

## The Parliamentary Election in the Czech Republic,

19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> June 1998

The Czech Republic held its second parliamentary election in two years on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> June 1998. The previous right-wing coalition government elected in May 1996 was plagued by problems from its inception. In November 1997 it finally fell apart after a series of scandals led to the defection from the coalition of the Christian Democratic party (KDU-CSL). Since January 1998 the country has been ruled by a 'government of experts' led by ex-central banker Josef Tosovsky. However, the interim government was only accepted by parliament after an agreement was reached to hold early parliamentary elections in June of this year. Opinion polls had for many months put the centre-left, Social Democratic Party (CSSD), in the lead.

Czech politics has been dominated by the figure of Vaclav Klaus since the parliamentary elections of 1992. Over this period his Civic Democratic Party, (ODS), became a by-word in Eastern Europe for economic stability and market reform. However, problems were piling up and by the election of 1996 the ODS's share of the vote fell sharply. As Klaus had once memorably remarked that there was no such thing as dirty money it was not surprising that financial scandals should start to chip away at his popularity. There had been concern for some time about the lack of transparency in the banking sector and shady privatization deals.

On top of this, Klaus's much-vaunted reputation as a monetarist and promoter of private ownership was less than accurate. The low unemployment rate in the Czech Republic was sustained by un restructured industries rather than by a rush into new types of employment. The country's trade deficit was also burgeoning out of control due to a plethora of imports.

However, despite the over-promotion (especially in the West) of Klaus's free-market credentials he was always disliked by some sections of Czech society who saw him as the representative of crude market forces. Such people \_ including intellectuals and ex-dissidents from the Communist era \_ had a champion in the president of the republic, Vaclav Havel. There were also critics of Klaus within the ODS itself. Under the leadership of former Interior Minister Jan Ruml several high-profile members of the ODS deserted Klaus and formed a their own party, the Freedom Union (US), in January 1998.

Klaus's 6 years in power came to an end last year when the ODS was accused of taking illegal contributions for its 1996 election campaign . Many people thought his political career was terminally damaged. In the May 1998 edition of *Transitions* President Havel's advisor, Jiri Pehe, predicted that the ODS would only get 11% of the vote. However, the results of the election confirmed other polls that showed the party bouncing back in the public esteem shortly before the election.

There are several reasons for this resurgence:

### 1. Economic:

It is probably true to say that the Klaus years were neither as good nor as bad as some people thought. However, by the summer of 1998 many Czechs were feeling poorer than they had for some time as the Crown had lost at least 16% of its value in the past year. And, as almost all the larger political parties had been accused by now of some kind of financial impropriety the stigma of corruption had dissipated. By the end of May opinion polls showed a surge of support for the ODS.

### 2. Political

Another factor in the ODS's favour is that it is one of the largest and best-organized political parties to have emerged in Eastern Europe since 1989. With strong local support the party took its message to the grass-roots and probably conveyed to the wary Czech voter a sense of confidence in its ability to govern effectively even though it would have to function again in a coalition. Recent events have also led many to question the country's election system. It is felt by many that a

majority, or mixed majority system would lead to greater stability than the purely proportional voting system now in use.

Although Klaus and the ODS failed to receive the support of any leading Czech newspaper or the broadcast media the party conducted a successful election campaign. It did so by emphasizing Vaclav Klaus's personal appeal as much as anything else.

### **3. The President**

Vaclav Havel's reputation for saintliness has been diminishing in the Czech Republic for some time – if not in the West. On a personal level his second wife, Dagmar, has proved unpopular with Czechs and the controversy surrounding a property deal in Central Prague involving the Havel family somewhat tarnished his reputation for unworldliness. On top of this, the president has suffered two serious bouts of illness in the last two years which many think has affected his judgment.

Whatever the causes, during the same period the president has become more outspoken often seeming to overstep the boundaries of his constitutional functions. Before his narrow re-election in January this year he promised to take an even more active part in Czech politics.

It is well-known that Havel was not a great admirer of Vaclav Klaus. However, he had until December 1997 kept his personal opinions to himself. In a controversial speech delivered after the fall of the Klaus government the president made plain his feelings talking in somewhat opaque but all-too obvious terms about the shortcomings of the outgoing government. He has also expressed his admiration for the young members of the interim government Michal Lobkowitz and Vladimir Mlynar who were also founder members of the Freedom Union. The party's leader Jan Ruml was a close friend from dissident days.

While some people regard Havel's intervention in the Czech political scene as necessary to counter-balance the sleazy reputation of the political parties to others it is alarmingly anti-democratic. If the Czech constitution had intended the president of the republic to have strong executive powers it would have said so and created the provisions for his election by popular mandate rather than by members of the parliament. The president's dislike of political confrontation and his seeming preference for governments of "experts" is also seen by some as an attack on normal party politics.

The president was not only antipathetic to the ODS. He hinted before the election that he was not necessarily obliged to ask the leader of the party with the largest number of votes to form a government after the election. As this was likely to be Milos Zeman, leader of the CSSD, there was dismay in the Socialist camp; Zeman himself denied that he had ever indicated he wasn't interested in the post of prime minister. While Havel acknowledged that a CSSD led government was in no way proto-communistic he let it be known that he would consider asking politicians (in this case young members of the favoured Freedom Union) to join a future government on a non-party basis.

After the election Havel's high-handedness was compounded when he refused to allow the Communist Party (KSCM) to take part in discussions on the formation of a future coalition. As the KSCM had garnered the third largest number of votes and is a legitimate political party in the Czech Republic this seems undemocratic even if, emotionally, many Czechs approved of the move.

#### **Conduct of the poll:**

The country had been divided into 8 constituencies with 13 parties contesting seats for the 200 member parliament. There were 13 separate pieces of paper one for each list and these were delivered in an envelope to each person on the voters' register at his or her home address. The procedure required the voter to bring the lists to the polling station where the original envelope was discarded and a fresh one collected from the election commission after the voter had been checked

on the register. Polling began at 2.00 pm on 19<sup>th</sup> June and ended at 2.00 pm the following day. Some voters claimed to have voted in Prague after noon on the 19<sup>th</sup>.

Members of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group monitored the poll in Kladno, Beroun and in and around the city of Plzen where they watched the count. Although BHHRG observers saw no violations in the polling stations there were many shortcomings in the organizational aspects of the Czech election that in a more politically charged atmosphere could lend themselves to serious violations of the process. At every level of the Czech election there was a lack of precision and attention to detail rarely encountered in the former Communist bloc over the past 7 years.

**Electoral Commissions:** There was a marked difference between polling commissions with cross-party political representation and those without. In Kladno and Beroun, for instance, the commission chairman/chairwoman had a computer print-out detailing the party affiliation of the commission. However, in Plzen there was no such documentation and none of the commissions claimed to know or feel it necessary to ask what political party their members belonged to. No one made any allegations of bias on the part of the commissions but it would be sensible for the Czech CEC to have a uniform policy on this matter in the future as matters of bias and unfair advantage in an election are often deflected by showing that local election commissions are multi-party.

**Voter registers:** Although the registers had been supposedly up-dated there seemed to be several deletions and corrections in every polling station visited. Anyone not on the register but able to provide proof of identity could be added to the list. However, voters were not required to sign the register as is the case in most other countries.

Chairmen were unable to answer accurately how many people were on that polling station's register or to answer at any stage how many people had already voted when observers arrived. Even when asked we were given vague percentages "about 40%" or "about 1/3". This is in marked contrast to polling stations in the FSU where accurate numbers are usually available. As there were always c. 12 people sitting as commission members someone could have been delegated to keep a tally of voters at different times of day. Such information would also be useful for future psephological research.

**Additional Lists:** Although the Czech Republic is small and two days were allowed for voting all stations had an additional list for people who found themselves away from home. To avail themselves of this facility the voter had to apply for a certificate from his local government office which was signed (although not dated). On production of the certificate a person could vote anywhere and be put on an additional list which in some places numbered a handful of people but in others many more: 100 delegates to a medical conference in Plzen were able to vote near their conference hotel in the town.

It seems perverse that Czechs who live abroad are not allowed a postal vote but people living in the republic who find themselves a few miles away from their home can vote elsewhere. This is a system patently open to abuse – in the discredited post-war elections (1945-8) in Eastern Europe voting certificates such as these were one of the main ways of falsifying the poll. Corrupt local officials can, theoretically at least, issue any number of them and it is very difficult to check up afterwards. As we learnt that a Czech acquaintance who has lived abroad for 30 years is still on a voter register in Prague 5 the possibilities for fraud become even more imaginable.

**Ballot papers:** As previously stated, commission chairmen were universally imprecise with their statistics. This extended to the most delicate of matters in an election: the number of ballot papers (and, in this case, envelopes) received at the polling station. Few had the precise figures although some seemed to think they had received the same number of envelopes as registered voters – they were obviously gambling on the fact that there would not be a 100% turn-out in order for there to be sufficient envelopes if people turned up to vote with certificates. As for extra ballot papers, in some places there were as many as 400 extra sets.

Envelopes were stamped with a seal but not signed by commission members. Attitudes to the ballot papers themselves were casual. One commission chairman handed our observers a set each as 'gifts' – something usually frowned upon – without invalidating them. At the end of counting there seemed to be no procedure for handling extra ballot papers.

### The Count: (Plzen 91)

The count at this station was conducted swiftly and competently. There was a problem initially in tallying the number of envelopes handed out with the number of votes in the box but this was sorted out satisfactorily. However, when the count had ended 5 extra envelopes were found and had to be included in the final result.

The procedures for dealing with unused ballot papers were casual – there were over 400 sets in this polling station and they remained lying around after the count was over. On the other hand, used envelopes were counted and packed up to be sent to the district offices.

#### . National Results:

(percentage of the vote and number of seats in parliament):

CSSD (Social Democrats) .....	32.3%	(74)
ODS (Democratic Citizen's Party) .....	27.7%	(63)
KSCM (Communists) .....	11%	(24)
KDU-CSL (Christian Democrats).....	9%	(20)
US (Freedom Union) .....	8.6%	(19)

The other parties on the list failed to reach the 5% threshold for representation in the parliament including the Republican Party (3.9%) and the newly formed Pensioners Party (3%). Their results came as something of a surprise as opinion polls had indicated that both parties would do well and their prospects occupied a large amount of media attention.

### Conclusion

The Czech election was conducted in a relaxed atmosphere and the parties had adequate opportunities for putting their programmes across to the public. However, a complicated voting system compounded by a lack of precision in areas like voter registration and accounting for ballot papers could lead to problems in future elections. Perhaps the Czechs are a little too relaxed and confident about their relatively recent return to democracy – things in Central Europe have changed for the worst before now.

It also seems unnecessary to have two days of voting in such a small country and to allow its inhabitants to vote away from home with such ease. Such a system should be stopped and measures taken only for Czechs abroad to vote away from home by initiating a proper system of postal voting. Ballot papers should only be available in the polling stations. The present system of sending them to peoples' homes is open to the possibility of fraud or intimidation. Our observers heard of cases of husbands insisting that their wives fill in the ballots at home and only take the 'approved' list to the polling station.

### Aftermath

Inevitably, the days following the election have been taken up with attempts to form a viable governing coalition. Despite the president's claims that he was not obliged to ask the leader of the party with the most votes to form a government Havel asked Zeman to try to do so on 22<sup>nd</sup> June. The outcome was not expected immediately.

Speculation surrounded who could, or would, cooperate with whom. Apart from the Communists (who had been excluded from coalition talks by Havel) all the successful parties had differences of opinion with each other. The most likely outcome is still that the CSSD, and KDU will somehow persuade the Freedom Union (US) to join them in government. The problem here is that the US has stated consistently – Ruml in particular – that the party will not join a coalition dominated by the leftist CSSD. However, other members of the party are thought to be more flexible and it is an open secret that this is the formation most popular with 'the Castle', the president's residence. There will

be some explaining to do to US voters many of whom supported the party as a new, untarnished vehicle for the right.

However, it has been suggested that Zeman will fail in his bid to woo the US and that the ODS with 27% of the vote would then try to form a government – supported by the KDU and the US. This solution, while attractive to the right, poses all sorts of problems not least of which is that it would produce basically the same government that collapsed last year. It would also bring Vaclav Klaus back to power as prime minister. Rumours persist in Prague that Klaus intends to resign passing the mantle of ODS leadership to a younger, less abrasive politician. But this is probably wishful thinking. Party strategists must know that without Klaus the party would never have made its spectacular recovery in the election and that – for the immediate future – he is indispensable.

It is interesting to reflect that the debate over the future government both in the media and official pronouncements dwelt on the manoeuvrings of the Right. Despite getting over 42% of the vote, the Left appeared to be strangely marginalized. Most significantly, the future disposition of the US seems to lie at the root of everything.

There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, much of the media supports the US as does the President and his entourage. Jiri Pehe who directs the political department in the President's office and writes regularly in the Czech and foreign media manages, somewhat deftly, to straddle both camps. Pehe has regularly "talked up" the Freedom Union stating, for example, in *Transitions* (May 1998) that the US was the second most popular party in the Czech Republic after the Social Democrats.

Secondly, it is the kind of party favoured by politicians in Europe for its pro-European and pro-NATO policies – these people never forgave Klaus for his occasional bouts of Euroscepticism. Also, several party members were in power as part of the ODS-led government during which time, whatever their professions of incorruptibility, they were in close touch with business and banking interests.

However, the satisfaction no doubt felt by the US as it plays the role of kingmaker may be short-lived. Many predict a serious world economic down-turn following the Asian crisis. In which case, the Czech Republic with its fragile economy would suffer and its government held to account. Free marketeers and social visionaries would suffer alike. It could be that the real winners of the Czech election will be the parties, either left or right, who end up in opposition this time round.