



BULLETIN

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Parliamentary Elections in the Czech Republic: Consequences for Foreign Policy

by Rafał Morawiec

There is no definite favorite in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies (lower chamber of Czech parliament) that are to take place on 28 and 29 May 2010. If the right-wing comes to power, the principal trends of Czech foreign policy will be maintained. The formation of a government dominated by the left will result in significant changes in areas that are especially important for Poland.

Situation before the Elections. Since 9 May 2009, power in the Czech Republic has been in the hands of a temporary cabinet headed by Jan Fischer. It was formed following the fall of the coalition made up of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the Christian and Democratic Union—Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU—ČSL) and the Green Party (SZ) led by the ODS politician Mirek Topolánek. In the middle of the Czech presidency of the EU, the Topolánek government fell in a vote of no-confidence. Voting against the coalition were the social democrats (ČSSD) of former Prime Minister Jiří Paroubek, the communists (KSČM) and four members of the ruling coalition.

The majority which had voted against the Topolánek cabinet was not able to form a government, so ODS and ČSSD leaders decided to hold early elections in the fall of 2009. Until that time, the country was to be run by a “government of experts.” Its mission, however, was extended when—in September 2009—the social democrats withdrew their support for earlier elections. As a result, the elections will be held at the initially scheduled date, but it is not certain if they will result in the formation of a stable majority government.

The formation of a majority will be a challenge due to the evolving alignment of forces on the political stage. Following the breakup of the KDU—ČSL in the fall of 2009, a new rightist political group was set up under the name of TOP 09. Former Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, one of the Czech Republic's most popular politicians, became its leader, and TOP 09 soon became the fourth political force in the country, after the ODS, the social democrats and the communists. In the first half of 2010, the increasingly unpopular KDU—ČSL was overtaken in the polls by a populist group called Public Affairs (VV), while its leader, a well-known author Radek John, has recently become the country's most popular politician.

Forecasts. The latest polls point to the social democrats as the most likely winner of the upcoming elections. The ČSSD enjoys the support around 27–30% and has for several months been clearly ahead of the ODS (21–23%) headed by its new leader, former Labor Minister Peter Nečas. Third in the polls are the communists (13%), while TOP 09 (11–12%) ranks in fourth place. Public Affairs could emerge from the race with a similar or slightly lower backing, while the KDU—ČSL, which has been represented in all ruling coalitions except in 1998–2002, will be struggling to cross the electoral threshold. The remaining political groups stand no chance for parliamentary representation.

Possible Shape of Future Government. The post-electoral situation in the Chamber of Deputies and hence the shape of the future government will depend on whether or not the KDU—ČSL succeeds in crossing the electoral threshold. If it does, the alignment of forces in the Chamber will favor the emergence of a center-right coalition made up of the ODS, TOP 09, VV and the KDU—ČSL, despite the formal victory of the social democrats. If it does not, the formation of a minority ČSSD government supported in parliament by the communists is likely, although the latter scenario might be complicated by President Václav Klaus, who has announced that—on the basis of his constitutional prerogatives—he would refuse to appoint a cabinet enjoying the support of the communists.

If the election results were to make it impossible for either of the two largest parties to form its own government or at least one it could dominate, the emergence of a "grand coalition" composed of the social democrats and the ODS cannot be ruled out. It could take the form of a government or a parliamentary coalition. In the latter case, a minority government would be formed by one party and it would enjoy the parliamentary support of the second largest party, as was the case in 1998–2002, when a social democratic government ruled with the support of ODS deputies on the basis of what is known as an "opposition agreement."

Other scenarios are also possible, albeit less probable, such as a coalition between the social democrats and smaller parties (with the exception of the communists) or a post-electoral stalemate resembling the one after the 2006 elections, when during a six-month governmental crisis no political camp was able to gain an edge enabling it to form a government capable of winning a vote of confidence. In this case the role of the president would grow, as he would most likely press the leaders of the largest parties to form a grand coalition (Klaus was the co-architect of one in 1998).

Consequences for Foreign Policy and Relations with Poland. The shape of Czech foreign policy will depend mainly on whether the new government is dominated by the social democrats or the ODS.

In the former case, changes in Czech foreign policy can be expected in areas such as trans-Atlantic relations, European integration, energy security or relations with Russia. A government dominated by the social democrats will most probably adopt a stance of "soft Atlanticism." In practice, this would signify greater distance from the policies pursued by the USA, including plans for a modified missile-defense system, which the ČSSD has firmly opposed. At the same time, there would be a shift of emphasis in European policy, with greater stress placed on strengthening European integration within the framework of the EU. In matters pertaining to energy security, the Czech position would become closer to that of the largest EU member countries, such as France or Germany. At the same time, the importance Germany in Czech foreign policy would be enhanced, as the social democrats see that country as the Czech Republic's most important partner (before the U.S.).

A government headed by the social democratic leader would also strive to improve relations with Russia, both in a bilateral context and at the EU level. Less emphasis can also be expected on human rights—so characteristic of Czech foreign policy over the past few years, as well as on regional cooperation (also within the framework of the Visegrád Group).

It should be noted that in the case of a minority ČSSD government, the communists supporting it would have no impact on foreign policy. This is something the social democrats would not accept, fearing accusations of passively submitting to KSČM dictates. Moreover, the communists themselves are declaring that they will not make their support for a minority ČSSD government conditional on changes in Czech foreign policy, which rests on membership in the EU and in NATO. In any case, the views of the social democrats on key foreign policy issues are much closer to the position of the communists than those of right-wing political parties.

In the case of an ODS government, a continuation of the Czech foreign policy pursued by the Topolánek cabinet and (with some limitations) by the Fisher government should be expected. The probable participation in this government of the TOP 09 party, which is a proponent of deeper European integration, would offset the "Euro-skeptical" tones of ODS policy. Should a government emerge the participation of the two parties, former European Affairs Minister Alexandr Vondra (ODS) and Karel Schwarzenberg are likely have a decisive influence on Czech foreign policy, as they did in the Topolánek government.

Under a ČSSD-ODS coalition government, Czech foreign policy would become a function of the two trends, with greater emphasis on the program of the party whose representative will become foreign minister. In this case, European affairs might be formally isolated from the remaining foreign affairs areas, as was the case with Topolánek's coalition government.

The formation of a government dominated by the right would entail a continuation of those trends in Czech foreign policy that in recent years have turned that country into Poland's closest partner in both the EU and in regional cooperation within the Visegrád Group. The foreign policy changes announced by the social democrats—if implemented—could in turn reduce the possibilities for collaboration between the two countries.