

Government crisis is down to communication

By Jiří Pehe

The government's reshuffle and the stabilization measures announced May 28 are not likely to salvage the ailing coalition. They have come too late and only under extreme pressure from the public. And the reshuffle, affecting only three ministries, is — like so many recent steps of this government — mostly cosmetic.

President Václav Havel suggested earlier that a resignation of the entire government would be a better solution, and he may be right. Despite agreeing to the stabilization measures, the coalition is increasingly disappointed and would have a difficult time selling itself to a skeptical public.

For months, the government, and Prime Minister Václav Klaus in particular, had resisted not just personnel changes. Until the rapidly worsening macroeconomic indicators forced the government in April to announce its package of corrective measures, Klaus had been unwilling to even admit any failures.

No banking scandal or collapse of yet another investment fund was considered a significant enough failure to prompt the government or individual ministers to admit political responsibility. When the government finally admitted some of its mistakes and acted to "correct" the economy, it failed to admit that individual ministers or the government could be politically responsible for the mistakes. And this is one of the reasons the package proved to be politically unsuccessful.

In analyzing the developments in the past few months, political observers have talked about an economic crisis, a social crisis or even a crisis of the entire post-1989 political system. In reality, what Havel has called a "foul social mood" or a suffocating atmo-

sphere in society has been caused mainly by the inability of the government, and the coalition parties in general, to communicate with society, among themselves, and with political opponents.

The coalition, and Klaus' Civic Democratic Party (ODS) in particular, began losing its ability to communicate its policies to the public not long after the elections in 1992 that gave the coalition a comfortable majority in Parliament. Unchallenged by the fragmented opposition, the coalition parties were able to implement their policies without much discussion. They gradually stopped explaining their various steps to the public. Moreover, in the absence of both an impartial civil-service system and a developed civil society — which would serve as cushions separating them from the state — they began growing together with state institutions.

The ODS, as the strongest party, was particularly affected by this process, becoming eventually so ossified and devoid of new ideas that it was incapable of moving forward with reform policies. The coalition spent its energy more on preserving its power than on formulating and enforcing daring policies. Sensing this loss of forward motion and being unhappy about the coalition's arrogant style, many voters preferred to vote for the opposition parties in the 1996 elections.

Unused to a strong opposition, the coalition after June 1996 accepted the confrontational style of the Social Democrats — a development that transformed Czech politics into constant battles over trivialities. Confused and engaged in constant battles with the opposition, the coalition — and Klaus in particular — gradually completely lost their ability to lead.

The crisis the Czech Republic now finds itself in is, above all, a leadership crisis. The

crisis of leadership and the crisis of communication are, of course, closely related. The personnel changes in the government may partly revive the coalition but, in the long run, they will not save the coalition.

First, Josef Lux's Christian Democrats, who started distancing themselves from coalition partners the ODS and the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA) last year, may not be willing to take responsibility for failures that — as polls suggest — people associate mainly with Klaus' party.

Second, Lux is right when he says that a post-Klaus era has begun. Klaus simply is too rigid to be able to adjust to new circumstances. As long as Klaus remains at the helm, chances of true self-reflection and of renewing communication with society are dim not just because Klaus has proved, again and again, that he can reflect on his mistakes only under the pressure of extreme circumstances. It is also because fewer and fewer people believe that Klaus can really lead the country out of its current malaise. The politician most likely to replace Klaus is Lux himself. A politician with a future, such as Lux, may find it increasingly difficult to continue working under a politician "of the past," such as Klaus.

The irony is that it was Klaus' early successes — his ability to both implement a process of reform and to communicate his vision to the people — that gave Czechs a benchmark against which to measure their politicians. There is no guarantee that a new government will do a better job of negotiation with the opposition, implementing reforms, and communicating a vision to the Czech people. But perhaps it will have learned a few lessons.

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