



December 2024

Pirates on the New Wave

Jan Rovenský

Abstract

The change in the leadership of the Pirate Party under Zdeněk Hřib brings an ambitious strategy called the "New Pirate Wave," which aims to transform the party towards the political center, improve its electoral results, and keep it afloat. However, this change caused internal party tensions, resulting in the departure of influential members. The fundamental question remains whether this transformation will help the Pirates to regain their political influence, or whether it will ultimately lead to a further loss of identity and support from voters.

Key Takeaways

- Shift to the political center: Zdeněk Hřib seeks a broader electorate through reforms that are supposed to make the party more effective. However, this shift risks alienating the traditional progressive core of the party.
- Internal conflicts: Bylaws reform and a change of direction led to the departure of prominent members. This development may weaken the party's standing in the eyes of the public.
- Uncertain future on the political scene: The new strategy offers the potential to reach new voters, but the Pirates in the political center will have to cope with competition from other parties.

Introduction

The Pirate Party, once a symbol of the fight against the political establishment, is undergoing a fundamental transformation. The leadership was taken over by Zdeněk Hřib, who created a vision of the "New Pirate Wave." It aims to strengthen the party's effectiveness, move it to the political center, and reach out to a wider electorate, particularly, focusing on economic issues and improving the education system.

However, this strategic shift brought not only expectations but also an internal crisis. The departure of prominent members, including MEPs and other figures, raises questions about the party's future direction and whether it can maintain its uniqueness and identity. In addition, the Pirates have to face growing competition from established centrist parties and newly emerging progressive groups.

With electoral preferences dangerously close to the five percent threshold necessary to enter the Chamber of Deputies, the party's future is uncertain. Only time will tell whether Hřiba's strategy will be successful, but at this point, it is clear that the Pirates are facing a decisive test of their relevance, and the parliamentary elections in October 2025 will be a test of whether they can survive in high politics.

From Bartoš to Hřib

Under the leadership of Ivan Bartoš, the party managed to establish itself as a significant political force. It entered the Chamber of Deputies in 2017, and in 2021 its leader was considered for the post of Prime Minister. However, after a fratricidal ring fight on the candidate list they shared with the STAN movement during the 2021 elections, the Pirates won only four seats and their political influence declined significantly.

The decision to become part of Petr Fiala's cabinet became a more attractive option for the party than being in opposition to ANO and SPD. By joining the government, however, the Pirates lost their protest ethos and, additionally, became part of the political establishment that they had previously criticized and opposed. Despite this, however, polls gave them stable support, and during their government engagement, they were far from the threshold for entering the lower house.

The turning point came in 2024. First, the failure in the European Parliament elections, then the protracted problems with digitization management, and in the fall, the debacle in the regional and Senate elections, which became the impetus for Ivan Bartoš and the Pirates leadership to resign as party leaders. Bartoš's weakened position was immediately taken advantage of by Prime Minister Petr Fiala (ODS), who dismissed him from the post of Minister for Local Development, as a result of which the party members voted to leave the coalition and go into opposition.

In retrospect, it appears that the decision to leave the government was a mistake from a political and strategic point of view. The harsh criticism of Fiala's government, which they were part of for three years, does not appear credible. Moreover, the ANO and SPD movements have a lead in the opposition, while the Pirates, less than a year before the elections, must first stake out a space for themselves with their four deputies. Moreover, the party lost the much-needed media attention that it previously received thanks to which they could compensate for their weak position in the Chamber of Deputies. It would therefore have been more advantageous for the Pirates to have accepted the dismissal of their chairman and remained in the cabinet. There is a 2017 parallel, when former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka (ČSSD) dismissed the Minister of Finance and the chairman of ANO, Andrej Babiš, in violation of the coalition agreement. Even though there were calls to leave the government at that

time, the movement did not leave and was ultimately able to turn Babiš's dismissal to its advantage and use it before the elections, which it then won.

Six candidates have been nominated for the vacancy left by Bartoš: former Prague Mayor and current Deputy Mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib, former Senator Lukáš Wagenknecht, Senator Adéla Šípová, former Deputy Governor of Liberec Zbyněk Miklík, former Ostrava councilor David Witosz, and former Deputy Mayor of Prague 3 Štěpán Štrébl. In November 2024, Zdeněk Hřib became the new chairman, defeating Lukáš Wagenknecht by 454 votes to 401.

At that time, the Pirates had fallen close to the five percent threshold in the polls, which they last approached in the spring of 2022, and since then agencies have given them preferences of around 10%. According to the latest numbers released in November, the party had 5.9% (STEM), 6.5% (Median), or 5.7% (NMS) (Pohůdka, 2024).

“New Pirate Wave”

After he was elected chairman of the Pirate Party on November 9, 2024, Zdeněk Hřib immediately began a fundamental political transformation. He emphasized the need to abandon the culture wars and try to center the party so that it "starts to focus on the problems of ordinary people and focuses primarily on economic issues" and to focus on "increasing the quality and accessibility of education from kindergartens to universities," which, according to Hřib, should move the Czech Republic from the role of an assembly plant to the brain of Europe. According to the new leader, the Pirates are to become the dominant liberal force in the political center. A key part of the strategy is the New Pirate Wave – a reform of the statutes, which fundamentally changed the existing principles of the party based on direct democracy. This reform simplified and centralized decision-making processes and gave the Chairman greater powers, for example, in the compilation of candidate lists (Kopecký, 2024; Kopecký and Vachtl, 2024, Amendment to the Articles of Association, 2024).

The intention was to make it more efficient and to enable faster and more coordinated responses to policy challenges. However, this change provoked strong resistance, especially from the progressive wing, which criticizes the abandonment of original values such as transparency, direct democracy, and decentralization of power. Opponents also argue that the new direction strengthens internal elites while marginalizing the voices of ordinary members. The change of leadership and the reform of the statutes forced several dozen members across the country to leave, including well-known faces such as former MEP Marcel Kolaja, transport expert Ondřej Kališ, Turnov councilor Ivan Dřevíkovský and former vice-chairwoman Jana Michailid. MEP Markéta Gregorová and former MEP Mikuláš Peksa have decided to stay, but they are skeptical about a change of course (Křížová, 2024).

While Hřib sees the liberation from ideological positions and the transformation and centering of ideas as a chance to renew political influence, critics point out that without an emphasis on original values, the party is at risk of losing its identity and the support of traditional voters. In the pursuit of political influence, the Pirates may find themselves becoming the standard political force they have always defined themselves against. As a result, they will not differ from other parties in high politics; they will weaken and may not even get into the Chamber of Deputies in the fall. In any case, how these changes will manifest themselves in the coming months will be crucial for the future of the Pirates on the Czech political scene.

Risks and pitfalls

The Pirates' move towards the political center undoubtedly has the potential to appeal to a broader voter base, especially center-right voters who are looking for solutions to current issues such

as affordable housing, digitalization of the state, or environmental policy. This move could help them expand their current electorate, which has formerly been oriented more towards a progressive and liberal agenda, and strengthen their position on the Czech political scene. However, liberal voters tend to be fickle and easily switch to other parties when they are not satisfied with the current leadership or direction of the party. This pattern of behavior is commonplace in politics, which puts the Pirates in a situation where they are forced to constantly defend their relevance. It also shows that Generation Z is more conservative than the previous millennials who formed the traditional voter base. The party thus faces a double challenge: not only does it have to regain the trust of young people, but it also has to consider that it may no longer be their first choice. Hřib's politics, which focus on economic and pragmatic issues, may fail with this generation, weakening the Pirates' ability to appeal to a key segment of voters (Skalický, 2024).

It should also be remembered that the liberal center is an important, but not a key sector of the electorate, and this area is becoming tight. In competition with parties such as STAN and partly TOP 09, which also profile themselves as progressive and centrist and where former Pirate voters have begun to seek refuge, there is a risk that the Pirates will lose their identity and will be perceived as an unrecognizable part of a wider spectrum of centrist parties with an unusual name. Traditional voters, who supported the party mainly because of its emphasis on transparency, direct democracy, the fight against corruption, and the fight against the political establishment, may feel disappointed that the leadership now wants to focus on other topics (Skalický, 2024).

The emergence of new projects on the progressive left also increases the risks. For example, the successful coalition "Enough!" is forming in the Czech political space; the Progressive Czechia entity aims to be a counterweight to conservative forces. The project includes former Social Democrats Tomáš Petříček and Jiří Dienstbier, as well as Green Party politicians and some Pirates, including former MEP Mikuláš Peksa, who has remained a member of the party for the time being. The combination of prominent personalities from progressive politics may attract part of the original electorate of the Pirates, who may see in Progressive Czechia, a more consistent promotion of the values that the party represented in the past (Křížová, 2024). The departure of distinguished members and the bickering within the party represents not only an organizational weakening but also a symbolic problem that can have far-reaching consequences if it is not resolved quickly. Media-exposed conflicts weaken the party's credibility and increase the risk that it will be perceived by the public as chaotic and incompetent. This can lead to an outflow of traditional voters and difficulties in attracting new sympathizers who seek stability and professionalism.

In addition to the weakening of electoral support, the departure of experts can also be reflected in lower professional capacity. Pirates have long been associated with an expert agenda in IT, digitization, data protection, and transparency. The departure of specialists represents a loss of knowledge and contacts, which the party could otherwise use politically, for example, when creating a program or building female candidates.

The attitude of Chairman Hřib, who hesitates to run as a leader in the parliamentary elections, may also appear problematic. This does not strengthen the impression of a strong leader, especially when he claims that he wants to attract independent personalities to the candidate and put an economist at the head (Doubravová, 2024; Perknerová, 2024). The absence of a chairman on the candidate list is unprecedented in the Czech political environment which can be interpreted as a lack of responsibility or interest in the active leadership of the party. This unclear strategy can cause disorientation not only of voters but also of the members themselves, further impairing the overall effectiveness and cohesion of the Pirates.

Conclusion

The transformation of the Pirate Party under the leadership of Zdeněk Hřib is a key moment in the history of this originally protest party. His “New Pirate Wave” aims not only to strengthen the organizational structure and bring the party closer to more traditional political models but also to redefine program priorities towards economic and educational issues that can appeal to a wider spectrum of voters. This move has the potential to bring greater stability and ensure the survival of the Pirates in a scene that is increasingly crowded with centrist and liberal entities.

On the other hand, the departure from the founding ideals of transparency, direct democracy, and decentralization has been met with resistance not only from within the party but also among traditional voters. The departure of key figures, together with internal contradictions and the alienation of young voters, pose serious challenges for the future. Moreover, the move towards the political center puts the Pirates in direct competition with established parties such as STAN and TOP 09.

In a political liberal center where voter support is continually shifting, the party will have to not only regain the trust of its traditional voters but also effectively reach out to new groups before the parliamentary elections. The Pirates’ future will depend on their ability to find a balance between pragmatic reforms and preserving the core values that once made them a unique political entity. Hřib’s strategy offers hope for renewal, but its success is still uncertain. Voters will decide next year whether the “New Pirate Wave” will be a necessary rescue or a path to oblivion.

References

- Doubravová, B. (2024, 9. 11.). „Nový šéf Pirátů Hřib nechce kandidovat do sněmovny. Radši najděme ekonoma, říká.“ Aktuálně. <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/novy-sef-piratu-hrib-nechce-kandidovat-do-snemovny-radsi-naj/r~f6e595f49ec211efa1910cc47ab5f122/>
- Kopecký, J. (2024, 9. 11.). „Hřib chce Piráty jako hlavní liberální stranu na politickém středu.“ iDnes.cz. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/pirati-volba-predsedy-wagenknecht-hrib-liberalni-stredova-strana.A241109_102545_domaci_kop
- Kopecký, J. Vachtl, J. (2024, 9. 11.). „Hřib: Zaměříme se na ekonomiku a běžné lidi. Kulturní války upozadíme“. iDnes.cz. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/rozhovor-s-novym-predsedou-piratu-zdenkem-hribem.A241109_182809_domaci_kop
- Křížová, I. (2024, 12. 11.). „Vlna odchodů od Pirátů nekončí“. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-vlna-odchodu-od-piratu-nekonci-uz-nebudeme-unikatni-zni-ze-strany-264281>
- Perknerová, K. (2024, 18. 11.). „Nevylučuji, že budu kandidovat do sněmovny, řekl v debatě Deníku šéf Pirátů Hřib“. Deník. https://www.denik.cz/z_domova/zdenek-hrib-pirati-debata.html
- Pohůdka, P. (2024, 21. 11.). „Volební průzkumy pro volby do Poslanecké sněmovny“. E15. <https://www.e15.cz/volby/aktualni-volebni-pruzkumy-preference>
- Skalický, M. (2024, 12. 11.). „Voliči i straníci zvedají kotvy. Hřib má za úkol zlomit „prokletí liberálních stran“ iRozhlas.cz. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/volici-i-stranici-zvedaji-kotvy-hrib-ma-za-ukol-zlomit-prokleti-liberalnich_2411120600_nel
- Změna stanov. 2024. Piráti. https://a.pirati.cz/cf/2024-11/4_%C3%9Aprava%20vnit%C5%99n%C3%AD%20organizace.pdf

Author



JAN ROVENSKÝ

Analyst

He graduated from the Faculty of Arts of Charles University, majoring in English and Political Science, and in 2008 he received his PhD in Political Theory from the LUISS Guido Carli University in Rome. For fifteen years he worked at the daily Právo, where he first worked in the foreign editorial office. Since 2009 he has worked in the political department, from 2018 to January 2021 as deputy editor-in-chief. Since February 2021, he has been the media advisor to the chairman of the ANO movement.

Publisher



INSTITUTE FOR POLITICS AND SOCIETY

The institute's mission is to improve the quality of the Czech political and public environment through professional and open discussion and the creation of a lively platform that names major problems, develops their analysis and offers recipes for their solution through the cooperation of experts and politicians, international conferences, seminars, public discussions, political and social analyses available to the entire Czech society. We are convinced that open expert discussion and understanding of the nature and causes of individual problems are a prerequisite for any successful solution to the problems of contemporary society.



Martinská 2, 110 00 Praha 1



+420 602 502 674



www.politikaspolecnost.cz



office@politikaspolecnost.cz