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## Small Yet Loud: Minor Parties' Chances Before the General Election

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### Summary

The approaching elections in the Czech Republic are prompting new strategies among smaller parties, which continue to grapple with the obstacles posed by the electoral system. While some are forming formal alliances (such as SPOLU), others are resorting to informal pacts to circumvent the high electoral thresholds. This practice has sparked legal disputes and raised concerns about the future stability of Parliament. The outcome could be an unprecedentedly fragmented Chamber of Deputies.

### Key Takeaways

- Smaller parties are making use of various types of alliances – both formal and undeclared – to improve their chances of entering the Chamber of Deputies. This approach allows them to circumvent strict electoral rules (the so-called additive thresholds), but at the same time, it is giving rise to legal disputes.
- Pre-election polls suggest that most coalitions involving smaller parties are likely to win seats in Parliament. This could result in a record number of entities represented.
- In some cases, the courts have criticised the conduct of parties engaged in undeclared alliances. The final word will rest with the Constitutional Court. It is also likely that we will see a lawsuit at the Supreme Administrative Court challenging the overall validity of the elections.

The elections are approaching, and so far, it does not appear that the events of 2021 will be repeated. Previously, due to the balance of power and the specific mobilisation of voters in historic city centres, an unprecedented situation arose; almost one-fifth of valid votes fell below the five per cent threshold. While the liberal and centre-right parts of the political spectrum responded to calls for unity — leading to the creation of the SPOLU and PirSTAN coalitions — the left-wing and extra-parliamentary forces, hampered by fragmentation and the dominance of the ANO movement, were left standing outside the Chamber of Deputies.

This year, representatives of SPD, KSČM, SOCDEM, and other smaller non-parliamentary groups have taken the lesson to heart, forming several alliances that could ultimately help minor parties win seats in Parliament. What are the prospects for small parties in this year's elections? Why have they chosen forms of cooperation outside the classic symmetrical coalition? Moreover, what might this mean for the new Chamber of Deputies? These are the questions we will explore in today's text.

## What is a small party?

The simplest definition, formulated in a so-called numerical way by Peter Mair, regards small parties as those that meet two conditions: participation in at least three parliamentary elections and electoral support between one and fifteen per cent (Novák, Lebeda 2004: 293). A typical example would be the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) throughout its post-1989 existence (in cases where it stood for Parliament independently).

The potential strength of small parties stems primarily from the type of political system in which they operate. In parliamentary systems with proportional representation, their influence can be decisive. If a small party acts as a "hinge party", meaning its orientation and position within the party system allow it to form coalitions with larger partners both on the left and the right. In that case, it can become a kingmaker and its importance may grow dramatically. This is, for instance, the case of the aforementioned KDU-ČSL.

By contrast, in presidential systems using majoritarian elections, the position of small parties is considerably more difficult. For example, a Czech reader is likely unfamiliar with the US Libertarian Party, which has existed since 1971 and, with 722,000 members, is among the largest parties outside the Democrats and Republicans.

Some political scientists (e.g., Arend Lijphart) view small parties as a crucial aspect of the democratic process, as they reflect society's diverse political inclinations and provide representation for voters who, for various reasons, do not support larger or broader formations. Extensive comparative studies show that the number and size of parties depend on the salience of social cleavages. In states deeply divided along national, religious, or ethnic lines (so-called segmented societies), the existence of a greater number of small parties is more likely than in other places.

Take Belgium and the Netherlands: in the 2024 Belgian elections, only the New Flemish Alliance (N-VA) won more than 15 per cent of the vote; all other parties can be regarded as small. A similar situation exists in the Netherlands, where of the 15 parliamentary parties, only three (PVV, GL/PvdA, and VVD) can be considered major, while the others fall into the category of small-parties.

In the Czech Republic, small parties have consistently played a significant role in government formation. Apart from the period of the Opposition Agreement, every government has had to include more than one party. Despite attempts such as Mirek Topolánek's or Andrej Babiš's first cabinets, prime ministers ultimately had to seek support from smaller actors. The small party most frequently involved in forming governments since 1989 is the KDU-ČSL. It has been part of the cabinets of Václav

Klaus (both terms), Josef Tošovský (through ministers Lux, Svoboda, and Výborný), Vladimír Špidla, Stanislav Gross, and Jiří Paroubek, the second cabinet of Mirek Topolánek, Jiří Rusnok (through nominee Podivínský), Bohuslav Sobotka, and finally Petr Fiala. Thanks to its modest but stable support, KDU-ČSL can be regarded as an almost textbook example of a small party. Today, for instance, a similar position is held by the Pirates or the Greens.

## Coalitions at Every Turn

This year has seen an absolute boom in coalitions. For example, SPOLU is a classic pre-election alliance of ODS, TOP 09, and KDU-ČSL. The arrangement is crucial, especially for the smaller parties TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL, which would probably struggle to reach the necessary five per cent on their own.<sup>1</sup> A joint label reduces competition among the individual members, creates the impression of a large, strong, monolithic bloc, to some extent conceals ideological differences, and at the same time sets new mobilisation themes — for instance: Babiš is pulling us towards Russia and wants to turn the Czech Republic into Slovakia or Hungary. Because it is a formal coalition, SPOLU must win at least 11 per cent of the vote.

It is worth recalling the Four-Coalition, when in 2001 KDU-ČSL, the Freedom Union, the Democratic Union, and the Civic Democratic Alliance agreed to cooperate; in the 2002 elections, it was already known as the Coalition of KDU-ČSL and US-DEU. Among projects that were considered but never realised, one can mention the planned cooperation between KDU-ČSL and STAN before the 2017 elections. Although the coalition had been officially announced, the Christian Democrats ultimately rejected it because the party leadership saw the then requirement of at least 10 per cent of the vote as too great a challenge.

Another category is the so-called undeclared coalitions – a kind of compromise and, to some extent, a way of circumventing electoral law. Typically, the “home” party (i.e., the one after which the list is named, and which hosts the others) has an overwhelming advantage. This form of cooperation was once common. For example, in 2010, TOP 09 and STAN, when STAN and SLK candidates appeared on the TOP 09 ticket, “with the support of Mayors”. A similar arrangement appeared three years later, when Karlovy Vary Civic Alternative (KOA) and the Citizens for Budějovice Movement (HOPB) joined TOP 09, STAN, and SLK. The TOP 09 list for 2013 thus included 224 TOP 09 members (65%), 79 STAN (23%), 30 independents (9%), six SLK (2%), and two each from KOA and HOPB (1% each). It should be noted that if this had been a formal coalition of five entities (TOP 09, STAN, SLK, KOA and HOPB), “TOP 09 and Friends” would not have entered the Chamber of Deputies, as with 11.99 per cent of the vote they would have failed to meet the then requirement for four- and five-member coalitions, which stood at an astronomical 20 per cent.

A similar approach is being taken this year, for instance, by STAN, whose candidate list consists of 233 party members (68%), 12 members of SLK (3%), two candidates from KOA, one from East Bohemians, one from the association JsmePRO!, and 94 independents (27%). The Pirates and Greens have also taken this route, with 270 Pirate candidates (79%), 31 Greens (9%), one candidate from the Mourek party, and 41 independents (12%).

A much-discussed candidate list is that of SPD, which, despite being presented at campaign rallies as the JO! coalition, is formally still a single-party list — similar to the arrangements TOP 09 had

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent survey that included the parties of the SPOLU coalition individually was conducted by Kantar between 17 March and 4 April 2025, where both TOP 09 and KDU-ČSL each received 3% (Kantar 2025: 14).

with STAN and SLK in 2010 and 2013. Its composition includes 330 SPD members (96%), seven independents (2%), and two candidates each from the Free Citizens' Party, Trikolora, and PRO.

More examples can be found, particularly among new and less promising formations that struggle to convince enough people to fill the required number of seats on their lists. Among new entrants, the party Volt Czechia deserves mention as an attempt to establish a single major pro-European party with national branches. The composition of its list shows that out of a total of 95 candidates, 48 are party members (51%), 44 have no political affiliation, and three are candidates from the Liberal Alliance of Independent Citizens (LANO).

The final form of a “coalition–non-coalition” is the approach chosen by STAČILO. Ahead of the elections, a new entity, Stačilo!, was created as a classic party to host the candidacies of six other organisations. Its composition is unusual: the home group STAČILO has only 41 candidates (12%), whereas much greater representation is held by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM) with 155 candidates (45%). Other integrated entities include SOCDEM (37 candidates; 11%), the Czech National Social Party (24; 7%), the Moravians (nine; 3%), three candidates from the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (not to be confused with KSČM), one representative of the United Democrats – Association of Independents, and 72 non-affiliated candidates (21%).

## Court Battles and Murky Pre-Election Results

Before the elections, Volt Czechia filed motions with regional courts seeking to annul the registration of the candidate lists of SPD and Stačilo!, arguing that they constituted undeclared coalitions (iRozhlas.cz 2025). Přísaha took a similar step, complaining about an alleged “pseudo-coalition” of the Pirates and the Greens in the Ústí nad Labem Region (ČTK 2025a).

It is clear, however, that Volt's initiative was more about using the courts for pre-election publicity. Even the most optimistic observer would hardly expect a party with negligible support — and an even slimmer chance of entering the Chamber of Deputies — to threaten the existence of undeclared coalitions. Volt is almost sure to fare badly (our estimate is a maximum of 20,000 votes), regardless of whether the Court were to ban the disputed lists.

Paradoxically, it is a newcomer (Volt) criticising a practice which, although controversial, has long been established in Czech elections — and doing so at a time when it is itself standing in a similar form of cooperation (see above), as it did previously in the 2024 European Parliament elections.<sup>2</sup> The lawsuit is also undermined by the fact that Volt challenged only its ideological rivals (SPD and Stačilo!), while ignoring other undeclared coalitions of ideologically closer actors (e.g., STAN or the Pirates), even though the ratio of home party members to invited candidates is less balanced there than in SPD and the “JO! pseudo-coalition”. Even a layperson could easily get the impression that this is less about “levelling the playing field” and cleaning up grey areas of the electoral law, and more about a PR stunt designed to secure a few media mentions for an obscure party in the heat of the campaign — at the taxpayers' expense.

Because of the electoral system for Parliament, the courts had to rule on all 14 candidate lists (28 separate lawsuits — 14 against SPD and 14 against Stačilo!), as parties submit a different list in each of the 14 constituencies. Přísaha's complaint concerns only the Pirates and the Greens in Ústí nad Labem. The judgments of the regional courts are mixed. Importantly, not a single list has been annulled outright. While, for instance, the Ústí court dismissed the petition quite unambiguously,

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<sup>2</sup> Volt Czechia ran together with SEN 21.

the court in České Budějovice criticised the conduct of SPD and Stačilo! as an attempt to circumvent the law. However, it refrained from cancelling the lists in view of the imminent elections.

From the perspective of political science and electoral law, diverging interpretations are to be expected, depending on which reading an individual court adopts. On the one hand, the electoral law sets a higher threshold for coalitions and therefore assumes that any coalition will be treated as such. On the other hand, the law does not specify how a party must compose its list. Section 31(1) of Act No. 247/1995 Coll. states: “Candidate lists for elections to the Chamber of Deputies may be submitted by registered political parties and political movements whose activities have not been suspended, and by their coalitions; a list shall be considered a coalition list if all the political parties and movements standing jointly clearly designate it as a coalition on the list, state who its members are, and specify its name.” The law thus assumes it is entirely up to the parties whether they identify themselves as a coalition. If they do not, then legally they should not be treated as one, even if fifty different parties are standing under a single banner.

The differing judgments will also play a role in the Constitutional Court’s deliberations, as Volt Czechia has lodged a complaint there too. It is not clear whether the Court will decide before the elections. In 2024, the plenum took an average of 243 days to handle proposals (ČTK 2025b); however, in urgent cases, a ruling can be issued within weeks. It seems likely that the Court will refrain from intervening in this year’s contest, focusing instead on measures to prevent similar situations in the future — but nothing is certain.

If we try to anticipate the Constitutional Court’s decision, several scenarios emerge. One option is that the Court could strike down the additive electoral threshold as unconstitutional for all coalitions, declared and undeclared alike, thus closing the debate about what counts as a coalition and who should decide. Another possibility is that it will recommend clarifying the parts of the law dealing with the formation of coalitions. That is easy to say, but far harder to implement. Lawmakers might, for instance, decide that any list containing, in addition to members of the home party and independents, members of other parties is automatically a coalition. The consequences of such a solution would be disastrous for smaller parties, depriving them of the opportunity to ride on the back of stronger allies under more favourable conditions. Whether this would help or harm Czech democracy is debatable, as it might ultimately restrict centripetal tendencies and strengthen party headquarters at the expense of candidate quality.

A third option is that the Court may acknowledge the current situation is not ideal but leave discretion to party leaders as to whether their cooperation with other entities should be labelled a coalition, allowing current practice to continue. What is also quite likely is that the whole affair will culminate in a lawsuit before the Supreme Administrative Court challenging the overall validity of the elections. Since anyone can initiate such proceedings, the elections and the courts will likely remain in the spotlight long after 4 October 2025.

## A Fragmented Chamber of Deputies

What impact will undeclared coalitions have on the composition of the Chamber of Deputies? According to pre-election polls, most coalitions and “pseudo-coalitions” involving small parties are expected to enter Parliament. For SPD and its allies, this is almost certain; STAN with its satellites is polling around 10 per cent, the Pirates and the Greens are on a similar level, and in recent weeks Stačilo! has also been gaining strength. This means that the lower house could host representatives of more than 15 entities — a record since 2013 (ANO, ODS, STAN, SPD, Pirates, KDU-ČSL, Motorists,

TOP 09, KSČM, Stačilo, Trikolora, the Free Citizens, SLK, ČS-NS, PRO, and possibly others thanks to preference votes).

For comparison: in 2013, 13 parties were represented in the Chamber (ČSSD, KSČM, ANO 2011, TOP 09, ODS, KDU-ČSL, STAN, Dawn, Public Affairs, the Greens, SLK, East Bohemians, and OBČ\_2011); in 2017, there were nine (ANO, ODS, SPD, Pirates, KSČM, ČSSD, KDU-ČSL, STAN, and TOP 09); and in 2021, only eight (ANO, ODS, STAN, SPD, KDU-ČSL, TOP 09, Pirates, and SLK).

This year's situation, in which only a small proportion of votes are likely to be wasted, will probably result in a highly diverse and unwieldy Chamber. However, the sheer number of entities says little about how effective the new legislature will be. More important than the total number of parties is whether the government will include a new and unstable actor whose internal problems could threaten its majority.

History offers examples of smaller parties struggling to manage the transition from an extra-parliamentary environment to government responsibility. For instance, the Greens in Topolánek's cabinet or Public Affairs, whose participation in Nečas's government split them into two hostile factions. If a new cabinet depends on parties with low internal cohesion and weak leadership within their parliamentary group, serious problems may arise that could limit its room for maneuver.

A small party can be solid and disciplined — or, conversely, a source of major complications. It is therefore not its size but its internal unity and the professionalism of its representatives that tend to be the deciding factor.

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