FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES

The Progressive Post

Political earthquake in the Czech Republic

By Jan Košák. Member of ČSSD, member of FEPS Ones to Watch program, teacher and humanitarian worker

October 2017

The triumph of the Czech Berlusconi and a heavy defeat for the left. A result that no one imagined, not even in their darkest dreams. Is it the end of a political era and can Czexit happen?

The sovereign winner of the Czech general election in 2017 is movement ANO (ALDE) of Andrej Babiš, which won almost thirty percent of the vote. The Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) experienced a total downfall and finished on sixth place with seven percent. This is the biggest political change since 1989.

A number of causes for this defeat can be found. The crucial thing is that social democracy became 'unreadable' for voters and lost their confidence.

During the government's mandate, ČSSD greatly underestimated communication with the public and the party itself. Thanks to that, coalition partner Andrej Babiš was able to appropriate almost all the merits and achievements of the government. On the contrary, its media ability has brought all negatives to ČSSD. Due to a number of conflicts within the coalition, mainly including problems with Andrej Babiš, led the situation to his dismissal from the position of Minister of Finance, which unfortunately damaged the majority coalition partner.

Even though the Czech Republic was doing well, the ČSSD continued losing the voters' confidence. Four months before the election, the leadership of the party was replaced. The co-existence of 3 people in the leadership of the party in positions of prime minister, party chairman and electoral leader worked, but was unclear and opaque to voters.

In the long run, disputes were sparked by the migration crisis, triggering national populist tendencies and criticism of the EU in the otherwise pro-European party. Unsolicited communications about police reorganization and especially Lithium mining two weeks before the election were the last blow to an otherwise well-governing party.

Despite intense campaigning on the streets and on social networks, and the excellent work of the electoral leader Lubomir Zaorálek, ČSSD suffered a significant loss.

Much more important than the outcome of the elections is whether the ČSSD will be able to interpret and understand correctly the message that citizens have sent to the party through the election.

The ČSSD has lost the support of those whose interests it had been defending for 139 years, the working class.

Research found that ČSSD lost more than 700 thousand voters, of which about 360 thousand went to the populist ANO, 70 thousand to the extreme-right SPD and 30 thousand to the communist party KSČM. The most interesting thing is that the remaining 260,000 former ČSSD voters did not turn up to vote.

The time of massive changes has come, and if the ČSSD does not want to experience a similar scenario as the left in Poland or Hungary, it will have to find a clear answer to the current situation. The situation can serve as an open window of opportunities, which we can't miss.

We can get inspiration from many social democratic sister parties:

- A new leader without effecting radical changes in the program, and a concentration on what the needs of the party's voters are. This was achieved in Portugal and partly in Spain, Austria and in the October election in Germany as well.
- Power performance and battle for nationalist voters. This has been for a long time the program of Robert Fico's Smer in Slovakia and Victor Ponta's PSD in Romania.
- A shift of the party's programmatic platform to the left, combined with strong messaging in the style of Corbyn as in UK.
- A liberal leader and a concentration on the domestic industry. Promoting liberal values and fighting for the surplus value to remain at home. This is the way of Justin Trudeau in Canada and will probably be the case for Matteo Renzi in Italy next year.

What direction will be followed by ČSSD will be demonstrated in the coming months.

In addition of this, nonetheless, it is also necessary to answer two fundamental questions about the future relationship between the Czech Republic and EU. Is Babiš like Kaczynski or Orban? And can Czexit happen?

Andrej Babiš is everything, but he is neither nationalistic and Europhobic like Orban, nor a religious conservative or an ideologue like Kaczinski. Babiš is a populist and a pragmatist at the same time. His fight is not with the EU or Germany, but he focuses instead on the profit of money and power. The EU is an opportunity for him to get rich and expand his influence. He is a technocrat who knows that the success of the country depends on European integration and on open internal borders.

The people of the Czech Republic are currently angry with Brussels. Emotions could cause the win of the 'Out' vote in a potential referendum about the European Union. Brexit has shown us that Europe has problems, but the EU is a great project. In this sense, Babiš has clearly said: "We must reform European Union, but not leave!"

We can say that the Czech political scene is at the end of one era and is going through a major transformation. After the elections, five political party leaders resigned, congresses were called, and changes have been profound. It will definitely be interesting to follow developments in the next few years, with the hope that the Czech Republic will maintain at least in the same good condition as it is now.