

Democracy Digest: Czech Coalition Throws Pirates Overboard

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Elsewhere in the region, Stickergate in the Slovak parliament; ‘citizen patrols’ spread fear and loathing in Poland; and Hungary PM’s political director suffers perhaps terminal case of dontopedalogy.

It might not have been a major election, but the regional and senatorial ballot of last weekend has thrown the Czech government and five-party coalition’s unity into disarray. After the opposition ANO movement of former PM Andrej Babis won more than a third of the popular vote and came out first in 10 out of 13 regions, coupled with the disastrous performance of the liberal Pirate Party – which lost 96 out of its previous 99 regional council posts – the time came for some soul-searching within the governing majority. Longtime Pirate leader Ivan Bartos and the entire party leadership promptly resigned in the wake of their second electoral debacle of the year, but the future of the leftish party within the ruling coalition was soon put to rest. Bartos, who reportedly tried to push the Pirates’ priorities for the next 12 months before the general election, met with PM Petr Fiala on Tuesday morning, and all appeared well albeit tense. But a few hours and a phone call later, Fiala had sacked Bartos from his position as deputy-PM in charge of digitisation and regional development – and chaos ensued. Accusing Fiala of a treacherous stab in the back in disregard with the rules of political decency and of violating the coalition agreement, Pirate leaders called foul, said the PM had been secretly convinced by his ODS party’s most powerful barons – including Finance Minister Zbynek Stanjura – to get rid of their leader, and threatened to walk out of the coalition altogether. “Ivan Bartos told me today that the Pirates will leave the government,” Fiala announced after Wednesday’s cabinet meeting, while an internal vote is also expected to take place over the weekend. The Pirates’ departure would not put the coalition’s slim parliamentary majority in jeopardy, but it would play into ANO’s hands a year before the next general election, and lead to the exit of the Pirates’ two other cabinet ministers.

One of those ministers is Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky, a visible and strangely popular member of a stubbornly unpopular government. From New York this week, Lipavsky confirmed that should the Pirates walk out, he would go along but could also resign as a member of the party, showing solidarity with his colleagues while distancing himself from the political drama playing out in Prague. With Fiala continuing to heap praise on his cabinet’s top diplomat, pundits suggested Lipavsky is keeping the door open to re-enter the cabinet as a non-partisan after the break-up is complete. As fate would have it, also across the pond to attend the UN General Assembly this week is President Petr Pavel who, based on the institutional prerogatives of his office and good working relationship with the government, could have acted as moderator in the current crisis. Cautiously avoiding taking sides in the ongoing name-calling and finger-pointing, Pavel said he would meet with cabinet leaders on Monday. In New York, the Czech president said Ukraine should have “realistic” expectations about how to end the war with Russia, while calling for a reform of the UN Security Council. On Thursday, Pavel was headed to Chicago for a keynote speech in honour of historic Czechoslovak leader Tomas Garrigue Masaryk and to meet with the Czech community there.

‘Stickergate’ in the Slovak parliament; conflicts grow among coalition parties

Wednesday’s session in Slovakia’s parliament took an unusual turn when Andrej Danko, deputy speaker of parliament and leader of the far-right Slovak National Party (SNS), called on Progressive Slovakia MP Lucia Plavakova, who identifies as queer, to remove a rainbow sticker from her laptop on the grounds that parliamentary rules prohibit MPs from using visual aids to promote political parties or advertisements. Plavakova promptly refused and Danko expelled her from the debating chamber. Meanwhile, his party colleague and MP Rudolf Huliak referred to Plavakova as a “bitch” during a press conference, adding that she is “not a woman”. Huliak has refused to apologise for his attack on the MP. The issue of stickers overshadowed the planned debate on measures to reduce the excessive public finance deficit, which was postponed until the following day. Plavakova filed a complaint over her expulsion, initially backed by MPs from Hlas, a member of the governing coalition alongside Smer and SNS. Danko called this support a “betrayal”. Later, Plavakova was expelled again for the same reason by Tibor Gaspar, another deputy speaker and an MP from Smer, who is also a former police chief facing criminal charges. When Plavakova lodged a second complaint, Hlas MPs no longer sided with her. Plavakova and her party condemned Danko’s action as “outrageous”.

PM Robert Fico insists that all is well within his coalition despite open conflicts between his two partners, Hlas and SNS. At the heart of these disputes is the vacant position of speaker of parliament. According to the coalition agreement, the post belongs to Hlas, having become available after its party leader Peter Pellegrini became president in June. However, SNS leader Danko is vying for the role himself, leveraging attacks on Hlas and its ministers, such as Health Minister Zuzana Dolinkova. While Hlas accuses SNS of destabilising the government, Danko claims the opposite. He insists he doesn’t want to dismiss Dolinkova, despite publicly criticising her. Fico has also criticised Dolinkova by pointing to persistent problems in healthcare even though nearly 9 billion euros has been allocated to the sector this year. There are also disagreements over a consolidation package worth 2.7 billion euros, although the cabinet has approved it. How coalition MPs will vote on it remains to be seen. In another sign of disunity, last week when the coalition removed opposition leader Michal Simecka from his position as deputy speaker of parliament – an unprecedented move – three Hlas MPs refused to back it.



*A still from a video showing a civilian patrol organised by Bronimiy Polskiej Granicy (“We are defending the Polish border”) on the Poland-Belarus border.
Photo: Facebook*

‘Citizen patrols’ spread fear and loathing in Poland; audit confirms past visa irregularities

So-called “citizen patrols” set up to “defend” Poland from migrants are forming across Poland, media and human rights groups noted this week. While the phenomenon has been observed for several

months on the Polish-Belarusian border, an incident in September in which two Poles were beaten by four Colombians and one Argentinian has led to growing calls online to form such patrols across the country. Among those calling for mobilisation is MMA fighter Rafal Podejma, who in September posted an online video with the following appeal, sprinkled with expletives: “Can’t you see it? They are taking away our freedom. They are killing our brothers on the streets. They are raping our girlfriends. They are taking photos of our friends’ kids. This is our country and we’re not giving it away. So I appeal to you, let’s behave, let’s show them who we are.” In a recent incident, an anti-immigration protest and patrol were organised on Saturday in Zyrardow, a town near Warsaw where several factories are located, with the participants ultimately attacking a hostel where immigrant workers, including from Ukraine, had been living. Gazeta Wyborza later reported how, a few days after the attack, the majority of foreign workers had left the hostel and their jobs in Zyrardow, much to the disappointment of their Polish employers. “The emergence of these so-called ‘citizen patrols’ is very unsettling,” Lukasz Jakubowski from the anti-racist organisation Never Again told Wyborcza. “Their main goal is not to take care of Polish citizens as they declare, but to scare away migrants living on the territory of Poland. Authorities should react firmly to these events, especially when there is a threat of violence.”

A report by Poland’s Supreme Audit Office (NIK), leaked to Wyborcza this week, confirmed that large-scale irregularities in the issuing of visas to foreign workers were committed under the previous PiS government, as had been previously reported by Polish media. The report stated that “the actions taken by the foreign ministry... were unlawful, inappropriate and unreliable, and resulted in the mismanagement of public funds.” The irregularities reportedly affected some of the more than 366,000 visas issued to “citizens from Asian and African countries” under PiS as well as to Russian citizens. The issue had already been exploited by Donald Tusk’s party in the runup to the general election in October, and the PM once again jumped on the findings. “While our Polish soldiers and border guards risked their lives and health to defend us from the wave of illegal immigration organised by Putin and Lukashenko, the PiS government allowed entry, including in exchange for bribes, to 366,000 people from Africa and Asia,” Tusk tweeted on publication of the NIK report. Official data, however, shows that working visas issued under PiS went primarily to citizens of India, China and Turkey, a separate demographic than the migrants currently trying to enter Poland illegally via Belarus.

Another Magyar ex speaks out; Orbán’s political director puts foot in mouth

Hungary’s political soap opera around opposition leader Peter Magyar reached new heights this week. Magyar, whose TISZA party is trailing Fidesz by 5-6 points according to the latest polls, was again accused of being a “violent person”, this time by an ex-partner, Evelin Vogel, with whom he founded TISZA in the spring. Vogel gave an exclusive 50-minute video interview to Index (a pro-government website) in which she, as well as highlighting her own role in founding the party, revealed that she now “fears for the people who joined TISZA” because Magyar is simply not the person they all thought he was. She accused the MEP of being ill-tempered, rude and violent, often shouting at her and his party colleagues. In an abridged version, which ran almost simultaneously with the video interview on all pro-government media channels, she hinted mysteriously that “he is capable of anything” and practically portrayed him as a threat to society. Magyar was quick to respond on social media, accusing his ex of being paid by the government. Yet Magyar’s temper has been a hot topic in Hungary since his meteoric rise to political stardom this year. In a very personal interview in March that shed light on the intimacies of their marriage, his ex-wife, the former justice minister Judit

Varga, whose political career was holed by the presidential pardon scandal, also accused Magyar of verbal aggression. The two interviews ran along the same lines, spreading the same message that Magyar is psychologically unfit to lead. Critics suspect that both interviews were ordered and orchestrated by the government's propaganda machine to undermine Magyar's authority and support. The campaign has now been picked up by the prosecutor's office, which has asked the European Parliament to lift Magyar's political immunity in order to investigate his behaviour over the summer when he was involved in a fight in a Budapest bar.

Yet another self-inflicted wound for the governing camp. This time it was the turn of the prime minister's political director, Balazs Orban (no relation), to shoot himself in the foot and cause an uproar that could lead to his downfall. In an interview with friendly news site Mandiner, he questioned the wisdom of Ukraine fighting back against the Russian aggression given Hungary's experience of its 1956 revolution against Soviet rule. "Taking '56 as a starting point, we probably wouldn't have done what President Zelensky did two and half years ago, because it was irresponsible, because it was obvious that he had put his country on the defensive, that so many people had died," Orban said. "If we had been asked, we would not have advised it. Because we have learned that we have to be careful here, and we have to be careful with very precious Hungarian lives. You cannot just throw them away." This stands in stark contrast to how many in Hungary feel about the 1956 revolutionaries, who are cherished as heroes for sacrificing their lives in a doomed struggle for independence. Orban's comments are a blow to the Fidesz party, whose patriotic ethos and identity are built on sovereignty and the protection of Hungarians against all evils (mostly from Brussels). Political analyst Gabor Torok called Orban's words "the biggest political scandal of 2024"; opposition politicians called on him to resign; and Russia expert Andras Racz wrote on Facebook: "If Ukraine had not defended itself, it would have lost its independence and sovereignty. The very sovereignty that the Hungarian government has been so keen on lately." Racz said essentially the political director had admitted this government would not defend Hungary against a possible Russian attack. To make matters worse, Orban is also chairman of the Advisory Board of Hungary's Public Service University, which trains military officers whose main task would be to defend Hungary from an external attack.

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