

External Debacle—Domestic Chance

The interim government in Prague during the Czech EU Presidency 2009

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In the Czech Republic, the coalition government formed by Conservatives, Christian Democrats and Greens has been overthrown by a no-confidence vote at the end of March 2009. Since 8 May, a cabinet of government officials has assumed the official functions until early elections in mid-October—and this during the Czech EU Presidency. The approach of the opposition shows political irresponsibility and provincial narrow-mindedness. Even the former president and moral mentor of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel, condemned the opposition because of its stupidity and accused it of stabbing the government in its back.

The moment for the overthrow was most awkward. Yet, the installation of the multipartisan cabinet of government officials and the upcoming re-elections offer the Czech Republic the chance to finally constitute a capable government: a grand coalition of Conservatives and Social Democrats.

A constant claim in politics is for sustainability. The Czech Republic has satisfied this claim, since it has enduringly disgraced itself at European level. Nicholas Sarkozy and other core-Europeans of the nice, old Europe will laugh up their sleeves and will point to their warning words at the end of the “Grande Présidence.” On 24 March, the social democratic opposition (ČSSD) overthrew the coalition government led by the conservative Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek (ODS). He had to resign and from then on had only managerial responsibilities. The search for an interim government started—the Czech Republic had slithered head over heels into a tangible cabinet crisis which also had an impact on Europe: The domestic disempowerment of the Czech government has brought an interim presidency to the EU that is politically inexperienced and unknown in public.

The European Union seems to be without guidance. The last EU summit in Prague on the Eastern Partnership turned out to be a meeting composed of substitutes—an indication for the perception and ordering of priorities in other European capitals. Thereby, the political matters of the EU high-level meetings are

reduced in rank and the efforts of the Czech government regarding content are foiled.

The Czech Republic at Europe's forefront

Yet, at the beginning everything had looked different. After the Czech Republic had assumed the EU presidency on 1 January 2009, the government in Prague seemed to be well-prepared for the “challenge of the EU presidency,” against all prophecies of doom, and obtained acceptance—to the disapproval of president Václav Klaus, an avowed critic of the EU, who fulminated against the Treaty of Lisbon. However, the Czech parliament ratified the treaty in February, and only the second chamber, the senate, was missing.

Right from the beginning the EU crisis management in Prague was challenged: The war in the Gaza Strip led to a discussion on the extent of European engagement in the Middle East, and the dispute between Russia and the Ukraine over gas clearly demonstrated the consequences of the EU's dependence on energy. The Czech politicians and civil servants commuted between Moscow and Kiev, fought against Sarkozy's actionism

and represented a whole region with their achievements: Even small and new democracies are able to successfully lead the European Union!

The overthrow of the government

Still, the happiness did only last until 24 March. Although the party leader of the social democratic opposition (ČSSD), Jiří Paroubek, had announced a truce with the coalition government led by ODS and Mirek Topolánek for the time of the EU presidency and had hitherto presented himself pro-European, he launched a no-confidence vote against the government—and won.

He was able to do so with the help of two dissenters of Topolánek's ODS and two delegates of the small, green coalition partner. In fact, it should have been an easy task: Topolánek's government had only 98 of the 200 seats in parliament and had to rely on goodwill of neutral members of the parliament. The prime minister constantly stood in Paroubek's line of fire who had already tried to overthrow the government four times. Evidently, the opposition leader himself did not believe in a success at this fifth attempt, since he lacked a political concept for the further course of action; he argued in favor of a continuation of the official functions by the previous government that was supposed to prepare re-elections after the EU presidency.

But this was reckoned without one's host. President Václav Klaus saw the chance to finally take down his party archfiend Topolánek and to shipwreck the Treaty of Lisbon, for him the symbol of all evil in Europe.

Topolánek had moved the ODS more and more away from its founding father and honorary chairman Klaus, especially with regard to European issues. The latter resigned office at the end of 2008, after his favorite Pavel Bém had lost the elections on the party chair against Topolánek.

The “successful” no-confidence vote provided Klaus with great influence: He was the one to decide who should continue governing—and this during the Czech

EU presidency and just shortly before the vote on the Treaty of Lisbon in the Czech senate.

The president denied Topolánek the mandate to form a government. Thus, the two big parties were forced to agree upon a—preferably apolitical—candidate, who was then suggested to the president as interim premier in order to form a cabinet of state officials. The head of the Czech statistic agency, Jan Fischer, was chosen. He is unknown and inexperienced in the Czech and even more so in the European political arena.

Klaus was enormously mistaken regarding to the second aspect: The Czech senate did vote for the Treaty of Lisbon on 6 May and in this way also against the president.

Fierce criticism and disappointed citizens

The behavior of the opposition shows that even five years after joining the EU, domestic power intrigues and irresponsibility concerning European issues dominate the political arena in Prague. Both, at home and abroad the criticism was accordingly fierce. Petr Drulák, director of the respected Institute for International Relations in Prague, called for the replacement of the ruling political class and appealed for an electoral boycott in the conservative newspaper “Lidové noviny.” The response was also broadly negative in Germany. Klaus Brill, correspondent of the “Süddeutsche Zeitung,” spoke of a “deficit of statesmanlike sense of responsibility” and about the pronounced reluctance to find a democratic compromise amongst the political elite.

With regards to European politics, the successful no-confidence vote has to be regarded as a disaster. Topolánek himself called it an international disgrace. The ministers had to leave office in the middle of the presidency, expertise and experience concerning the European floor got lost overnight. The Minister for European Affairs, Alexandr Vondra, who was responsible for the conception of the presidency, had to hand his duties over to the former ambassador to NATO.

In the meanwhile, many Czechs perceive the ado on Prague Castle and in the parliament with a mixture of disinterest and dismay. 90 percent of the Czechs are discontent with the current political situation. With growing interest they followed the EU presidency and were disappointed by their political elite. They will give a corresponding answer: The turnout of voters during the upcoming European elections will be low, and both big parties will lose voters at the early re-elections in mid-October.

Re-alignment of the political balance of power in Prague

This development provides an opportunity for the Czechs to adjust their domestic balance of power. The government led by Mirek Topolánek stood on a shaky ground right from the beginning and only possessed the majority in parliament with the vote of dissenters from the social democratic opposition. Thus, the government was capable of acting and making decisions in a limited way only. Re-elections should have broken up this paralysis already earlier on.

Political instability, unfortunately, has a tradition in Prague. Since the breakup of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the Czech Republic was governed about six years by ČSSD or ODS minority governments as no stable coalition governments could be formed. The country has so far experienced ten governments within the nearly 17 years of its independence.

The EU presidency has eclipsed this situation. It seemed to be a multi-partisan consensus to not disgrace oneself in Brussels and to keep up appearances for half a year. This went wrong, but Czech politics can now gather itself.

With the cabinet of government officials headed by Fischer, ODS and ČSSD have basically agreed upon a grand coalition. This was only possible because none of the outstanding protagonists of both parties heads the government. The seemingly neutral government now provides some leeway for both camps, since it is suggested that none of the parties actually bears the responsibility. But without the support and the votes

from parliament there would be no cabinet of state officials. Even the latter requires parliamentary majorities and has nothing to do with the presidential system of the Weimar Republic that could bypass the parliament by presidential mandates. Thus, the Social Democrats have given Fischer a list of demands—or otherwise they will not give the vote of confidence in parliament. Thus the game goes on, as until 6 June the parliament has to pronounce confidence to the government.

A functioning government is needed

The personal power struggle between Topolánek and Paroubek must not determine politics after the elections in October. The antagonized protagonists have to draw the corresponding conclusions and to resign from the political scene. Whether they are willing to do so remains more than doubtful—yet parties are always build from the bottom up regarding political content and personnel.

Therefore, moderate powers within ODS and ČSSD should try to strengthen their influence and position persons that would be prepared to form a grand coalition after the re-elections. Such an alliance indeed is not the perfect solution—as the German example shows. In light of possible alternatives after the election in mid-October however, this construction might be the best compromise to form a stable and functioning government that is not dependent on party dissenters or the archaic communist party. Presumably, neither ČSSD nor ODS will be able to find a majority together with the smaller parties.

The Czech Republic needs a stable government in order to meet the challenges of the economic crisis that will have strongly affected Prague until October and to restrict the influence of the president. As until 2013, he will prevent the European flag flying on Prague Castle. Under constitutional law, the possibilities of the president are limited, yet forceful actors are needed in order to counter his political ego and craving for recognition. The Czech parliament and senate with the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon have shown that Klaus may rumble but has no decisive political

influence. Although he shows off as the keeper of the independent Czech democracy from the totalitarian threat coming from Brussels, he seems to have problems accepting democratic basic principles: After the acceptance of the senate he accused the senators of having “cowardly failed” and announced to postpone his constitutional signature as long as possible. Apparently he overplayed the situation, since even former supporters distanced themselves from him. Voices coming from the Czech senate to dispose Klaus from office demonstrate how severe the irritation actually is.

A stable government after the election in October would strengthen the Czech capacity concerning foreign affairs, whose lack will unfortunately remain a bitter aftertaste of the Czech EU presidency. The parliamentary groups of the European Parliament and the European affiliates should support the Czech par-

ties concerning the establishment of a political culture that considers the parliamentary compromise as a success and not as defeat. It was the very best sign of the German Chancellor to travel to Prague in May, even though other heads of government were absent from the EU summit on the Eastern Partnership.



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