

Politics of Crisis

Jiří Pehe

The current and much discussed crisis in the Czech Republic started as a crisis of politics on two different levels – communication and leadership. First, there was a communication breakdown between the opposition and the coalition and, later, between the coalition and the public. Politics, as one of the most important ways in which a democratic system established internal communication, failed. The leadership crisis followed almost logically – politicians who cannot communicate with society cannot lead. How did this happen?

The first signs of serious problems appeared in 1993-94 when the three-party, center-right ruling coalition began using both its comfortable majority in the parliament and the fact that the opposition was fragmented to avoid discussing important issues with the parties on the other side of the parliamentary floor.

Communication was not working within the coalition either. The Civic Democratic Party (ODS) of Václav Klaus used its dominant position within the coalition to frequently overrule its two junior governmental partners – the Christian Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) and the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA). The coalition government adopted the highly unusual practice of voting on important issues. Since the ODS had a majority of ministerial portfolios within the cabinet, it could overrule its coalition partners any time it wanted.

In the absence of a strong opposition, a developed civil society, and an impartial system of civil service, the coalition parties became embedded within the state. Preserving their political and state administration posts became gradually more important than generating new ideas and finishing various reform projects. By 1995 the coalition had its eyes set on the 1996 elections and it lost the forward motion that had become associated with the Klaus government.

At the same time, Klaus – in an effort to attract voters – declared that the transformation process was

over. But such statements created a crisis of expectations. With the belt-tightening era ostensibly over, ordinary people began to demand a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth – something socialist parties traditionally do better than liberals. At the same time, the we-know-it-all political style combined with the inability – or unwillingness – of the coalition parties to clearly state what they had in mind for the country in the areas of housing, energy, education, and health made the coalition seem ossified and arrogant to an increasing number of people. As a result, the coalition suffered a defeat in the June 1996 elections that it could have easily avoided.

Following the elections, it quickly became apparent that the coalition parties were unable to cope with a situation in which they were under constant pressure from a strong opposition. Rather than using this challenge to improve communication with the public and the opposition, they started moving in the opposite direction. They were "helped" by the opposition Social Democrats, who – despite their electoral success – continued to maintain a highly confrontational, and at times hysterical, political style. The coalition parties adopted a similar style.

Political discourse quickly degenerated into mindless confrontation. Political battles were fought over trivialities; big issues – such as various unfinished reform projects – remained untouched. The confrontation between the opposition and the coalition had two specific features. First, it was a highly personal fight – most often involving Klaus and Social Democratic leader Miloš Zeman, who dislike each other intensely. Second, the public was left out. By November 1996, opinion polls indicated that many voters had become disgusted with politics and politicians in general. Only 30 percent of eligible voters showed up to cast votes in the Senate elections. This important warning was, however, ignored by leading politicians.

Paradoxically, the government had a chance to regain some fresh political dynamism in the fall during a rash of banking and investment fund scandals. The government could have used such warning signs to analyze its failures and outline a clear vision of the future. Instead, it hesitated. When the coalition finally announced its package of austerity measures in April, the economy was itself on the brink of crisis. The economic climate had been adversely affected by the government's own leadership crisis, meaning its inability to address important issues, such as the state budget and trade deficits, the overly rapid growth of wages, unfinished reform projects, or the lack of transparency on the capital markets.

Entirely in line with its previously displayed lack of self-reflection and lack of political culture, the government failed to implement cabinet changes to go along with the "package." As a result, the package has politically failed. The political crisis has continued to deepen – and now, in the wake of the sharp depreciation in the currency, the Czech Republic may also experience a full-blown economic crisis.

The only way to save the current coalition is, at this point, the resignation of the entire government. A new government, headed by someone other than Václav Klaus – whose policies have fueled the crisis – would have to come up with a new comprehensive program and present it to parliament. Unfortunately, the ODS is probably not ready to sacrifice Klaus. The ODS was created as Klaus's party and without him, it could easily disintegrate. Moreover, Klaus himself is not likely to assist in the search for acceptable solutions.

Under such circumstances, the most likely scenario is that the revamped but still unpopular government will announce a stabilization program and will attempt to govern. It is not likely to regain the public's trust and it is not likely to have enough dynamism to carry out any major changes. Zeman may be right when he predicts that the country is headed for early elections in 1998. ■

Jiří Pehe is the director of the Regional Specialist Unit at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and a member of the editorial board at *The New Presence*.