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Regional and Senate Elections, Government Crisis, and the Fate of the SPOLU Coalition

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Summary

In politics, only a few rules apply universally, regardless of time, place, or circumstances. The first rule states that power belongs to those who make decisions. The second rule establishes that others must accept these decisions. And the third rule is that the one who holds power decides, and the others follow. However, in the end, they will inevitably face a situation where they must defend their position against those who seek to take their place in making decisions. This is the iron rule of politics, which naturally does not spare even the Czech Republic. According to numerous indications, Petr Fiala, the current Prime Minister and leader of the strongest government party, finds himself in the third phase. Let us now analyze the current post-election situation step by step.

Key Takeaways

- The regional and Senate election results were not favorable for the government parties and the Pirates. This is a clear signal that the bond with their supporters from 2021 is gone.
- Petr Fiala took a radical but measured step by dismissing Ivan Bartoš over issues with digitalization, to demonstrate who holds authority within the coalition.
- However, keeping Jan Lipavský in the government has sown seeds of conflict within ODS, which could ultimately have fatal consequences for Fiala.

Regional and Senate Elections as a Catalyst

Fiala's statement on Saturday, September 21, 2024, that the regional elections for ODS cannot be considered "a success, but not a complete failure either" (Brodničková, 2024) will likely enter the golden collection of Czech political quotes, similar to Václav Klaus's "non-victory." Betting on calm and pretending nothing happened works only if at least part of the public buys into this narrative—something that is highly doubtful.

Just look at the results of the regional and, especially, the Senate elections. The opposition movement ANO succeeded in a way we haven't seen in regional elections since 2000. Finding any positives for the government camp under such circumstances is challenging. In 2008, when ČSSD managed to win in all regions¹ with 35.85% of the votes and 280 mandates (41.48% of all seats), the newspapers headlined it as an "orange tsunami," Jiří Paroubek was on top, and the collapse of Topolánek's government during the EU presidency was looming. This year, ANO gained 35.38% and secured 292 mandates (42.63% of seats). In the Senate elections, it achieved its strongest results since 2012 with 9 senators, 3 of whom succeeded in the first round. What message can the average voter of the 2021 Five-Party Coalition draw from this? Probably not that it's "not such a complete failure."

Regional elections in 2024 mean something entirely different than they did in 2008. Back then, the election cycles meant that regional elections took place almost two years before the parliamentary ones. For the government, these elections served as a litmus test of public sentiment mid-term, at a time when there was still room to correct, push forward, or at least grasp issues rhetorically. After the Nagyová scandal and the early elections in 2013, the gap between regional and parliamentary elections shortened to just one year, making the regional elections less of a mid-term check and more of a final warning for the government. And after the second round of the Senate elections, a red alert must have flashed at the ODS headquarters.

Fiala Caught in a Tight Spot

In response to the disappointing results for ODS, the Prime Minister attempted to emphasize the exceptional outcome in the South Bohemian Region during a press conference. With a total of 47.51% for Martin Kuba's candidacy, it is indeed a remarkable achievement, and a single-party government is quite a rarity among regional leaderships. However, Kuba was not willing to share this success with the central leadership and boldly stated, "This is not the result of nationwide ODS efforts; this is the work of one specific team. It's the sum of our years of work." (Marek, 2024). This is a clear delineation from the current leadership, with whom the South Bohemian leader has several unresolved issues.

The first problem is, of course, the existence of the SPOLU coalition. In the past, Kuba has not hidden his belief that the coalition with TOP 09 and the Christian Democrats is more of a burden than a significant advantage for ODS, especially after winning the elections in 2021. Kuba is not alone in this view. For the average ODS member, looking at public opinion polls where both coalition partners achieve low single-digit percentages and appear at the bottom of the graph among non-parliamentary entities, the question inevitably arises as to why the coalition should survive into the next election period. Moreover, ODS's gains are not substantial enough to justify "feeding two extra mouths."

The second problem lies in the government's actions and the inconsistency between the originally promised reforms and the reality of day-to-day governance. Critics (including, but not limited to, Kuba)

¹ Except for Prague, where regional elections are not held.

are troubled by the excessive concessions made to coalition partners' interests—not only within SPOLU, but also to STAN and especially the Pirates—where ODS is seen as sacrificing its liberal-economic foundations in favor of socialist redistribution, taxation, and bureaucratization. These are criticisms that Fiala had to address following the electoral debacle, and he responded with a plan: a government reconstruction.

Bartoš Out, Pirates Overboard

The plan, which in its original form probably seemed promising, was quite simple: dismiss Bartoš due to digitalization issues, appoint a new Pirate of their choosing, and then put pressure on them until the elections. If the Pirates left the coalition as a result, it wouldn't be a problem for ODS—for their voters, it would represent a win-win situation.

Fiala was well aware that the government had been criticized for a lack of ideological clarity stemming from the broad coalition of five parties, where the right-wing ODS, TOP 09, and KDU-ČSL were joined by the regional STAN and the left-liberal Pirates. This coalition, which had one extra member and four more parliamentary seats than needed for a majority, reflected the political landscape at the time. Pirates and STAN had entered the elections and the government only as a joint entity. Fiala had to accept the Pirates, which wasn't much of an issue amidst the post-election euphoria of securing a viable governing majority.

However, three years in power significantly changed the situation. The excitement over the promised “change” transformed into frustration and disillusionment. The government parties, with their unclear and primarily half-baked compromises, failed to convince their original supporters that they knew what they were doing. Meanwhile, the Pirates and STAN definitively split, running separately or in coalitions with other entities in the European and regional elections. Moreover, despite his strong declarations, Ivan Bartoš began to falter in his key agenda—digitalizing construction processes—which was his responsibility in the government. This allowed Fiala to execute a plan he had likely been preparing for some time, simply waiting for the right moment.

Citing problems within the Ministry of Regional Development, Fiala decided to dismiss Ivan Bartoš, demonstrating to the public—and especially to disgruntled ODS members—that he was firmly in control of the government. Fiala anticipated that the Pirates, weakened by a very painful defeat in the regional elections—where they lost 96 seats, the governor position for Rudolf Špoták in the Plzeň Region, and visible Senator Lukáš Wagenknecht in Prague 8—would no longer have the strength to fight for government positions. He expected that they would accept Bartoš's fate and nominate someone else in his place. But Fiala miscalculated. The Pirates, having already faced several slights and harsher remarks within the coalition, slammed their fists on the table and declared, “If Ivan goes, we all go.” And since it was a question of who leads and who follows, Fiala simply dismissed Bartoš, and the Pirates left.

Rebel Lipavský

This could have been the end of it, and Fiala's plan could have worked. However, the situation wasn't so simple. The Foreign Minister, Jan Lipavský, suddenly discovered that his allegiance to the Pirate Party wasn't strong enough to follow the other ministers out the door. This surprising move, revealing more about the internal dynamics within the Pirate Party than would be comfortable for them, caught many observers off guard. Even more surprising was the Prime Minister's response. Rather than being pleased to have one less contentious party in the coalition and using the vacant positions to reward

his party members or ambitious allies from the remaining coalition partners, Fiala somewhat inexplicably agreed to allow Lipavský to remain as Foreign Minister.

The real reasons behind this decision can only be speculated. The Prime Minister, as well as TOP 09 Chairwoman Markéta Pekarová Adamová, cited Lipavský's expertise and solid performance during his government tenure as the justification. Another argument was that changing such a key minister one year before the elections could be counterproductive. Another explanation could be that Lipavský's actions had gained favor with the Czech Republic's partners in the EU and NATO, leading to friendly recommendations that his continued tenure would be more than beneficial for furthering these relationships.

Whatever the actual reason may be, Fiala's move certainly didn't sit well with his party members and supporters. It's incredibly difficult to explain why a "rebel Pirate," willing to renounce his party without hesitation in pursuit of the position—essentially like a political Judas—should remain in office after all the other Pirates left demonstratively. The situation also creates the impression that ODS is incapable of producing a sufficiently experienced and respected figure to replace the current Foreign Minister. This lack of qualified individuals is a dismal outcome for a party that, for decades, dictated the political direction of the country. Another problem for ODS members is the ongoing power-sharing with those they disdain. ODS is now not only supporting TOP 09 and the Christian Democrats but also the liberal Lipavský.

All of this creates a precarious situation for Fiala's leadership and, consequently, the fate of the SPOLU coalition. The Prime Minister has already announced his intention to join forces with Pekarová and Jurečka (who has now been replaced by Výborný) once again. However, given the tensions within ODS, it's also possible that by next autumn, Petr Fiala may no longer be its leader.

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