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Municipal Elections in Prague

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Three Key Takeaways

- **Significant Decline of ODS** – The municipal elections revealed the continued weakening of ODS as an independent political brand. The party is losing support in many cities and increasingly relies on coalitions with other political parties to achieve electoral success.
- **Mixed Results for ANO** – While ANO strengthened its position in some cities, such as Plzeň, it suffered significant losses elsewhere. These results highlight considerable differences in the performance of its local party organizations.
- **The Rise of STAN and the President's Role** – According to the author, STAN is strengthening its position at the expense of ODS, complicating prospects for broader cooperation among opposition parties. The commentary also examines the debate surrounding President Petr Pavel's participation in the municipal elections and his responsibility to set an example for citizens.

Three stories from the municipal and Senate elections

The victory of STAN, the stumble of ANO, and the annihilation of ODS as an independent brand are the most common assessments that we can read in the domestic media. It is always difficult to objectively evaluate the result of local elections. Large metropolises such as Prague compete according to the same rules as the smallest municipalities hidden somewhere in the Czech forests and groves. While in village competitions it is more likely to look for "the willing one" who will take over the mayorship for the next four years, the competition in the metropolises is reminiscent of small parliamentary elections, in which nationwide influences, the government, the opposition and the civic-activist sector often enter into local affairs. After the final count of all districts, we can describe three stories that crystallized during the elections to municipal councils this year.

This year's elections were influenced by the political developments that permeates the whole country. The first big story of these elections is another painful fall of the ODS. The party, which used to be synonymous with right-wing politics of the 1990s, is looking for a way forward after the collapse of SPOLU. As the new chairman, Martin Kupka is having a hard time. The former press spokesman and star of municipal politics has not yet had time to transform into a bold right-wing leader and already has to explain why the party does not flourish at best, and sinks into the depths of oblivion at worst.

Since the spring, public opinion polls have indicated that the STAN movement is becoming the main opposition force. This is a very uncomfortable situation for the ODS, with profound effects both within the party and on its supporters and potential voters. The fact that the ODS failed to win seats on the Liberec city council, i.e. a right-wing stronghold, where it easily won 28.9% (2006) and 31.8% (1998), is just one of many unpleasant defeats. A similar example is Beroun, a town near Prague with a typical right-wing electorate, where in 2010 the ODS reached almost 30% and now the party has not been able to exceed the 5% threshold. The ODS can only win in coalitions with other entities, such as in Jihlava or Trutnov.

The problem for the leadership is precisely the structure of the results and the fact that the coalition is now the only chance to be at the top of the municipal council. Such a situation naturally strengthens those factions in the ODS, such as the group around former chairman Petr Fiala, which see broad right-wing coalitions such as SPOLU as an ideal solution to regain power and influence. Logically, this makes sense, especially if we analyze the results of independent ODS candidates versus coalitions with partners, but on the other hand, this potentially weakens the independent brand of the ODS, which is a very sensitive issue for many party members – especially those who remember the golden era of the 1990s. A warning sign for the ODS leadership should be a situation where the blue-bird brand has become rather a nuisance for some locally successful politicians, and for local elections they prefer to disguise themselves as independent or new entities that do not subscribe to the ODS very much. An example is the ODS in Prague 10. During the election campaign, the current mayor Martin Valovič was very careful not to promote his political affiliation. The voter could thus get the impression that the "Together for Prague 10 (The Best City in the World)" candidate is a multi-party coalition, although in fact it is a purely ODS list. This game of hide and seek is beginning to resemble the situation in the ČSSD, where local politicians also preferred to rebrand so that the nationwide brand would not take away some votes.

There is a second story associated with the identity crisis of the ODS – the contradictory results of the ANO movement. The case of Pilsen is very interesting for the Czech domestic political scene in several respects. Firstly, ANO has been able to grow significantly from a decent 27.26% in 2022 to 31.69% this year, as one of the few larger cities. The reason for the success is not too difficult to find. The performance of the current coalition led by Mayor Roman Zarzycki has been very good, with even voters from the opposition parties having to admit that the city is starting to actively address pressing issues such as homelessness, security and integration of foreign workers. The mayor

thus fulfilled the vision of the ANO movement leadership about proactive management of cities, and there are 18 seats and a new coalition with the PRO Pilsen and STAN movements. Secondly, another interesting situation took place in the beer capital. In Senate district No. 9 Pilsen-City, ANO candidate Lucie Kantorová won by a landslide over the long-time ODS senator and mayor of the Pilsen 2 district, Lumír Aschenbrenner, who did not advance to the second round. His downfall on home turf was probably caused by the candidacy of Karel Řehka, the former Chief of the General Staff, who immediately after the end of his career in the Army of the Czech Republic joined the political struggle in the colors of the STAN movement and managed to win over a large part of the senator's supporters. This, of course, has its political consequences. Aschenbrenner has already said that he has no plans to officially support Řehka against Kantorová, which will benefit Řehka's challenger in the second round.

And here the whole story is connected with the nationwide development. Too often, the ODS loses to STAN candidates, which the party members do not like, and further progress in building some form of SuperSPOLU between ODS, TOP 09, KDU-ČSL, STAN and perhaps the Pirates is thus unlikely and will fail in a situation where STAN profits at the expense of ODS. SuperSPOLU may be created in the media, but without the participation of the ODS, which in itself will make much more sense – from the point of view of the ideological proximity of potential coalition entities.

The case of Pilsen also to some extent undermines the interpretation of the results of the local elections as a blanket weakening of ANO in larger cities due to the policy of the ruling coalition. ANO lost where we would expect stable results or moderate growth, i.e. in larger cities in northern Bohemia and northern Moravia. The chairmen of ANO's local branches in towns such as Dvůr Králové nad Labem, Nový Bor, Litvínov, Cheb, Ústí nad Labem, Frenštát pod Radhoštěm, Holešov, Děčín, Kopřivnice, Zlín or Chomutov might like to frame their more than 10% drops as a negative externality of Andrej Babiš's government, but the increases in Krupka, Žatec, Jindřichův Hradec, Aš, Vyškov, Pilsen and Přerov disrupt this story in many ways. Rather, ANO will have to think about the governance structure of its regional and local branches, evaluate voter turnout in 2022 and 2026, analyze changes in the structure of voters and revise the strategy for the next municipality.

The third story is the now half-forgotten pre-election pickle with the participation/non-participation of the president. The question of whether the president should vote in the village of Černouček has been debated by almost everyone, from politicians and commentators to comedians and internet stars. What is certain is that a holiday for elections, that the president set with a fixed date, is simply not right. Even if the president votes in the smallest municipality, as the highest constitutional official, he simply has to set an example in all circumstances, especially in elections where the turnout does not consistently exceed 50%. Petr Pavel finally arrived in Černouček from Morocco at the insistence of his team, thus silencing some of the critics, but the reluctance and definitive absence of the first lady due to her holiday in the Canary Islands still leaves an unpleasant aftertaste from the whole saga. The paradox of the election will remain the fact that in the president's home municipality, where 219 citizens (including Petr Pavel) voted, the Motorists – the president's biggest critics – won a seat thanks to the success of Martin Král (MOTO) on the list of the Association of Independent Candidates ČERNOUČEK 2026.

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