



Dwindling Solidarity – Czechia’s Political Realignment Driven by the Division over Ukraine

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HIIA Analysis

Regular publication of the Hungarian Institute of International Affairs.

Publisher:

© Hungarian Institute of International Affairs, 2025.

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October 03, 2025

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DWINDLING SOLIDARITY – CZECHIA’S POLITICAL REALIGNMENT DRIVEN BY THE DIVISION OVER UKRAINE

In the final stretch of the October 3–4 elections in the Czech Republic, each party is trying to outbid the others, as they must win the trust of a dissatisfied public that in recent years has been forced to pay the price of the Fiala government’s missteps out of its own pocket. Although on the surface it may seem that the Czech economy has weathered the worst of the storm—inflation has eased, the koruna is stable, and unemployment remains low—the everyday experience of voters shows just the opposite: a higher cost of living, a declining standard of living, and increasing housing expenses. Czechs are increasingly unwilling to accept the coalition government’s excuses and are demanding genuine, effective solutions instead. Growing war fatigue and concerns about the long-term presence of Ukrainian refugees have only heightened the stakes of the election. In this climate, Andrej Babiš is positioning himself as the alternative, offering a pragmatic, sovereigntist approach that prioritizes Czech interests over costly arms deliveries and emphasizes the need to achieve peace as soon as possible. The public’s shifting attitude suggest that the country is on the verge of a political realignment—one that, with a Babiš victory, could usher in a new era not only in domestic but also in foreign policy.

THE PRICE OF SUPPORT – FATIGUE, SKEPTICISM, AND FRAGMENTATION IN RELATION TO THE WAR

Since the outbreak of the war, the Czech Republic has taken in the [most](#) Ukrainian refugees per capita, most of whom have been able to [find jobs](#) in the Czech labor market. The Fiala government, together with President

Petr Pavel, has supported Ukraine—the Czech government was also the initiator of [the ammunition shipment](#) aimed at supplying Ukraine with artillery shells, which several countries have joined. Within this framework, Ukraine has already received [3.5 million](#) large-caliber shells. The Ukraine issue is one of the foundations of the identity of the governing SPOLU coalition, which is trying hard to communicate these results as successes during the election campaign.

However, Czech voters do not appreciate this, as support for the SPOLU coalition, consisting of the civic democratic ODS, the Christian democratic KDU-ČSL, and the liberal conservative TOP 09, is currently in free fall (with a decline of 11.8 percent according to the [latest polls](#)), and support for ODS Prime Minister Petr Fiala has also [dropped sharply](#). As in other European countries, political preferences in the Czech Republic have clearly shifted to the right: This trend was evident in both the 2024 [European Parliament elections](#) and the subsequent [local elections](#), and the current elections will be no different. The strongest opposition party, ANO, led by Andrej Babiš, has been ahead in the polls for some time with a stable lead (with around [30 percent](#) support), while smaller right-wing parties also enjoy greater support than the current coalition, with a combined total of around 17 percent.

There are several socioeconomic processes behind this, but as in Poland, support for Ukraine and attitudes towards Ukrainian refugees living in the Czech Republic have changed, at least according to the [latest surveys](#). Czech society is essentially [divided into two camps](#) when it comes to Ukraine: One part of the population continues to support the country, while the other does not. The latter camp is the larger one, albeit only slightly. The issue of Ukrainian refugees already [divided](#) Czech society in 2023: about half of the population (51 percent) accepted their permanent stay in the Czech Republic, while the other half rejected it. The opinion of those who oppose their stay there is becoming increasingly firm and outspoken. Although the Czechs' attitudes towards Russia are mostly negative, this does not translate into strong military support for Ukraine: Public opinion on the matter is more passive and restrained, and the public does not feel responsible for Kiev's defense efforts.

In September 2023, slightly more than one-third of the population agreed that the Czech Republic should help Ukraine regain its lost territories, even if this would prolong the war. The majority—[nearly two-thirds](#)—believed that peace should be achieved as soon as possible, even if this meant leaving certain Ukrainian territories in Russian hands. The political parties in government did not really respond to the change in public opinion, instead emphasizing [further military support](#) for Ukraine in their rhetoric. In the current campaign, SPOLU links the issue to the Czech Republic’s international reputation, as does the liberal press that sympathizes with them: They argue that a change in government that results in a shift in how strongly Prague supports Kyiv could severely undermine the country’s international relations, lead to isolation, and set the country down a “Fico path” that would only exacerbate the current economic problems. Most voters do not believe this narrative, however.

HOW DID THE FIALA GOVERNMENT MISHANDLE THE CRISIS?

In addition to the fact that a significant part of society supports ending the war, attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees have also changed. In March 2022, the Fiala government passed the “Lex Ukraine” law, which gave Ukrainian refugees unrestricted access to the labor market and, among other things, unemployment benefits, healthcare, education, and living allowances. The geographic distribution of Ukrainian refugees was uneven: For example, in districts like Plzeň, Mladá Boleslav, and Prague, Ukrainian refugees accounted for up to [32 percent](#) of total employment.

Although their integration into the labor market has been smooth so far, there is a [growing](#) belief that the Czech Republic has taken in too many refugees, which is placing a serious economic burden on the country. In particular, concerns have been raised that the Ukrainians are too costly for the Czech Republic. If the country’s economic situation deteriorates, unemployment rises, or other economic problems hamper growth, it is likely that coexistence with Ukrainians already living there would become significantly more difficult, providing ammunition for more radical political organizations. An interesting aspect of the issue is that despite the fact

that large numbers of Ukrainian guest workers had already arrived to the Czech Republic after the breakup of Czechoslovakia (mainly from Transcarpathia, with a Transcarpathian address being a requirement), an increasing proportion of Czechs now believe that the cultural integration of the refugees has been unsuccessful. More recently, a [discussion](#) has emerged about how the Czech Republic should prepare for the scenario in which family members who have experienced the front arrive to join families already living in the country, bringing with them their traumas, problems, and integration challenges.

As in Poland, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees has also driven up housing costs. This problem has only been exacerbated by the misguided economic measures of the Fiala government: In the years following the pandemic, [inflation](#) in the Czech Republic was higher than the EU average, the consolidation package has still not managed to close the budget deficit, the shift away from Russian energy has in some cases [tripled](#) energy prices, and food has also become more expensive. The situation was not helped by the fact that various social contributions were reduced while the retirement age was raised. Despite the government's efforts to communicate that the large number of Ukrainian workers has benefited the Czech economy, GDP stagnated in 2023 and grew by only [one percent](#) in 2024.

CZECHS FIRST: BABIŠ'S PRAGMATISM REGARDING UKRAINE

Under the leadership of Andrej Babiš, the strongest opposition party, ANO, which is also the frontrunner in the current elections, takes a completely different approach to Ukraine than the governing parties. Babiš would [halt military support](#) for Ukraine, and he considers the NATO-targeted 5 percent defense spending [unrealistic](#) for the Czech economy, maintaining that only 2 percent is feasible. [According to Babiš](#), the Czech ammunition supply program is opaque, too expensive, and potentially corrupt, so he would terminate it and direct freed-up funds to "their own people." Regarding the attitude towards refugees living in the Czech Republic, Babiš previously said that after the war, all refugees should return home but later modified this by saying that those who fill jobs, work, and pay taxes are

needed. Although the party's [election program](#) does not specifically address the issue of Ukrainian refugees, it does have a section on migration that rejects the EU migration pact, proclaims zero tolerance for illegal immigration, and rejects parallel societies or communities disconnected from Czech culture in the country. Babiš also takes a much more pragmatic stance on Ukraine's integration: He does not support accelerated EU membership or NATO accession.

Smaller right-wing parties have also recognized the public's skepticism and fatigue toward Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees. The SPD, led by Tomio Okamura, for example, would [immediately end](#) all financial and military support for Ukraine and strongly opposes the country's EU or NATO membership (the party would also put the Czech Republic's own membership to a referendum). The Motorist Party (Motoristé sobě) won the trust of voters by [rejecting](#) the EU's green transition policy and criticizing the Green Deal, and it also takes the position that arming Ukraine will only prolong the war. The rise of these two political forces clearly shows that Babiš has strong legitimacy not only from the public, but also from potential coalition partners (and their voters) to pursue a more sober, pragmatic policy that puts Czech national interests first.

THE QUESTION IS NO LONGER HOW, BUT HOW LONG

What is certain is that the protracted war and the long-term presence of Ukrainian refugees is causing a kind of "fatigue" in Czech society, and these are primarily accompanied by political concerns. The solidarity that prevailed at the beginning of the war now seems to have significantly eroded. As a result, the logic of "we stand with Ukraine" is increasingly being replaced by the question of "who stands with us?" The shift in voter expectations clearly shows that economic and social difficulties take precedence over foreign policy loyalty. This phenomenon fits into a broader Central European trend. In Poland, Slovakia, and elsewhere, it is evident that social fatigue and economic problems are eroding unity in support of Ukraine. What makes the Czech case unique is the political fragmentation and the rise of right-wing parties, which make this transformation even more striking.

This is likely not just a temporary fluctuation but a structural realignment that will shape Czech political decisions and foreign policy over the long term. The question is no longer how the country should support Ukraine, but how long Czech voters are willing to bear the burden of support.

Babiš's rise to power could also redefine the Czech Republic's foreign policy orientation. While the current government represents an EU-conformist direction, a Babiš cabinet would likely place greater emphasis on Central European cooperation. In this sense, the V4 could regain importance, particularly on crucial issues such as energy security, the management of migration, and ending the war. The pragmatic economic interests and shifting voter preferences in all V4 countries may encourage these states to find common ground again, and the Czech Republic, led by Babiš, could play a key role in this.



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