

## Czech Republic 2001

### Turmoil at Czech TV: Principle or Politics?



"Television is for the people not the party" according to this banner outside Czech TV

*"You are one of those intellectuals who preach freedom and democracy, and who at the same time would want to get rid of parties ...Removing the parties would mean dictatorship; democracy is based on the parties"*

Antonin Švehla to Karel Čapek: ***Ze Švehlových hovorů*** Karel Čapek

At the beginning of January 2001 thousands of people held large demonstrations in the centre of the capital of the Czech Republic, Prague. According to their leaders, the demonstrators were outraged by recent appointments to the staff of Czech television which were deemed to be politically motivated and threatening to the independence of the country's media. There was talk of "neo-totalitarianism" and a return to one party control over the state media.

A new director of the service, George Hodač, had been named on 20<sup>nd</sup> December 2000. Employees at Czech Television alleged that Hodač was a political appointee close to Vaclav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (ODS). They went on strike to protest, 'occupying' the station's Prague building where they received support from leading politicians.

Outsiders soon became involved: representatives of the European Union and non-governmental organizations, like the International Federation of Journalists in Brussels, immediately sprang to the strikers' defence, criticizing the authorities for their handling of the situation. Only when Hodač handed in his resignation and Parliament made changes to the way in which future directors of Czech TV were to be appointed was the situation brought under some kind of control.

Representatives of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group visited Prague at the end of January to investigate the situation. People in the West would find it very strange if thousands of demonstrators took to the streets to protest against personnel appointments to their state media, which are routinely made on political grounds from people of the right political affiliation or the right party membership book. Most Italians, French and German citizens would be unable to name the various directors, news editors etc. of their respective television stations. However, supporters of the strikers at Czech TV are quick to counter this argument. They say that after the decades of Communism the Czech people are very sensitive to any sign of political interference in the media.

It is with regret that BHHRG's observers have to differ with such a high-minded and simplistic rationale. After looking at the situation closely and meeting various participants in the dispute

they have concluded that the situation is a great deal murkier than presented. Rather than a manifestation of 'people power', the Czech TV strike seems to be part of a larger strategy the aim of which is to shift power to a small group of people whose tentacles reach into all areas of the country's cultural, economic and political life.

### The Dispute

The Czech Republic has 4 national television stations – state TV with 2 channels and independent stations, Nova and Prima, and TV3. There are also over 200 radio stations including state radio. Matters relating to the licensing and governance of these bodies falls under the auspices of the Czech Radio and Television Council, a body appointed by parliament and whose membership reflects the balance of party representation in the lower chamber. Two separate bodies govern the running of TV and radio – respectively, the Czech Television and Radio councils.

In the year 2000 troubles with the running of Czech TV gained momentum. Its young director, Jakub Puchalsky, resigned in December 1999 and was replaced by Dušan Chemeliček in February 2000. According to critics, neither managed to upgrade the station's professionalism either in programme making or in financial accountability. In an attempt to improve the way Czech TV operated, parliament sacked the Television Council in March 2000 replacing it with a new team.

One of its first acts, in April, was to hire George Hodač as news director. His period in office was less than happy and he resigned in August after disputes with the staff – again over attempts to reform the institution. There were also rumours that Hodač had fired Roman Prohok, the anchorman of a TV discussion programme, for his unsympathetic treatment of parliamentary speaker, Vaclav Klaus. This has been denied by many observers who say that Prohok was dismissed because he was no good. It had nothing to do with Hodač.

On 20<sup>th</sup> December the Council fired Chemeliček and appointed Mr. Hodač as director general with a mandate not only to tackle internal reforms but also to sort out the less than transparent financial affairs of Czech TV. Many claimed outrage that he had been appointed too quickly, without a proper debate, but others said the opposite: it had taken the Council, in fact, too long to reach a decision.

Hodač, a Czech by birth, left Prague in 1980 and worked for many years at the Czech desk of the BBC World Service in London. His experience at an internationally acclaimed broadcasting body no doubt commended him. The appointment of the mild-mannered Hodač was viewed by many members of the staff at Czech TV as outrageous – particularly as he had got many people's backs up during his previous stint as news director. Their anger was compounded when he named Jana Bobošíkova, a Czech TV insider, as news editor on 23<sup>rd</sup> December.



George Hodac as parrot on Vaclav Kaus's shoulder – a cartoon by the strikers at Czech TV

The main allegation against Hodač was that he was a lackey of the opposition Civic Democratic Party and that he had even applied for a job with the party's leader, Vaclav Klaus. Both Klaus and Hodač himself have vehemently denied this and no evidence has ever been proved to show any connection between the two men. Hodač has always claimed to be non-political and it would certainly be odd for the liberal establishment that runs the BBC to have harboured in its midst a dangerous right-winger. In an example of the no-win situation so familiar in cases like this he was also accused by *Le Monde's* Prague correspondent, Martin Plichta, of having been a sympathiser with the Communist regime during the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Jana Bobošíkova had worked briefly for Klaus as an economic advisor in his capacity of Speaker of Parliament. In other words, she was an employee of parliament, not the ODS. She also been known to have conducted hard-hitting interviews with Klaus on Czech TV.

The staff refused to work for them. They occupied the newsroom and put it around that they were fighting for the independence of Czech TV, even though the new appointees had, at this time, done nothing which could be deemed as political or biased. By Christmas Day there was a system of dual broadcasting going on in the Czech Republic with the 'rebels' resorting to satellite and cable to transmit. On 25<sup>th</sup> December Hodač provoked outrage by cutting off normal programming for 24 hours in protest at the occupation. On 26<sup>th</sup> December Mrs. Bobošíkova fired 20 of the rebels although they refused to accept their notices. Attempts by Hodač to involve the authorities in clearing the strikers from the newsroom met with failure. Interior Minister, Stanislav Gross, refused to send in the police.

The strikers called for support via their 'pirate' transmissions and the printed news media reinforced their appeals. By the end of December members of the public had been persuaded that a media coup d'état was taking place and gathered outside Czech TV's headquarters in Prague 4 to peacefully protest. Hard on their heels came the politicians. Members of the Freedom Union, part of the 4-party opposition coalition (known as the 'Quad') were the most prominent. But there were some sympathisers from the Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). These people joined the strikers in their bunker, ostentatiously taking sleeping bags and staying there for several days. Food and drink was provided by members of the public and hoisted into the building on ropes to reinforce the beleaguered situation they were in. On 27<sup>th</sup> December, and, later, in his New Year message broadcast from Prague Castle, President Havel voiced his sympathy for the strikers; his wife Dagmar went on air on 2<sup>nd</sup> January to do the same.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> January parliament met in an emergency session and approved an amendment to the law governing Czech TV and radio. It was proposed that in future, candidates for the Czech Television and radio councils would be proposed by civil groups although final membership would have to be approved by parliament. Membership of the bodies would be increased from 9 to 15. An interim director would be appointed until these mechanisms were put in place. Hodač left hospital on 9<sup>th</sup> January and on 11<sup>th</sup> he resigned from his post of director of Czech TV.

## **The Protagonists**

### **George Hodač**

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Monde*, 5/1/2001



A caricature of George Hodač – 'Bobo' is Mrs. Bobošíková – hanging outside Czech TV

Many critics have been agitating for changes to be made at Czech TV for some time. The organization operates from a vast sprawl of buildings situated on a hilltop, Kavčy Hory, overlooking Prague. It employs 2800 people including 1850 permanent freelance staff who are on full salaries; many members of the staff have worked there for a long time. Compare this with the small number - 396 people - employed by independent TV Nova, which has a higher percentage of the TV audience (52%) than Czech TV.

Czech TV receives somewhere between 1 to 2 billion Kc., (Czech koruna) from advertising revenue, despite being funded by the state to the tune of 4 billion Kc. It has been pointed out that, proportionately, this is far too much. It is also alleged that there are too many non-transparent arrangements with private production companies which have been created on the back of Czech TV. The law, apparently, also places an obligation on Czech TV to support Czech cinematography. BHHRG received many allegations that these generous funds are recycled to favoured intellectuals and artists involved in subsidised film-making and that one reason for their strident support for the strikers was that this cosy relationship might end if the finances of Czech TV were cleaned up.

After the new TV Council was elected in April 2000 Chemeliček asked for an extra half billion crowns which would put the budget into deficit but parliament refused to approve. According to many, this is when the problems started. George Hodač was appointed in December to bring matters to a close and prepare a proper audit of the station's finances.

It is generally accepted that Hodač was not an insider – the only one out of 22 applicants for the job from which 6 were short-listed. But although he was deemed to have the professional skills to make the necessary changes he was probably totally unprepared for the onslaught that followed his appointment and, according to some observers, he lacked the necessary bullishness to fight his corner against the rebels. He ended up in hospital exhausted by the strains of his short appointment.

George Hodač was the news editor of Czech TV for a short period between April and August 2000. He had come to the job full of good intentions hoping to improve the professionalism of the news coverage by introducing work and production methods used by the BBC. He admits that he encountered hostility to these ideas. In 1989 the old guard had been cleared out of Czech TV's news and editorial departments were re-staffed with young, enthusiastic novices. Hodač says that during the past ten years such people had been producing unprofessional material - proper training was still needed especially with regard to objectivity.

Then, according to Mr. Hodač, he and the director, Dušan Chemeliček agreed that one particular programme, *At High Noon* a midday discussion programme between Czech politicians and a moderator, Dusan Prohok, was losing its way and had poor audience figures. They agreed to dismiss Prohok and look for a new format for the programme. To most observers, this would seem to be part of the daily business of running any company in which

there will be winners and losers. But, according to Hodač, the firing of Prohok immediately became a political issue, particularly with members of the Freedom Union who accused him of acting on Vaclav Klaus's orders. Hodač says that he never discussed the matter with Klaus.

Why did Mr. Hodač apply for the job of director after, what had been, an uncomfortable time at Czech TV? He says that, initially, he had no intention of doing so but was persuaded to put his name forward by friends. Even then, he was surprised to be chosen. But, having been selected he, once again, thought that he might have an opportunity to introduce policies which would improve standards at the station and introduce a professional audit. Hodač is a British citizen and, as such, cannot belong to a Czech political party or vote in Czech elections. He says he has no connection with the ODS and has only spoken to Klaus in his capacity as a journalist employed by the BBC World Service and Czech TV.

It was now 21<sup>st</sup> December and many people, particularly politicians, were away from Prague on Christmas leave. It was, therefore, difficult to appoint a new team. Hostility immediately greeted his appointment. However, angry employees said "its not about you but the principles", meaning, according to Mr. Hodač, that the main purpose behind their protest was to change the way the Czech Television Council was elected.

He is convinced that the 'coup' which followed had been planned months in advance – probably when key people realised that Dušan Chemeliček was going to be dismissed. He agrees that it had nothing to do with him personally – the same chain of events would have happened if any of the other (bar one) candidate had been chosen for the post. As evidence, he points out that a lot of money had been spent on the strike that followed his appointment in the form of pre-recorded programmes, some of them containing disinformation about him and Jana Bobošíkova. The rebels had also gained access to private mobile telephone logs in an attempt to show that they were in cahoots with the ODS representatives on the TC Council. This would be a major criminal offence in most countries but it shows the strikers excellent connections to the country's security apparatus. Mr. Hodač suggests that a number of the key strikers from the technical and administrative staff were holdovers from the Communist old guard – activists who had belonged to the People's Militia or StB operatives.

Despite the Christmas break, politicians from the Freedom Union were in Prague ready to take advantage of the unrest. Like all MPs in the Czech Republic they have immunity from prosecution and so Stanislav Gross, the Minister of the Interior, refused to intervene and have them removed from the newsroom when they arrived to support the rebels. They also blocked the police's access to the strikers.

Much of the fare on Czech TV over the Christmas period was pre-recorded but it was almost impossible for him and Mrs. Bobošíkova to produce any fresh programmes, including news reports. While the strikers occupied the newsroom they managed to broadcast from a variety of different locations but their bulletins were often interrupted and by the 8<sup>th</sup> January Mrs. Bobošíkova had given up trying to broadcast news programmes. The temperature rose and people started to demonstrate outside the building – some members of the crowd became aggressive and Mrs. Bobošíkova was roughed up. Apparently, Ladislav Spaček Havel's spokesman, was in the crowd. He just stood by and watched.

Hodač himself was receiving abusive telephone calls and e-mails, some making death threats. Finally, the police on their own initiative, provided him with a 24-hour guard as they feared he might be killed. Mr. Hodač and his wife are still overcome by the events even though they are now back in England. They say that they would be too afraid to return to Prague.

On 11<sup>th</sup> January Hodač decided to resign after spending 5 days in hospital suffering from exhaustion and stress. Far from gaining support from particular politicians he says that none came to his defence. Although the prime minister, Miloš Zeman, initially opposed the strike he changed his mind and demanded Hodač's resignation when it looked as though the situation could have serious political repercussions for the government. Vaclav Klaus, the man allegedly behind the right-wing takeover of Czech TV, was skiing in Austria when the crisis

began. According to some observers, as the political implications became clear he resolved to keep as far away from the situation as possible. As he told BHHRG that he “never watched TV” he may not be the best person to comment on the seriousness of the situation. Although George Hodač resigned he has had no official letter confirming the termination of his appointment – something required by law

### The Strikers

In late January the buildings of Czech TV were still plastered with graffiti and political slogans – usually showing Klaus and Hodač joined in one way or another as Siamese twins. A lavatory bowl was stuck on the top of a poll under which lay hundreds of burnt-out candles left by protesters earlier in the month. Posters proclaiming ‘*Stavka*’, the Czech word for strike, were plastered over the windows. Even supporters of the rebels were unhappy with some of the infantile sloganeering which often bordered on the spiteful. One sign hung on the door of the newsroom by the strikers proclaimed: “Do not open the windows or the stink will pass into the newsroom!”



An example of the strikers' humour – a toilet on a poll outside Czech television

Staff at the reception desk were well-prepared for foreign visitors and a spokesman for the strikers, Jan Molaček, soon appeared to talk to BHHRG's representatives. The main hall was bustling, but, then, these strikers were, in fact, **working** - producing and transmitting Czech TV. Mr. Molaček admitted that 'strike' now meant something more akin to 'workers occupation' - a familiar expression during industrial disputes in the 1970s. Nevertheless, people's TV sets still carried the word '*stavka*' in the corner of the screen – a reminder of the heroism of the TV staff who had fought so boldly against political interference.

Organization of the strike was reminiscent of Gramsci's factory councils. No vote was taken by the strikers on holding the strike, something which is quite illegal in many Western countries including Britain. When asked why no vote had been taken, Molaček said that all the staff were in agreement and that one was not necessary. He added, "All decent people in the Czech Republic support us," thereby betraying an interesting view of democracy. For example, it was difficult to find out exactly how the chain of command operated among the strikers. Mrs. Bobošíkova claimed not to know who was in charge. According to Molaček, each department had its own strike committee. When asked whether its members had been voted into office, his answer was very vague. However, each department met every evening to discuss the day's events. Their demands were clear. While they didn't expect to have a say in the election of the general director they would regard anyone connected with the previous management as "unacceptable" and they demanded the immediate firing of Mrs. Bobošíkova and her 2 assistants. Someone with experience working at Czech TV would be "the best kind of person" to take on the role of director general in the future.

It is debatable whether that is such a good idea. Mr. Molaček has been employed in the Foreign Newsroom for two years. At 5.30 on a weekday evening he had no idea what Czech

TV's major foreign news stories were going to be the following day. There was a big foreign story at that time - the Indian earthquake had just taken place. But, presumably attending the strikers' committee and meeting foreigners took precedence over work.

On the question of Mr. Hodač, Molaček claimed that there had been "many occasions" when he had tried to influence the content of the news. However, when pressed to give specific cases he could only name the well-rehearsed incident with Roman Prohok and something related to a programme about the Labyrinth Theatre, he couldn't remember what. After asking various people, including Mr. Hodač, exactly what had happened with the Labyrinth Theatre programme we only managed to discover that Mr. Hodač had asked to see a preview of a film about restoration work at the theatre – a fairly routine procedure in any media operation. He had also asked the programme's producer to offer the theatre's director, a Mr. Kraus, the right of reply. Mr. Kraus refused and the programme was aired anyway. Perhaps there were some people in Czech TV who felt this might be too close for comfort.

### **Other countries**

Political control of media outlets is not unknown in many countries. Italy's television stations are controlled by the political parties and in Germany the ruling parties chose the personnel who run the different states' television and radio stations. In Great Britain the governing council of the BBC is independent but the director general is appointed by the government. The present incumbent, Greg Dyke, is a Labour Party member who donated £50,000 (250,000 Czech Kc.) to Tony Blair's private office. His appointment provoked controversy but, on the whole, people were prepared to see how he performed in the job before demanding his resignation.

However, despite the politicization of appointments to much of Western European television the European Commission's spokesman, Jonathan Faull, expressed his alarm at developments in the Czech Republic and said the EU would "consider intervening". The International PEN Club announced that it was "worried" by the developments in the Czech Republic "which show clear signs of political interference in, and manipulation of public news". No one in Prague seemed to have met any representative from PEN – the statement was released in London.

However, Aidan White from the International Federation of Journalists did arrive in Prague on 8<sup>th</sup> January. He, too, spent time with the strikers but made no special effort to meet Mrs. Bobošíkova and George Hodač while he was there, only making cursory telephone calls to them. In the end he called to "all our member organizations in more than 100 countries to show their support and declare that they will assist you in your strike".

None of these people ever ask about the political orientation of the bulk of the staff at Czech TV or point out that the previous director of Czech TV, Ivo Mathe, is now an advisor to President Havel. In fact, there has been criticism of partiality in state TV over the years. For example, expensive programmes supporting the Czech Republic's entry into the EU and Nato were aired in 1998. They were, essentially, propaganda on top of which they were funded, at least in part, by these organizations.

At this moment Bulgarian journalists are rebelling against the new director of radio appointed by their own, independent broadcasting council. So, the fact that a broadcasting body is, officially, non-political does not stop people protesting about what they consider to be a politically motivated appointment, or one they just don't like. Defenders of the system whereby bodies dealing with matters like media regulation are appointed to mirror a country's political complexion say that, at least, you know where you are with this system.

### **The Public**

As the dispute was covered in a totally one-sided way by the news media it is no surprise that many people really did think that a sinister plot was afoot to subvert Czech TV. There were well-attended gatherings outside the headquarters of Czech television and, later, a large demonstration in Wenceslas Square. Some observers suggested that up to 100,000 people

had rallied in support of the strikers on 3<sup>rd</sup> January. The police put the figure at closer to 50,000, still a substantial turnout. Expensive sound equipment was available as well as well-produced posters – hardly a sign of spontaneity. It is alleged that the NGO organizing this sort of event was set up **before** Hodač's appointment.

Many young Czechs, no doubt unconsciously, mourn the fact that they missed out on the heady days of dissident activities in the 70s and 80s. This simulacrum of oppression gave them an opportunity to star as fighters against totalitarianism. It is a disturbing fact that in a country praised for its past commitment to democracy so many should respond to the call to the streets but appear to be so insouciant about the rule of law. However, the Czech public has been carefully coaxed for a long time now by the media into believing that all politicians are crooks and that their own politicians are more crooked than most. This development is proving very useful as voter apathy (the inevitable product of such disenchantment) could break the back of support for the main political parties.

It has also been pointed out that the Czechs are easily manipulated – they capitulated to both Nazism and Communism without a fight. Their 'velvet revolution' in 1989 wasn't entirely brought about by 'people power' as presented. More accurately, it was a carefully orchestrated compromise between disaffected members of the Communist Party who wanted to break free of the old constraints and former dissidents, many of whom still run the country today. Critics say that these people wanted to change the elites who were in power rather than afford ordinary Czechs genuine political pluralism.

### **Politicians**

Bearing in mind the radical profile of the strike it will come as something of a surprise to learn that its main support came from politicians of the right and centre. Members of the Freedom Union took up their cause even sleeping with them in the room designated as their headquarters for several days over Christmas. They were also joined by members of the Catholic church, including President Havel's favourite priest, Tomas Halik and the suffragen bishop of Prague. It should be born in mind that allegations of political bias against Mr. Hodač were still (and have remained) unproved. He had been unable to produce any programmes which might have offered grounds for the charges against him.

The strikers were breaking the law and so were their political supporters. Hodač had been appointed according to the country's laws, no one denied that. On top of this, the newsroom they were using for their protest was out of bounds to both members of staff and the public as it was designated by law for use in specific cases including national emergency when Czech TV would need to inform the public about what to do in a national crisis. The fact that the country's (non-executive) President should also publicly back the strike only fuelled the fears of some about the strength of the Czech Republic's commitment to parliamentary democracy and the separation of the powers. If the Duke of Edinburgh (the husband of Britain's Queen Elizabeth) had appeared on TV to support a wild cat strike there would have been outrage. Yet, that is what Mrs. Havel did on the strikers' 'dissident' broadcasts.

In other words, a minor industrial dispute was used by a group of well-known politicians in the close circle of the country's president to further their own political project.

### **Political Background**

Since the collapse of Communism in 1989 several political parties have arisen in the Czech Republic. The main ones are the Social Democrats (ČSSD), the mainstream party of the left, and the Civic Democratic Party, (ODS) led by Vaclav Klaus, who was prime minister of the Czech Republic from 1992-1997. On the margins are several formations of the right and centre as well as the Czech Communist Party, the KSČM which, unlike other such parties in Eastern Europe, never changed its name but which has always managed to garner a serious percentage of the votes in nationwide elections, coming third.

It is generally accepted that Klaus was the dominant player in Czech politics during the 1990s. A self-avowed free marketeer and supporter of Britain's Margaret Thatcher he was once hailed as the person who had modernized the country, privatizing much of the economy and making it a serious player on the world stage after forty five years of Communist stagnation.

However, Klaus made enemies. He can be abrasive; allegations that he is arrogant and flamboyant are not without truth. But the underlying reasons for his unpopularity, particularly with the Prague elite, are more to do with substance than style. For, despite his commitment to free markets Klaus had ploughed a relatively cautious furrow when it came to privatisation – he felt that society needed to readjust at a slower pace to the free market than some in his party would wish. This was also coupled with a barely concealed scepticism towards some of the conditions demanded by the European Union for the Czech Republic's entry.

The ODS won the parliamentary election in 1996, but with a much-reduced majority. Troubles were mounting for the party and they came to a head in the Autumn of 1997 when the ruling coalition collapsed after its Christian Democratic component (KDU-ČSL) removed its support over allegations of financial sleaze in the ODS. There soon followed disruptions within the party itself, led by former dissident, Jan Ruml. The intention of Ruml and his supporters was to lever the whole party apparatus away from Vaclav Klaus. This failed. At a specially convened meeting held in the Czech town of Podebrady later that year Klaus was overwhelmingly re-elected as party chairman.

The only alternative now was for the rebels to resign. They did so, forming a new party in the early months of 1998. Called the Freedom Union it was designed to be more free market and pro-European than the ODS. It was obvious to most observers that its major participants were close to President Havel. When an interim government of 'experts' was formed in January 1998 several members of the Freedom Union were awarded key posts. One of them, Michal Lobkowitz, became Minister of Defence and hastily steered the country (despite public disquiet) into NATO membership.

Despite Havel's delight in having an non-elected government of "experts" run the country, parliament had only given the green light for an interim government on the understanding that elections would be held by the summer of 1998. BHHRG monitored the poll held that June [see BHHRG report **Czech Elections 1998**] By then the pundits had written off Mr. Klaus, predicting that the ODS would only garner 11% of the vote. In fact, they did remarkably well coming a close second to the Social Democrats (ČSSD) with 28% .

Several weeks followed in which the leader of the Social Democrats, Miloš Zeman, tried to form a government. The Communists (KSČM) who had taken third place were outlawed as coalition partners by the president. That left the two smaller right and centre parties, the Freedom Union and Christian Democrats (KDU) with, respectively, 8% and 10% of the vote. At one stage it looked as though Ruml's Freedom Union would take part, but the ex-Trotskyite dissident was keen to preserve his bona fides as a right-winger and he refused to join a leftist government. He also demanded a slate of top ministerial jobs for the Freedom Union in the new government which was unacceptable to Zeman.

Only one alternative remained for Zeman: to form a minority government tolerated by the leading opposition party, the ODS. Under a carefully worked out arrangement, Vaclav Klaus's ODS agreed to this proposal, Klaus himself would become chairman of the new parliament. Against all predictions to the contrary, this government has lasted until today, However, the opposition agreement depends heavily on the personal relationship between Klaus and Zeman and the latter has been saying for some time that he will retire as head of the ČSSD in April 2001. This has whetted the appetite of many who suspect that if he goes they will be able to take over the reins of power in the party and end the coalition government agreement with the ODS.

Minority governments are not unknown in Western Europe – for example, there is one in Italy at the moment. However, many Czechs - like people in other former other ex-Communist countries - are provincial in their outlook. They seem to think they are uniquely disadvantaged

by having a minority government. Moreover, they insist that such a government is illegitimate and undemocratic. It is undoubtedly the case that the media has fuelled this unhealthy development. The intellectual nomenklatura's hatred of Klaus bolstered by the manoeuvrings of President Havel and his circle have only served to fan the flames of discontent and disillusion with politicians.

### Havel and Klaus

The relationship between the Czech President and the country's foremost politician is more than a confrontation between two individuals. At heart, it is a metaphor for two very different ideas of how society should be run and organized. Although it was public knowledge that the two men were at loggerheads, the collapse of the Klaus government in 1997 defined the differences between the two men more sharply than anything that had happened before.

In a well-publicized speech delivered to the Czech parliament in December, 1997, soon after the collapse of the coalition government Havel criticized politicians for their dishonesty and lack of integrity. This had been a familiar *sous texte* in many of his public statements and lectures. While the president believes in a form of non-political politics, Klaus has always stressed the importance of creating well-organized political parties to properly anchor democratic institutions in a country. Havel, on the other hand, promotes one of the most potent ideas that has come up in the post-Communist world: a civil society where the views and initiatives of citizen's groups are the guiding force in society rather than elected politicians.

Because of the moral authority earned during his period as a dissident, Havel's regular intrusions into the political life of the Czech Republic have been accorded great respect, particularly in the West. But it is at odds with his public role which is carefully circumscribed by the Czech constitution as a non-executive head of state. Havel is not elected by popular mandate but by members of parliament. Someone with similar powers in a Western country would normally refrain from entering the political fray.

However, over the past few years Havel has become more rather than less involved in day to day politics. Not only has he made his political preferences plain he has also, for example, criticized politicians and his fellow countrymen for their inherent racism over their attitudes to gypsies. He has also granted a number of high profile pardons to people, even associates. In December 2000 he granted what must be his most controversial pardon to date that of Zdenek Ruzicka who had been sentenced in 1997 to 17 years imprisonment for a murder committed in 1992. Ruzicka's wife persuaded a Prague-based lawyer to investigate the grounds for the conviction.

As Ruzicka had only served 3 years in prison the President's actions were, according to Jan Vyklicky of the Czech Union of Judges, out of order: a pardon should never be granted for legal reasons as it challenges the legitimacy of the courts. Havel has also granted pardons in several criminal cases, even before suspects have been charged – something the president's defenders say is in keeping with the provisions of the constitution but which is a clear breach of normal practice. His intrusion into the debate at Czech TV is only the latest example of behaviour many feel to be totally inappropriate to a head of state.

Czechs refer to the people around Havel as 'the Castle Group' in reference to the presidential residence. While there are various non-political advisors, like Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, an Austrian aristocrat with large land holdings in the Czech Republic it is an open secret that politicians like Ruml, Vladimir Mlynař (a former editor of the newspaper *Respekt*) and other Freedom Union colleagues are close friends. The families of many of these people were 'reform' Communists involved in the Prague Spring in 1968. Some Social Democrats, like Petra Buzkova are also regular visitors to the Castle. She expressed 'solidarity' with the strikers and took her sleeping bag down to the Czech television studios during the dispute.

None of this would be so alarming if there was a proper debate in the Czech Republic over the rights and wrongs of the president's actions. Journalists in the West are no different. Most

seem to get their information about the country from one source: former Radio Free Europe's Czech correspondent, Jiří Pehe. Pehe was even opining about politics in Prague when he worked as president Havel's political advisor. One of the founders of Impuls 99 (see below) , he is a regular participant at (well-funded) conferences. Other journalists working for the Western press are *parti pris*. Martin Plichta, *Le Monde's* Prague correspondent was also a signatory of the Impuls petition.

Despite the fact that both local and foreign media harp on about Klaus's control over all aspects of Czech life he has next to no constituency in the place that matters most – the media. No major Czech newspaper supports him and the ODS and some regularly publish scandalous stories about him and the party. The main purveyor of scandal is the leading daily *Mlada Fronta Dnes*. To be fair, it does not only target Vaclav Klaus. It has also levelled accusations of bribery (never proved) against the country's prime minister, Miloš Zeman. As though to embarrass Zeman two of the paper's journalists also implicated him in a plot to discredit other members of the party. Havel pardoned them before a proposed investigation into the affair could take place .

### **The Political Prizes**

Much of the debate that surrounds the nature of politics in the Czech Republic takes place in several well-endowed think-tanks and foundations. The country is not alone in hosting such organizations, but Prague's beauty and relative affluence attracts more of these Western financed bodies than most other places behind the former Iron Curtain.

Among those with a higher profile , are the East-West Institute whose headquarters are based in New York, the Bohemiae Foundation, the Civic Institute and the Institute for European Politics and Economics. Even Czech TV has one : the People in Need Foundation. A new US-backed organization, the Institute for Public Security is in the works dedicated to bolstering the Czech Republic's commitment to NATO.

Many politicians in the Quad coalition have close contacts with these foundations. The Institute for European Politics is partly funded by the European Union and the main thrust of its work is to prepare for entry into the EU. Among its trustees are Ivan Pilip, Petr Matreju and Jan Kasal, all members of the Freedom Union. The Civic Institute receives funding from the US arms manufacturer, Lockheed Martin. Its president, Pavel Bratinka is a member of one of the smaller parties in the Quad coalition, the ODA. Senators Daniel Kroupa and Jiri Skalicky of the ODA are both on its advisory board. Michal Lobkowicz (Freedom Union) is listed as a trustee of the Bohemiae Foundation as is Ivan Pilip's wife, Lucie Pilipova. And Tomas Jezek features on the board of all three foundations. Jezek, Chairman of the Czech Securities and Exchange Commission and a former member of the ODS, called upon Klaus to resign in 1997.

Another major player is the Prague-based investment bank Patria Finance members of which are closely associated with the Freedom Union. Havel's nominee for president of the Czech National Bank, Zdenek Tuma, was once chief economist at the bank.

For many politicians in Prague these foundations are a way of getting closer to the centres of power in Europe. For them, no questions should be raised about the Czech Republic's membership of the European Union despite the likely harsh effects it will have on the country's economy and social development. Membership of the EU will bring lucrative contracts to the Czech Republic - including improvements to the country's infrastructure through upgrading communications and amenities like water purification - an environmental 'must' for EU entry. This will benefit not only Czech investors but, more importantly, large West European companies.

Meanwhile, the United States concentrates its economic priorities on the Czech Republic's membership of NATO. Lockheed Martin (sponsor of the Civic Initiative) is in the forefront of those seeking lucrative contracts for weapons and other military hardware. At the moment the company is participating in a tender to supply between 24 and 36 new supersonic tactical aircraft to the Czech army.

Some politicians, notably Vaclav Klaus, refuse to take an unquestioning line in accepting all EU policies. He feels that the core issue is whether this or that contract is beneficial to the country rather than its potential for lining the pockets of local businessmen and their tame politicians. He also offended the US by publicly opposing the Kosovo War in 1999. For this reason, many foreigners, even those from the right of the political spectrum have abandoned Klaus and sought out the more 'realistic' politicians in the Quad coalition.

But the ODS – and Mr. Klaus – are still, albeit indirectly, in power and elections are not due for another 18 months. How, then, can they and their foreign backers bring about the collapse of the opposition agreement and early elections?

### **Opposition activity**

The Quad and its allies have been trying to get a handle on the situation, since the 1998 election. In 1999 a familiar group of intellectuals signed a document modelled on Charter 77, called Impuls 99. It set out, yet again, the thesis that Czech politics was riddled with corruption and that what was needed was a resurgence of civic values. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Havel was one of its high-profile signatories. In October that year the organizers of Impuls held a conference demanding a more positive approach to the EU – the public, according to the participants, were more enthusiastic about Europe than “some of their politicians”, obviously a veiled reference to Klaus.

Then, later that year a movement called “Thank you, now leave” was set up by a group of former dissidents active in the 1989 revolution. They held a well-attended demonstration in Prague but faded away soon afterwards. People wanted to know why the organizers didn't go forward and create a political party. But, then, as the *raison d'être* of the enterprise was anti-politics it would have been somewhat inconsistent to have jumped on the bandwagon so soon after having denounced politicians so vehemently.

It took another year before the opposition had a fresh opportunity to stir up public discontent - the strike at Czech TV. Although the events that led up to Hodač's appointment and the immediate reaction to it were coloured by internal divisions in the television establishment, the situation soon presented itself to the hungry oppositionists as an opportunity to stir up public disgust. As reported, the strike was well-funded. The expensive sound equipment and lavish posters used at public demonstrations must have been paid for by someone. Some fingers point to the foreign-funded foundations as the conduit for financing this, and other opposition activities.

The Quad has had other, less-publicized, successes in the past few months. The party did well in elections to the Czech Senate in November 2000 picking up 16 seats. The turnout was very low as most Czechs regard the Senate as an expensive irrelevance but the second chamber does have some role to play in the country's political life including a say in any changes to the constitution.

Also, thanks to their connections to Havel parts of a new election law that would have weakened the position of smaller political parties were cut down by the Constitutional Court last month. In November 2000 the president managed to rush through the appointment of his own candidate, Zdenek Tuma, as the next governor of the Czech National Bank before new legislation comes into effect that transfers the power to the government. Some say that the allegedly speedy appointment of Hodac pales into insignificance compared with the haste that accompanied Havel's naming of Tuma.

### **FUTURE PROSPECTS**

**Czech Television:** On 9<sup>th</sup> February parliament appointed a new interim director to run Czech TV, Jiří Balvin. According to Radio Free Europe's report on the same day “ Balvin has 25 years experience in television, but four years ago he was fired as Director of Czech TV's artistic production due to bad financial management”. On 14<sup>th</sup> February the *Prague Post*

quoted him as saying that he wasn't sure that he would be able to conduct the audit. One of his first acts was to fire Jana Bobořikova, her assistant, Vera Valterova and Jindrich Beznoska, the finance director. The rebels announced that their 'strike' was over when they were told that they would not lose their jobs. Vaclav Havel approved, saying that "his first decisions seem to be sensible".

In other words, an illegal coup succeeded with the blessing of the country's president and a group of ambitious politicians. Financial reforms at the station seem further away than ever. Is this, then, likely to be the end of the matter? The new TV Council is supposed to be made up of non-political appointments but that has not assuaged the demands of employees in other country's television stations.

Independent TV is also under attack. Vladimir Źelezny, founder and owner of Nova TV, which has the largest share of viewers in the Czech Republic worries that there will be a process to prevent him from keeping his licence when it next comes up for renewal. There have also been indications that he might be under investigation for financial impropriety. Źelezny is disliked by the Castle establishment – several years ago the Havels sued Nova TV for libel. To add to his problems, Źelezny was known to have offered Hodač the use of Nova's facilities during the strike.

**The Government:** Many predict the demise of the opposition coalition before the next parliamentary elections scheduled for June 2002. Milos Zeman's resignation from leadership of the ČSSD would likely trigger such a move. There is an identifiable group of MPs in the party who would welcome this and happily fall into the arms of the Quad coalition.

The problem for the Quad has always been how to extend its narrow appeal beyond Prague intellectuals and businessmen and into the wider Czech society. To many people they have no programme other than an intensification of the kinds of economic reforms that will put even more of them out of work. To gain any kind of serious foothold in a future government the Quad would have to rely on its Christian Democrat component as the two smaller Quad parties (the ODA and Democratic Union, DU) have no identifiable constituencies and negligible support in public opinion polls. The KDU (which is basically left-leaning) does seem to have grassroots support, - basically from the Catholic peasantry in southern Moravia. This may explain why the party's leader, Cyril Svoboda was recently elected overall chairman of the Quad coalition.

It must also attract voters away from the ODS which been remarkably resilient up to now. But the constant attacks against Mr. Klaus for corruption, and now, manipulating the media have probably taken their toll. If the coalition falls apart there are likely to be defections from the ODS as there have been in the past.

Shortcomings in the Czech election system (basically unchanged from that used in the first Czechoslovak Republic) could also work to the advantage of politicians hungry for power. BHHRG has long thought that the rules governing the conduct of both Czech and Slovak elections are open to abuse. For example, provided with the correct documentation, Czechs can vote anywhere in the republic. It is open to unscrupulous local officials to provide such documentation that would enable those that so wished to go around the country voting several times over. These certificates were used widely in 1998. So, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that some election fraud has taken place in the past and could happen again in the future.

**The President:** President Havel's term of office comes to an end in 2002 and speculation continues about who will succeed him. At one time the favourite was the priest, Tomas Halik. Then, last year, the name of Madelaine Albright was mentioned. Now, former dissident Petr Pithart and chairman of the Senate is being touted due to his success in gaining the release of two Czechs (accused of espionage), from prison in Cuba. Despite the fact that the media constantly alleges that Mr. Klaus covets the presidency, so far he has denied having an interest in the job. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a future government containing Quad coalition members could press for his prosecution (and permanent removal from the political scene) on charges of fraud and financial impropriety. The Estrada/Fujimori

scenario is a potential model for denying Mr. Klaus a role in politics whatever the Czech electorate might think.

The president's much touted support for civil society has amounted to nothing more than the promotion of certain business circles and political elites. But, readers of Gramsci will recognise this as the correct meaning of civil society: the hegemony over society of powerful interest groups rather than organizations giving ordinary people the opportunity to pursue their own destinies.

The president had the chutzpah to compare the appointment of Mr. Hodac with the Communist take-over of 1948. As usual, in the Orwellian world of post-communism the opposite is the case: it is the actions of the strikers and their political supporters (possibly assisted by former state security officials) that recall the events of February 1948. What is certain is that television – the most potent vehicle for news management in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – has been thoroughly politicised in the Czech Republic. Its future – and that of the whole country - lies in the hands of a small group of politicians who are poised to come to power in the not too distant future. The success of their enterprise depends on whether or not ordinary Czechs wake up and take a more serious interest in the political future of their country.