

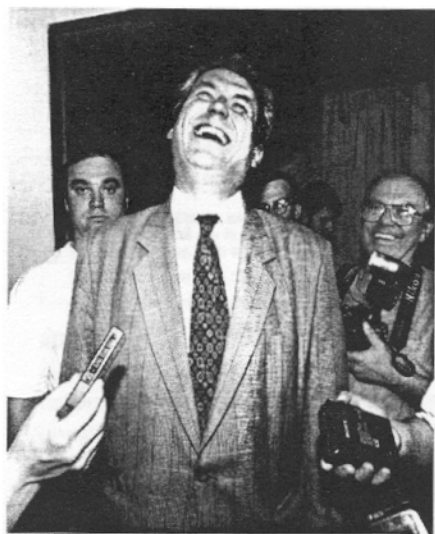
Elections Result in Surprise Stalemate

Conservative reformer Vaclav Klaus's party placed first in the Czech parliamentary elections, yet the real winner was the Social Democratic Party, whose upsurge in support has deprived Klaus's coalition of a parliamentary majority. Any minority government will find it difficult to govern, and the country may be headed for early elections

by JIRI PEHE

THE FIRST PARLIAMEN-
tary elections in the indepen-
dent Czech Republic, held on
31 May–1 June, have changed
the country's political landscape and its
style of politics. After four years of gov-
erning without serious challenge from
the fragmented opposition, Prime Min-
ister Vaclav Klaus and his coalition allies
lost their parliamentary majority, largely
because of the strong showing by Milos
Zeman's Social Democrats (CSSD),
who came in second, just 3 percentage
points behind Klaus's Civic Democratic
Party (ODS). The CSSD is the real win-
ner of the elections; it has managed to
more than quadruple its popular support
from some 6 percent in 1992 to 26 per-
cent in 1996, apparently capturing most
of the votes that went to smaller leftist
parties in 1992. As the strongest opposi-
tion party, the CSSD will determine the
fate of any minority government.

Paradoxically, the Czech parliamen-
tary elections did not amount to a rejec-
tion of the Klaus government's reforms,
nor has there been a truly significant
shift to the left. In fact, Klaus's ODS and
its two coalition allies — the Civic
Democratic Alliance (ODA) and the
Christian Democratic Union–Czecho-
slovak People's Party (KDU-CSL) —
have increased their overall popular
support in comparison with the elections



Social Democrat Milos Zeman savors victory. His party placed second in the elections but holds the most political cards.

of 1992 (see Table 1). Yet, despite this relatively good showing, the coalition lost six seats in comparison with 1992.

The coalition was partly hurt by the intricacies of the Czech electoral law, under which the votes cast for the parties that fail to win more than 5 percent of popular support are redistributed among those parties that passed the 5 percent threshold.¹ Seats are allocated on the basis of the results in each of the eight electoral districts; the total number of parliamentary seats allocated to each district depends on the number of residents. While the ODS won in five districts, scoring a huge victory in Prague (with some 44 percent of popular support), it lost to the CSSD in three large, economically depressed districts: northern Moravia, southern Moravia, and northern Bohemia; in 1992, the ODS won in all eight. The result of this electoral arithmetic means fewer seats for the coalition, even though it increased its popular support nationwide.

REASONS BEHIND THE 'DEFEAT'

Although the overall vote for the left has not increased significantly compared with the 1992 elections, Zeman's achievement is remarkable. He has

managed to consolidate the democratic left, creating a strong opposition force that has been able to speak, above all, for those who have not benefited from Klaus's reforms. The CSSD, while acknowledging the overall relative success of the Czech Republic, has emphasized that the country does have a number of pressing problems it must deal with in the areas of corruption, crime, housing, and the badly functioning education and health-care systems.

Some analysts have suggested that many voters who supported the CSSD did not, in fact, vote for the CSSD but, rather, against the ODS.² The ODS, and Klaus in particular, have been accused of displaying increasing "arrogance" and overconfidence, as they governed virtually unchecked by the splintered opposition. Before and during the election campaign, the coalition parties, confident of their victory, spent much time challenging each other rather than the opposition.

The ODS ran a passive, backward-looking campaign, which was apparently good enough to recapture the votes the party won in 1992 but not good enough to increase the ODS's support above the 30 percent Klaus hoped to receive. The ODS's electoral slogan — "We have shown we can do it" — was seen by many as putting too much emphasis on the party's past achievements rather than its vision of the future.

Finally, support for the extreme-left Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) and the extreme-right Republican Party (SPR-RSC) remains strong. The Communists garnered 10.3 percent of the vote and the Republicans 8 percent, taking a total of some 18.3 percent of the popular support and 40 seats away from democratic parties. In comparison with 1992, support for the Communists declined by about 2 percent, while support for the Republicans grew by 2 percent. (In 1992, the KSCM ran as part of a broad leftist coalition called the Left Bloc, which later splin-

¹ See Jiri Pehe, "The Electoral Law," *Report on Eastern Europe*, no. 11, 16 March 1990.

² Czech Television, Radio Free Europe, 2 June 1992.

tered. The Left Bloc received 14 percent of the popular vote. If one adds the 1996 vote for reform-communist parties that split away from the Left Bloc to that of the KSCM, the support for communists declined by 2 percent.)

FORMING A GOVERNMENT

President Vaclav Havel met with the three right-of-center parties' leaders and with Zeman on 3 June for the first round of talks on how to form a new government. He ruled out involving the two extremist parties in the talks. After the talks, Havel announced that he thought the current right-of-center coalition should form a minority government. He avoided, however, proposing Klaus for the post of prime minister, saying that he would appoint the politician who will generate enough "consensus." Both the CSSD and Klaus's ODS have ruled out a grand coalition.³

The CSSD initially implied that it would not accept Klaus as the new prime minister, mentioning instead KDU-CSL leader Josef Lux or Foreign Minister Josef Zieleniec of the ODS, but on 4 June it indicated that its opposition to Klaus is not absolute. However, the party did make clear that it will attach a number of other conditions to supporting a minority right-of-center government. For example, it demanded posts in the leadership of the parliament, which the opposition parties were excluded from by Klaus's coalition in 1992.

On 6 June, Havel asked Klaus to form a minority government, indicating that the CSSD would receive leadership posts in parliament in exchange for supporting the government. The CSSD indicated that the right-of-center government would have to alter its policies in housing, education, health care, and welfare to reflect CSSD goals.

Should Klaus fail, Zeman is unlikely to be able to form a minority coalition government on his own, even if the ODA and the KDU-CSL joined him and he received the silent support of the Communists. Such a coalition would probably turn out to be unstable and, at some point, unacceptable to the right-of-center ODA and the centrist KDU-CSL.

The last option appears to be calling new elections and perhaps temporarily

Table 1: Czech Election Results

Party	Result in 1992	Result in 1996	Seats in 1996
ODS	29.73%	29.62%	68
KDU-CSL	6.28%	8.08%	18
ODA	5.93%	6.36%	13
CSSD	6.53%	26.44%	61
KSCM	14.05%	10.33%	22
SPR-RSC	5.98%	8.01%	18

In 1992, the KSCM ran as part of the Left Bloc coalition; the ODS ran in coalition with the Christian Democratic Party, with which it merged in 1995

Source: CTK, 3 June 1996; *Hospodarske noviny*, 3 June 1993

appointing a government of experts. Elections, however, cannot be called before spring 1997 because the Czech constitution prohibits dissolving the parliament and calling new elections until a Senate is in place. The first-ever Senate elections will be held in November.

The election results have greatly increased the role of President Havel, who had been a largely ceremonial figure since 1992. In this impasse, he has been crucial in helping find compromises. Havel is certain to push for solutions that do not upset political stability in the country, as he has always supported politics based on consensus seeking rather than confrontation.

POLITICAL CULTURE

Despite the post-election stalemate and the possibility that the results will make it more difficult for the government to push through radical economic and privatization measures, the elections had a number of positive features: no irregularities were reported, voter participation was high (more than 75 percent), and the number of parties in the parliament decreased to six. There appears to be a clear trend toward the narrowing of the political spectrum, with the ultimate result of having only three or four viable parties with clearly defined ideologies in the parliament.

The election results also mark the consolidation of parliamentary democracy, as all top political leaders will now be present in the parliament. In 1992, most of these politicians were elected to the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly, which was abolished after the split of Czechoslovakia. As a result, most government ministers and top party leaders were not members of the Czech parlia-

ment. This year's elections mark a clear shift from the executive to the legislature; in the past four years, the government has dominated Czech politics.

The emergence of a strong opposition party is a blessing in disguise. Political culture in the country has suffered in the last four years because the ruling coalition governed virtually unopposed. The ODS leaders, and Klaus in particular, have tended to disregard or show disrespect for not only the opposition and the media but frequently their own coalition allies as well. The lack of political bipolarity, combined with the relative success of reforms, has caused Czech media to become predominantly pro-government. The ODS has blocked decentralization and the creation of an ombudsman, claiming that such measures were aimed at weakening its power. It seems that the ODS and its allies will now have to seek compromises and take into account the opposition's demands, which may improve the quality of political discourse in the country. Political complacency and occasional arrogance are likely to be replaced by realism and more modesty.

STABILITY ASSURED

The results of the elections do not necessarily mean that the Czech Republic will become politically unstable or that it will abandon its reform program. Unlike elections in some other post-communist countries, the Czech elections have resulted in a clear mandate for democratic parties. The privatization program is basically completed, and, as far as the economy is concerned, at this stage the country needs to deal more with fine-tuning what has been accomplished and with social matters than with large-scale reforms. Moreover, the reform of areas such as housing, welfare, education, and health care may benefit from input by the Social Democrats.

Although the country may not face instability, it is likely to witness a lot of politicking as well as attempts to make deals behind the scenes and to find compromises that may prove to be short-lived. In the end, such improvisation may not be enough, and new elections may have to be called. ■

³*Mlada fronta Dnes*, 3 June 1996.