamentary and political majority necessary for a sustained attack on democracy. Instead, a major problem in the Czech case has been the tremendous accumulation of economic, political, and media power in the hands of one person and its subsequent use in the way that Abby Innes (2016) succinctly described as a corporate state capture. Even then, however, Babiš’s conflicts of interests, frequently pursued by some media, together with a mismanaged COVID-19 pandemic, rising inflation, and other economic issues, have consistently brought pressures on his party and ultimately led to its defeat.

The 2021 general elections were de facto a referendum on Babiš. Two previously mentioned anti-ANO electoral coalitions, together consisting of five individual parties, were formed ahead of the elections to challenge Babiš: the more conservative SPOLU coalition of ODS, KDU-ČSL, and TOP 09, and the more liberal centrist coalition of Pirates and STAN. Both coalitions performed well electorally. SPOLU received the highest number of votes and defeated Babiš by a few votes. More importantly, however, together with the



coalition of Pirates and STAN, they hold a majority of seats in the lower house of parliament and now form the government under the leadership of Petr Fiala (ODS). To make things worse for Babiš, he decided to run for the presidency but was decisively defeated in the 2023 direct presidential elections by Petr Pavel, a non-affiliated former NATO general, who was politically supported by all the parties in the government coalition.

This now leaves the country and its party system in a somewhat paradoxical situation: Babiš has been replaced in government by some of the very same parties whose past scandals led to his successful entry into politics. Considering that Fiala's government consists of five ideologically rather heterogeneous parties and now faces ANO as its main opposition party at a time of high levels of inflation and social unrest, it remains to be seen how stable the post-2021 government will be. The fragmentation of the Czech party system that precipitated the emergence of ANO is also unlikely to be fundamentally reversed by the defeat of Babiš's technocratic populism. However, this peaceful and strategically manufactured transfer of power, both in parliament and in the presidential office, shows that while parties are often the Czech political system's main problem, they are still also the only institutions capable of solving these problems.

## Note

1. Depending on the individual party rules, either the local or district branches draft the candidate lists that are sent for approval to the higher levels of party organization, be it the regional executive committee or the national executive committee. Additionally, in the case of some parties, the party leadership maintains a veto right on the candidate selection.

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