



BULLETIN

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The Consequences of the Government Crisis in the Czech Republic

by Rafał Morawiec

After the resignation of the center-right government of Mirek Topolánek, the Czech Republic found itself in a crisis that could last until early elections scheduled for the fall 2009. The recall of the Czech government at the half way mark of that country's EU presidency will not affect its ability to carry out tasks of a technical and organizational nature, but will weaken the Czech Republic's ability to influence the developments in the European Union. The fall of the Czech government also signifies the demise of Topolánek's political plan consisting in securing the support of the center-left for the deployment of the American radar on Czech territory in exchange for his party's consent to the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty.

Causes. The fall of the coalition cabinet headed by the leader of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) was the consequence of a long process that had already led to the coalition government's loss—in the fall of 2008—of its majority in the lower house of parliament. The opposition Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) of former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek attempted to overturn the government four times in the past two years. At the end of 2008, it seemed that the approaching Czech presidency of the EU would ease the rivalry between the coalition government and the opposition. The leaders of both parties—Topolánek and Paroubek—began talks about a “non-aggression pact” of sorts. In the end it proved impossible to reach an understanding, mainly because of the ČSSD's conditions, the acceptance of which would have entailed the government's *de facto* resignation from its own program.

The majority of Czechs hold the view that Topolánek's government dealt effectively with the tasks connected with the EU presidency. This generated increased support for the ODS, which began recouping its losses in relation to the ČSSD, until then the leader in the public opinion polls. The social democratic leaders interpreted this as a possible threat to their victory in the upcoming elections. Under these circumstances, the overturn (with the help of the communist party) of the government that was regaining public support seemed the only way to reverse the trend so unfavorable to the ČSSD.

Topolánek's government fell because of lack of support from two ODS deputies with close ties to President Václav Klaus, for whom blocking the Lisbon Treaty's entry into force is one of the most important political goals. This, in turn, will largely depend on how the Treaty's ratification process in the Czech Republic ends. The Senate has yet to pronounce itself on the issue and the position of ODS senators will be crucial. The recall of Topolánek's government at the initiative of the ČSSD, a supporter of the Treaty, could incline them to reject it, the more so as the majority of ODS senators share President Klaus' reservations about this document. Should this happen, this would signify the slowing down of EU institutional reform. This may have been one of the principal motives behind the president's actions during the recall of the government.

Internal Consequences. It is not unlikely that the majority which brought about the downfall of Topolánek's government would be in a position to form a government able to obtain a vote of confidence. This means that the Czech Republic is possibly facing a long-term governmental crisis similar to the one that occurred following the parliamentary elections of June 2006, when a stable government could not be formed for over six months. A similar scenario could be averted by holding early

elections, but this is impossible in view of the tasks the Czech Republic has to carry out in connection with its EU presidency.

ODS and ČSSD leaders managed to reach a tentative agreement that the elections would take place in October 2009. They did not, however, agree on the make-up of the cabinet that is to govern until then. Basically, this will depend on who the president will entrust with the mission of forming a government. Klaus said that he would only appoint a candidate who is able to get the support of a stable majority in the lower house, one produced by an understanding between political parties, and not—as was the case following the 2006 elections—by the coalition's co-opting of a few deputies from other political groups. In practice, the president's conditions could only be met through an understanding between the ODS and the ČSSD, something ruled out for the time being by both parties' leaders, who hope to pursue their own political plans.

ODS, which is still the largest party in the lower house of parliament, demands that Topolánek should obtain the nomination for prime minister again and head the government until the elections. The social democrats are ready to tolerate a Topolánek government until the Czech presidency of the EU ends, but under certain conditions—the recall of the minister of the interior and the general prosecutor. After that, they want the establishment of a “cabinet of experts” (with the support of the communists), whose make-up they would largely determine.

Most probably, the leaders of both parties will ultimately accept the president's conditions. Otherwise Klaus—arguing that the country's affairs cannot be administered in an ongoing manner by the dismissed Topolánek cabinet—could entrust one of his political allies with the task of forming a government. In truth, such a government would have no chance of securing a vote of confidence, but it could operate for a long period, as the Czech constitution places no deadlines on the president for nominating a new prime minister replacing one that was dismissed. It is in Topolánek and Paroubek's interest to prevent such a scenario, as a cabinet headed by a close ally of the president could take a stand in EU matters that is in line with the critical views of the president concerning deeper European integration, views that neither of them shares.

External Consequences. The fall of the government and the prospect of a drawn out crisis will have a negative impact on the Czech leadership in the EU. Actually, a similar situation took place in three other countries holding the EU presidency in the 1990s (in Denmark—1993, in France—1995, and in Italy—1996), but in each of them, the change of government took place without significant problems. Moreover, the transitions did not occur in conditions of a financial and economic crisis and in a climate of uncertainty about EU institutional reform.

By overturning the government at the half-way mark of the Czech presidency, the parliament provided additional arguments to those politicians in Western Europe (such as President Sarkozy) who had raised doubts about the Czech Republic's ability to meet the challenge of EU leadership, especially in times of crisis. The fall of the government will not affect the Czech presidency's ability to carry out tasks of a technical and organizational nature, but it will weaken its ability to influence the EU's strategic decisions. Meanwhile, the Czech presidency will have to face serious and immediate challenges. One of these will be the G20 summit, during which the Czech Republic is to present the position of the entire EU. At the same meeting, certain EU member countries, notably France and Germany, will present their own positions and, in case of differing views, it is not likely that they would want to consider the position of the presidency put forward by a government in a state of dismissal. The same could be the case in other controversial matters. From the Polish point of view, it is important that the Eastern Partnership initiative, whose realization is a significant element of the Czech presidency's program, doesn't give rise to reservations in the EU forum.

One of the effects of the Czech governmental crisis might be a possible attempt to take the initiative in EU matters by its larger member states, especially France, which, while criticizing the Czech presidency, has tried to emphasize the value of its own leadership and draw attention to the necessity of EU institutional reform. The possible setback of the Lisbon Treaty ratification process in the Czech Republic would have an especially negative impact on the ability of new members to lead the EU. This would include Poland, who is to assume the presidency in the second half of 2011.

The fall of the center-right Czech government was greeted with great satisfaction in Russia. In commenting on this fact, Russia's ambassador to NATO Dmitri Rogozin pointed out that the Czech left had always been against their country's participation in the American missile defense program. In the present situation in the lower house of the Czech parliament, the ratification of the Czech–American agreements on the localization of the radar intended as one of the element of the missile defense system, is rather unlikely. The fall of the Czech government definitely put an end to Topolánek's political plans of gaining the support of the center-left for the radar installations in exchange for the ODS's agreement to ratify the Lisbon Treaty.