

The Populist Vs Anti-Populist Divide in the Time of Pandemic: The 2021 Czech National Election and its Consequences for European Politics*

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Introduction

After several waves of COVID-19 pandemic, the October 2021 general election in the Czech Republic turned into a ‘referendum’ about the government dominated by the populist party ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens) led by Andrej Babiš. Babiš, a billionaire entrepreneur, concentrated political, economic and media power in an unprecedented way during his incumbency (Hanley and Vachudova, 2018). The Czech Republic was once the frontrunner of democratic consolidation in central and eastern Europe, but Babiš and his government has taken it on an illiberal swerve (Bustikova and Guasti, 2017), underlined by technocratic populist discourse with little sense for separation of powers and the system of checks and balances (Havlík, 2019). Instead of a competition between various programmatic alternatives, the election has turned into a highly polarised battle about the future character of the regime.

The election brought several surprising results. The long-term leader in the polls, ANO, facing a critical perception of the government’s performance during the crisis (Císař and Kubát, 2021; Hartikainen, 2021), suffered an unexpected defeat. For the Social Democrats, the junior coalition partner of ANO, and the Communists, who supported the government for most of the term, the election was a disaster. Neither of the parties of the traditional left reached the threshold required to enter the parliament and thus lost their representation in the Chamber of Deputies. In addition, the gains of the opposition have been noteworthy. Two coalitions, Together (SPOLU), and the Pirate Party and Mayors and Independents (PirSTAN), gained a clear majority in the parliament and formed a new government by uniting against populism and portraying themselves as ‘the only democratic alternative’ (Havlík and Wondreys, 2021). A new populism vs anti-populism divide (for example, Moffitt, 2018) had become central to political contestation, supplanting the traditional competition between left and right parties, already shaken by the rise of populist parties in previous years.

Against this background, this article examines the ideational and performative dimensions of the divide between populism and anti-populism in the Czech Republic. We analyse how this new divide emerged, structured political competition, and

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influenced the 2021 general election. Despite the contested nature of the term, we follow the consensus about the minimal definition of populism (Canovan, 1999; Rooduijn, 2014; Stanley, 2008) as ‘a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004, p. 543). As such, populism is seen as a Manichean discourse constituted around three interrelated elements: (1) the virtuous people that are (2) betrayed by the essentially bad/corrupt elites, and (3) the restoration of the people’s sovereignty by populists themselves. Anti-populism, by contrast, constitutes a combination of strategic stances presented in opposition to populism (Moffitt, 2018). It refers to an antagonism that portrays populism as a fatal threat to democracy or economic development (Hamdaoui, 2022). Consequently, the anti-populist actors present themselves as the only viable alternative to the omnipresent danger of populism (Kim, 2018).

The populism vs anti-populism divide involves the discursive construction of ideas and political identities (Stavrakakis et al., 2018), and performative and stylistic characteristics of how political actors act, behave and communicate (Ostiguy, 2017). Populist and anti-populist actors not only create their own identities and performative style, but they also necessarily construct the perceptions of the opposing camp, guiding people’s understanding and interpretation of political reality (for example, Stavrakakis et al., 2018). In doing so, populists blame elites for not representing the needs of the people, while anti-populists both discredit the populist ideas and style and claim to be their opposite.

However, the strategic choices and political communication of political actors do not happen in a vacuum; they are embedded in a broader political and social context (Engesser et al., 2017). This article thus connects the ideational and performative dimensions of the populism/anti-populism divide to the political and discursive opportunities (Giugni et al., 2005; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004) that were available for electoral mobilisation during the 2021 election campaign. To identify broader frames and discursive elements constructed in the electoral campaign of anti-populist coalitions, we rely on a qualitative thematic analysis of political communication by main opposition parties and their leaders. Data were collected through triangulation of social media data¹ and mainstream media data with the parties’ official programmes. These data show the importance of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created favourable opportunities for anti-populist parties to strategically criticise the (populist) government for ineffective crisis management, lack of accountability, and moral weakness, highlighting the negative impact of the crisis on society, especially in the later phases of the pandemic. Further, we discuss the election’s consequences on domestic and European politics and the future of Visegrad co-operation in particular. Our article adds to the debate on the central yet underexplored divide between populists and anti-populists that has been emerging across Western democracies (Moffitt, 2018).

¹The examples from parties’ and leaders’ anti-populist discourse in Section II are drawn from data gathered from Facebook fan pages of party leaders and parties listed in the references: Czech Pirate Party (2021), Fiala (2021), STAN (2021).

I. Party Politics in the Czech Republic: From Stable Party System to Populist Breakthrough

The Czech party system emerged as an exception to the highly volatile party systems of the newly established democracies in central and eastern Europe (Lane and Ersson, 2007). Starting in the mid-1990s, Czech party politics were characterised by low levels of volatility, the dominance of a left–right socio-economic cleavage, and the continual parliamentary presence of four major parties which had integrated relatively successfully with West European party families: the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) on the left and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) on the right, with two other parties playing a more minor role, the left-wing Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) and the centrist Christian and Democratic Union – the Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) (Havlík, 2015). Support for these four parties increased over time so that they were able to gain almost 88 per cent of the votes (194 out of 200 seats) in the 2006 general election.

However, the economic crisis of 2008 and a series of corruption scandals marked the end of this stability. The 2010 general election saw a rapid decrease in support for the old parties and an increase in the support for new parties, which not only entered parliament but went straight into government. The 2013 and 2017 general elections brought continuing destabilisation of Czech party politics, indicating disillusionment and public disenchantment with existing parties and government performance (Guasti and Mansfeldová, 2018). Two new political parties, ANO and Tomio Okamura's Dawn of Direct Democracy, won almost one-third of the seats in the 2013 snap election. In the 2017 general election, the ANO party, Freedom and Direct Democracy party, a successor to the Dawn party, and another anti-establishment newcomer the Czech Pirate party (Pirates) won two-thirds of the parliamentary seats, while the percentage of seats gained by the established parties went down from almost 90 per cent in 2006 to 34 per cent in 2017. The destabilisation was underscored by electoral gains of populist newcomers who eroded the prevalence of socio-economic class voting (Havlík and Voda, 2018; for the election results, see Table 1).

The populist challengers also contested the established patterns of political campaigning. Pointing primarily to the incompetence and (alleged) corrupt practices of the established parties, they created a narrative that the development of the Czech political and socio-economic system was based on a 'cartel' of old political parties (Císař and Štětka, 2016). Through these vivid accusations, the populist parties made anti-corruption and anti-establishment claims highly salient to the public. In line with populist ideology, they were constructing a divide between 'us' and 'them', blaming the traditional elites and glorifying the Czech people and their talents. While their policy positions were framed in contrast to those of the opposition, the populist heartland (Taggart, 2000) was presented as a land of ordinary but immensely skilled, bright, witty and diligent people (Havlík, 2019). The populist parties also brought a simplified, emotional, and negative style of communication into public discourse. This major reshuffling of the party system at both electoral and discursive levels signalled the emergence of what we identify as a new conflict dimension between populism and anti-populism in Czech party politics.

Table 1: Results of General Elections (% of votes)

	1996	1998	2002	2006	2010	2013	2017	2021
ČSSD	26.4	32.3	30.2	32.3	22.1	20.5	7.3	4.7
KSČM	10.3	11	18.5	12.8	11.3	14.9	7.8	3.6
ODS	29.6	27.7	24.5	35.4	20.2	7.7	11.3	27.8
TOP 09					16.7	12	12	
KDU-ČSL	8.1	9	14.3	7.2	4.4	6.8	5.8	
US		8.6						
ODA	6.4							
SPR-RSČ	8							
SZ				6.3				
VV					10.9			
ANO						18.7	29.6	27.1
Dawn/SPD						6.7	10.6	9.6
Pirates							10.8	15.6
STAN							5.2	

Abbreviations: ČSSD – Czech Social Democratic Party, KSČM – Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, ODS – Civic Democratic Party, TOP 09 – Tradition, Responsibility, Prosperity 2009, KDU-ČSL – Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party, US – Union of Freedom, ODA – Civic Democratic Alliance, SPR – RSČ – Association for the Republic – Republican Part of Czechoslovakia, SZ – Green Party, VV – Public Affairs, ANO – Action of Dissatisfied Citizens, SPD – Freedom and Direct Democracy, STAN – Mayors and Independents.

II. The 2021 General Election: Emergence of Anti-Populism

The conflict between populism and anti-populism emerged as the most important dividing line during the Czech 2021 general election campaign. ANO campaigned on 'support to the ordinary people' whose interests should be put before others, whether the EU or immigrants, and tried to divert attention from the ongoing public health crisis by focusing on national sovereignty and immigration as well as the 'post-COVID' economic recovery and healthcare. The populists also campaigned on ridiculing the opposition parties (Rovný, 2021), mainly targeting the (nominally) progressive Pirates that, for a long time, seemed to be ANO's biggest challenger in the polls (Havlík and Wondreys, 2021).

However, the ANO inadvertently mobilised the anti-populist opposition by their reliance on the votes of communist MPs, increasing adoption of illiberal rhetoric, an evident nativist-populist shift (Havlík, 2019), continuous corruption allegations against Babiš, and later also by adoption of inconsistent and chaotic government measures to curb the COVID-19 pandemic. A social movement 'A Million Moments for Democracy', formed after the 2017 elections, played a crucial role in mobilising civil society against governing elites perceived as corrupt and self-serving (Bernhard et al., 2019). The civil society activists organised a series of the biggest public demonstrations since the fall of communism, appealing to the democratic opposition to unite and collaborate to defend democracy from the politics represented by populist parties. Ultimately, five diverse opposition parties, also facing an electoral system which favoured larger political parties, overcame their ideological differences and eventually formed two electoral coalitions. The SPOLU coalition united two conservative parties (ODS and TOP 09) and KDU-ČSL, and the PirSTAN coalition united the liberal Pirate party and centre-right Mayors and Independents (STAN) (Rovný, 2021).

The anti-populist mobilisation was expressed in ideational and performative dimensions. One of the strongest ideational dichotomies presented by the two coalitions was that of populism vs democracy. Not only did the opposition parties become increasingly denoted as ‘democratic’ parties in public discourse, but they themselves also constructed this narrative. In their rhetoric, democracy stands in sharp contrast to populism, communism and radicalism or extremism. Accordingly, the populists were presented as an acute, fatal threat to the Czech society and anti-populist opposition was the solution for an ill-fated country. This allowed the opposition politicians to distance themselves from the populists in government as well as the communist and populist radical right parties.

This divide between illiberal and democratic politics gradually intensified, replacing the initial framing of SPOLU as a right-centre alternative to the populist and socialist government (Havlík and Wondreys, 2021). In the months leading to an election, the anti-populist politicians heavily campaigned as ‘democratic politicians’ (Pirates, June 2021) and ‘a force for liberal democracy’ (STAN, August 2021) against ‘a populist-communist coalition’ or extremism (Petr Fiala, August 2021; STAN, September 2021). The anti-populist motivation even surpassed ideological differences with other opposition parties. As explained by the ODS leader Petr Fiala, the defeat of Andrej Babiš and the end of the populist government was the main reason the SPOLU coalition was not campaigning against the PirSTAN coalition. Similarly, in an election endorsement presented by the PirStan coalition, a well-known Czech actor stated, ‘this year’s election is not so much about a programme; unfortunately, it is simply about how to weaken the preceding oligarchy and populism. And also, how to support the way to democracy and decency’ (STAN, September 2021).

At the ideational level, the anti-populist actors contrasted economically irresponsible and pro-Eastern (that is, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese) populism that is divisive, amoral and untruthful, with economically responsible and pro-Western anti-populist forces that are unifying, moral and truthful. Framing the divide in economic terms, anti-populists called for the end of the ‘irresponsible plundering of the public finances’ and ‘pernicious indebtedness of the country’ (Petr Fiala, May, August 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its negative impact on the important tourism, hospitality and automobile industries and the country’s increasing budget deficit, presented an opportunity for the opposition to criticise the government. The anti-populist opposition disagreed with the measures introduced to boost the economy and condemned the government for its failure to act decisively and minimise the impact of the crisis on society (Cisáň and Kubát, 2021).

Another highly salient ideational frame presented in the anti-populist discourse concerned the question of the country’s geopolitical orientation. While the opposition politicians presented a clear orientation towards the West (one of the most important legitimising frames of the political transformation of the Czech Republic after the fall of communism was ‘the return to Western Europe’), especially the EU and NATO, they framed populists as moving the country to the East, especially towards Russia and China. Making use of the pro-Russian and eurosceptic attitudes of populist parties and the political alliance of Babiš with pro-Russian and pro-Chinese President Miloš Zeman, anti-populists repeatedly voiced concerns about a possible threat that populists would call for a referendum to withdraw from NATO and the EU. This would make Czechia ‘an insignificant, isolated, poor, and endangered country in Eastern Europe’ (Petr Fiala, September–October 2021). Anti-populism and thus the West, on the other hand, would lead to ‘democracy, prosperity, security, and stability’ (Petr Fiala, September 2021).

The opposition further strongly emphasised the polarising effect of populism and, in contrast, presented themselves as a unifying force. The SPOLU (which translates as ‘Together’) and PirSTAN coalitions accentuated the need to unite the people because the populists ‘widen the abysses in our country’ (Petr Fiala, April 2021) and ‘pit people against each other’ (Petr Fiala, September 2021). Anti-populists also utilised moral arguments to brand themselves as a democratic shift from the populists. This perspective contrasted populists’ alleged absence of morality and democrats’ strong principles. The populists were accused of pushing rules beyond democratic norms, thus being ‘without moral limits’ (Pirates, June 2021). In contrast, the opposition promoted ‘humanity, values, faith, beliefs’ and had ‘to fight for the character and future of our state’ (Petr Fiala, September, October 2021). The pandemic helped them to deploy moralising frames as the populists’ lack of accountability and moral weakness caused many people to die ‘completely unnecessarily’ (Petr Fiala, September 2021).

Lastly, the ideational dimension of the divide included a contrast between ‘lying’ populists and ‘truthful’ democrats. Populism was equated with ‘lies and empty promises’ (Petr Fiala, May 2021) and democratic opposition with politics based on truth, facts, and ‘real’ expertise. The discourse about ‘top independent experts’, who ‘use real data’ (Pirates, September 2021) might have resonated well during the pandemic among parts of the public when the need for information increased significantly. Lies and truth were heavily contrasted: ‘Let’s fight against populism, let’s tell others, what is the truth and what are the fabrications of Andrej Babiš’s advertising machinery’ (Petr Fiala, September 2021). In this context, the opposition also stressed the affinity between populism and disinformation, fake news and conspiracies.

In the performative dimension of the populism/anti-populism divide, the opposition constructed two major styles of politics. SPOLU and PirSTAN presented themselves as advocates of a ‘new’ form of politics, defined by civility and competence as the major principles of ‘good politics’. Anti-populist appeals of ‘bringing normal decency back into politics’ (Petr Fiala, August 2021) contrasted with the ‘bad manners’ of populists (Moffitt, 2016), who were consistently accused of being unable to behave in a civil manner. This was well personified by, for instance, the image of Petr Fiala as a professor of political science, continually attired in a formal suit, which is the image that he reinforces by emphasising the need to constantly follow the rules of etiquette. This communication strategy fits the distinction between ‘low’ and ‘high’ in politics. Low politics, usually attributed to the style of populists, refers to “down-to-earth”, coarser and more personalistic politics. High politics, on the other hand, often claimed to be represented by anti-populists, refers to a more restrained and proper behaviour in terms of manners as well as institutionally (Ostiguy, 2017).

Another element of the performative side of anti-populism emphasised the incompetence of populist politics, concentrating on populism’s ‘political theatre’ instead of designing and implementing effective (and value-based) policies. While populists were alleged to base their politics on political marketing and empty, simple solutions aiming to arouse emotions, anti-populists supposedly crafted their policies through rational and reasonable decision-making. The COVID-19 crisis and the government’s poor performance during the pandemic played exceptionally well into this discourse. The populists were condemned for their crisis management as ‘incompetent chaotics’ (Pirates, September

2021), while democratic actors were presented as bringing a complex political programme built on competency acquired through expert knowledge.

III. Domestic Consequences

The two anti-populist coalitions SPOLU and PirSTAN gained a clear majority of 108 seats out of 200 in the Chamber of Deputies. They outright refused any collaboration with ANO and SPD and entered negotiations about the formation of a joint cabinet immediately after the announcement of the official electoral results. The new cabinet, led by Petr Fiala, was appointed on 17 December 2021 and passed the parliamentary vote of confidence on 12 January 2022. The preamble of the coalition agreement of the new government strongly and explicitly emphasised the attachment of the government to democratic values. It expressed the need to ‘deepen basic parameters of a functioning democratic free society’ and the principles of the Czech constitutional system ‘built on the separation of powers, parliamentary democracy based on the free competition of political forces and respect for human and citizen rights and protection of minorities’ as well as the necessity to preserve the independence of the public service media (*Koaliční smlouva na volební období 2021–2025*, 2021). The agreement clearly confirmed the anti-populist basis of the collaboration of otherwise ideologically diverse political parties.

The Czech case is not an exception but a part of a broader trend across European countries in recent decades. Mainstream political actors use different strategies in response to the populist surge, often without framing themselves as anti-populists. However, once the populist forces come to power, anti-populist mobilisation is rarely a deliberate choice and ‘the confrontation is likely to become the default response of anti-populist actors’ (Stanley, 2016, p. 277). The formation of anti-populist reactions is well illustrated by the broad pre- and post-election coalitions in Slovakia after Mečiar’s governments in the 1990s (Kopeček, 1999), Poland following the rule of the populist government in the 2000s (Stanley, 2016), Italy in the 2010s (Zanotti, 2021), the Greek experience (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2019), and the more recent but less successful case of Hungary (Scheppelle, 2022).

Even if anti-populist politicians are successful, the long-term effects of their electoral strategy are more worrisome than comforting, especially regarding the stability of political parties and party systems. The main reason lies in the deeply divisive, antagonistic nature of populism (Hameleers and Fawzi, 2020) which drives the anti-populist reaction into highly polarising ‘confrontation by design’ (Stanley, 2016) and eventually leads to ‘pernicious polarisation’ in the system (Stavrakakis et al., 2018). In other words, anti-populism recapitulates populism’s Manichean rhetoric of the fight between the good and the bad (Mudde, 2017). In the Czech case, a half year after the election, a return to a more moderate, depolarised and policy-oriented political competition does not seem to be a likely outcome of the governing and opposition parties’ communications. On the contrary, the unprecedented inflation rates and the migration caused by the war in Ukraine have provided opportunities for both the intensification of ANO’s patrimonial protectionist populism and SPD’s nativist radical right populism (Císař and Štětka, 2016). At the same time, the parties of the SPOLU coalition have launched another campaign against the ANO party built on the party’s ‘dark sins’. When asked about the Presidential election in

January 2022, the coalition underlined 'anti-populist politics' as a major quality of the future president of the Czech Republic (Týdeník Forum, 2022).

The current government's policies will likely be influenced by the (neo-)liberal economic agenda shared by most of the five governing parties. In particular, we can expect an increased emphasis on individual responsibility and limited social expenditures (although to some extent probably mitigated by the economically more centrist Pirates). However, the government's preference for austerity measures amid economic difficulties may open (without effective social policies) a window of opportunity for protectionist policy alternatives and consequent counter-mobilisation. The electoral disaster of the social democrats and communists, the two parties that dominated the left part of political space for more than 30 years, left voters who have been hardest hit by inflation unrepresented. A move of ANO towards a left-wing, eurosceptic variant of populism similar to the development of the initially centrist SMER party in Slovakia (Marušiak, 2021) would be a logical step in the ideological and electoral trajectory of the party. Similarly, the strengthening of economic protectionism and welfare-chauvinism of SPD may be another part of the restructuring of the party system after the 2021 election, moving the Czech populist radical right closer to its West European counterparts (Otjes et al., 2018).

Further, the government of ideologically diverse parties united mainly by anti-populism may produce instability. In particular, there are important differences in socio-cultural terms, especially between the Pirates and the rest of the coalition. Just a few months after the election, the issue of enactment of same-sex marriages (the Czech Republic only allows 'registered partnerships', guaranteeing fewer rights for same-sex couples than marriage) has been opened by the Pirates and strongly opposed by the Christian Democrats who claimed that they would propose the constitutional protection of marriage as the 'union of a man and a woman'. However, an emphasis on the issues where they have ownership is a typical strategy for junior coalition partners (Klüver and Spoon, 2020). Still, the fact that populist parties are the only opposition parties in the parliament leaves little space for alternative coalition arrangements.

IV. European Implications

As shown above, one of the defining ideational features of the anti-populist mobilisation was a firm rejection of the alleged pro-Russian and pro-Chinese orientation of the populist actors and, on the contrary, a defence of a clear pro-Western, pro-EU and pro-NATO attachment. While the populist parties (the radical right SPD in particular) and the communists have flirted with a possible Czeexit, the electoral victory of SPOLU and PirSTAN signifies that the questioning of Czech membership in the EU is not on the table right now. Nevertheless, the general pro-EU stance of the governing parties by no means indicated unconditional support for the (federalist) trajectory of the EU. On the contrary, one of the most important (yet suppressed during the campaign) dividing lines within the anti-populist camp concerns the attitudes of political elites towards European integration: the soft-eurosceptic and anti-federalist ODS on the one side, and the euro-pragmatic or even euro-enthusiastic remainder of the governing parties (Havlík, 2011) on the other side. We can expect, especially in the shadow of the ongoing Russian aggression in Ukraine, a strong emphasis on the need for collaboration at the EU level, however, within the limits of a push towards (further) federalisation of the EU.

The continuing strong presence of party-based euroscepticism in politics and the public's lukewarm opinion on the EU means that the Czech Republic has remained outside the eurozone. However, the post-COVID high-inflation rates² bring questions about the economic advantageousness of the preservation of the Czech crown that stood in the centre of the highly pragmatic European discourse of the Czech political elites (Haughton, 2009). The public debate about the euro has been limited to the stalling argument ('not yet, we should wait'). It should not come as a surprise that the government manifesto does not mention the possibility of opening talks about the euro. Therefore, when the four pro-European governing parties (TOP 09, KDU-ČSL, Pirates and STAN) re-opened the discussion about Czech membership in the eurozone in Spring 2022, this caught many by surprise. Though the adoption of the euro is not likely during this electoral term, the economic opportunity structures opened for the pro-European parties to build on the pre-election anti-populist discourse has moved the Czech Republic the closest it has been to the euro since accession.

One of the most visible, or perhaps the loudest, elements of the Czech participation in the EU in recent years has materialised throughout the Visegrad group, that is, the collaboration of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The outright refusal of the migration quotas alongside the illiberal swerve in Hungary, Poland and, to some extent, in the Czech Republic (Bustikova and Guasti, 2017) have turned the Visegrad Four countries into the 'enfants terribles' of European integration. The results of the election had a significant impact on the prospects of Visegrad co-operation at the EU level. The electoral victory of pro-democratic and pro-Western anti-populist forces came as a major blow to Visegrad co-operation, which was previously based on close personal relations between top politicians. Although there are still pragmatic references to it made by Prime Minister Fiala and others, the de-democratisation of Hungary and its stance towards the war in Ukraine undermined Visegrad collaboration and strengthened the inclination of Czech foreign and European policy towards bilateral relationships with Poland and Slovakia. This was facilitated by strong Polish opposition to Russia and traditionally warm relations with Slovakia.

The electoral victory of the anti-populist coalitions followed by the Russian-Ukrainian war also determines most of the content of the Czech presidency of the EU in the second half of 2022. The pro-Western and anti-Russian ideational basis of the anti-populism has been translated into new presidency priorities and reinforcement of the already existing ones. Energy security and the need to increase the independence of the EU member states from Russian gas and oil is one of the issues whose salience has increased. Given Czech dependence on Russian oil and gas in particular, it will be at the centre of attention in its upcoming EU presidency. The flow of millions of Ukrainian refugees to the EU has also increased pressure on finding common ground for a more long-term solution. Indeed, Petr Fiala already confirmed that migration policy would be one of the most prioritised issues of the Czech presidency. Similarly, the Czech presidency will seek to resuscitate the discussion about the EU defence capabilities and emphasise the need for an effective strategy in the field of cybersecurity. Although the Czech presidency will (have to) continue with the already existing agenda, the issues with the potential to divide the programmatically

²The annual inflation rate reached 13.2 per cent in the Czech Republic in April 2022, making it the third highest inflation rate among the EU member countries.

broad coalition will likely be less prioritised. Two of these issues are gender equality and anti-climate change policies, although the latter may be pushed forward by the war in Ukraine.

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