

No More Mr. Nice Guy!

The Czech Republic's unclear political situation is helping President Miloš Zeman acquire an unsettling amount of power

by Jennifer Schevardo

Even after the parliamentary elections of late October 2013, the power vacuum in the Czech Republic persists. Czech president Miloš Zeman is turning it to his advantage. More authoritarian than any of his predecessors in office, he is meddling with his country's political life and, in doing so, causing considerable damage. The international community must closely monitor these affairs and respond to Zeman's antics with clear criticism.

Not since the end of communism has the political situation in the Czech Republic been in such a mess. The disenchantment of Czech voters with politics reached an unprecedented low with the fall of the administration of Petr Nečas this June. The prime minister, until then perceived as a dry but trustworthy politician, resigned amid numerous corruption scandals.

With the Nečas affair(s) bringing about a virtual implosion of the bourgeois-conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS), signs initially pointed to a win by the social democrats (the CSSD). After an uninspired electoral campaign, however, all of the established parties were punished at the polls. Although the CSSD received the most votes, the results were not enough to secure the formation of a stable government on the left. Many simply voted for new parties. An overwhelming victory was handed to the politically inexperienced billionaire and populist Andrej Babiš, whose "movement" ANO ("action of dissatisfied citizens") had declared during the campaign that it would not govern but rather provide active opposition.

Having won over 18 percent of the votes, however, it must now take up the responsibilities of government, whether it wants to or not.

But the fragile structures of the new parties are not the only weaknesses affecting the political situation today. Czech social democrats had already begun the process of cannibalizing themselves on election night. Some members of the party leadership called for the chair, Bohuslav Sobotka, to step down and closed him out of the upcoming coalition negotiations. This step was later rescinded, but it now seems that a split in the CSSD is only a matter of time.

Indeed, it looks like this election has only one winner: President Miloš Zeman. The longer there is no new government with legitimization by parliament, the more influence he can exert over political affairs, and not just in the provisional short-term. Quite the opposite. Zeman is in an excellent position to remold Czech democracy in his own fashion. He is intentionally contributing to dismantling the parties and the parliament and, in doing so, is ruthlessly building up the power of

the presidency. This is the case even though his own party, SPOZ (party of civic rights – Zeman’s people), failed by a broad margin to make it into parliament, with only 1.5 percent of votes.

Zeman has lost no time dithering. The day after the election he openly advised the SPOZ to split away from him (and to change its name, too, thank you very much). At the same time, he rallied on his supporters within the CSSD to drive out Sobotka. (After a long and influential association with the party, Zeman had left the CSSD in 2007 to form SPOZ.) When Zeman’s involvement in the matter was revealed, there was outrage in the media and society as a whole.

Without actually overstepping the bounds of the constitution, Zeman is nonetheless intentionally seeking out the constitutional gray areas and interpreting them idiosyncratically. In doing so, he has on numerous occasions broken with established procedures for how the president works with the executive and legislative branches, further damaging trust in the political process.

In naming important executive posts – normally a purely formal act – Zeman has leaned openly on his personal patronage. When Prime Minister Nečas stepped down in June 2013, Zeman ignored both of the two usual channels. Instead of giving the elected governing coalition – or the opposition – the task of forming a new government, he tasked a longtime crony, Jiří Rusnok, with setting up a “government of experts,” which of course largely consisted of representatives of Zeman’s SPOZ. Although the parliament refused to approve this cabinet, Zeman has allowed it to continue provisionally in office up until today.

Rusnok used his time to push forward sweeping personnel changes within the ministries and state-owned enterprises. Since July, many dozens of functionaries and managers have been exchanged. The difficulty of the government building process that is now pending can only be good for Zeman, as shown by his recent meddlings in the social democrats’ leadership. Zeman is intentionally dividing and crippling what is left of the Czech Republic’s established parties.

Czech civil society has barely raised a finger. Nor have other European countries had anything critical to say in public about the extent to which Zeman has reinterpreted his presidential responsibilities and authority and its pernicious effects on parliamentary democracy. He is widely underestimated, seen as a funny old man who regularly embarrasses himself in public, be it under the influence of alcohol or through rhetorical slip-ups.

But Europe should not overlook Zeman’s eagle eye for the weaknesses of his political opponents, nor the fact that he knows how to use the political system to his own advantage. Right now Czech politicians and institutions are unable to produce a counterweight to Zeman. This is why it is high time for the governments of other EU member states to signal to him that they are watching his political moves critically. The continuing disruption of democratic processes in Prague under President Zeman could become a disturbing and destabilizing factor for Central Europe.

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(Translation: Miranda Robbins)