

Czech YES in EU referendum

The Czech vote on EU accession proved a baffling affair, with many 'yes' supporters backing the 'no' campaign's arguments. Even the opinionated president failed to back one cause or other, and still refuses to say which way he voted. **By Jiri Pehe in Prague**

ON 13TH AND 14TH JUNE the Czech Republic became the seventh country of the 10 candidates for European Union membership to say 'yes' to joining. More than 55 per cent of eligible voters cast their ballots and 77 per cent of them endorsed membership.

The results were surprising because the Czech Republic differs from most other candidate countries in two significant ways. First, it is the only candidate country whose politicians are deeply split over EU membership. Second, it is the only nation among those which have held referendums so far in which there was no minimum voter turnout to make the referendum valid.

Without the urgency of a turnout requirement, and in the face of political bickering over the issue, it is a remarkable fact that 77 per cent of Czechs who voted said 'yes' to the EU. The Czechs in the end showed that on average they are more rational and pragmatic than many of their corrupt politicians.

Czech Eurosceptics

The two major political parties that constitute the opposition are strongly Eurosceptic. While the unreformed Communist Party had openly asked its voters to vote against membership, the conservative Civic Democrats had said there was no alternative to membership but, at the same time, repeatedly expressed strong doubts about the EU. The two parties together hold 99 seats in the 200-seat Czech parliament.

The opposition of the Communists to EU membership is understandable. The

party is a rarity in modern Europe – it is one of the last vestiges of Leninist-Communism in any country that is to become an EU member. Even the East German Communists have changed their name and adopted a rhetoric that is much more social-democratic than that of their Czech counterparts.

Although political analysts often describe them as a far-left party, the Czech Communists serve several extremist constituencies. They combine leftist recipes

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for the economy with xenophobia, nationalism and anti-globalisation attitudes. But they also recruit their followers both from among the socially disadvantaged and far-right extremists. The Communists' leaders are well aware that in the EU the party will not have many friends and its influence may be on the wane.

Klaus's right-wing Civic Democratic party has become increasingly conservative and sceptical with regard to EU membership. Klaus, who was prime minister from 1992 to 1997 and actually submitted the Czech Republic's application for EU membership eight years ago, has hardly

missed a chance in the past five years to criticise the European Union. On the one hand, he claims the Czechs have no alternative to membership; on the other hand, he always gives a long list of the EU's various failings. The Union, in his view, is bureaucratic and socialist. It suffers from a severe democratic deficit. Further political unification is undesirable; the Czechs could dissolve in the European superstate like a sugar cube in a cup of coffee.

Although Klaus officially left the post of Civic Democrat chairman in December 2002, his influence over the party is great despite his position as Czech president.

Most party leaders identify with Klaus's views on the EU. As a result, the Civic Democrats endorsed EU membership, but did so in the most half-hearted manner imaginable. In fact, the barrage of negative comments about the EU from the Civic Democrat leaders was so intense that it was not clear why the party was still claiming there was no alternative to membership. A few days before the referendum on membership, the Civic Democrats put up a smokescreen by warning that even if Czechs approved EU accession, another referendum would be necessary next year to ratify the new EU constitution.

Jan Zahradil, deputy chairman of the Civic Democrats, and one of the three Czech delegates to the Convention devising the constitution, went so far as to make a show of leaving the Convention on the eve of the referendum – allegedly in protest against the body's manipulation by big states. Zahradil, the chief architect of the party's attitudes to the EU, has always agreed with Klaus that further political integration should be stopped, and that the EU should, if possible, return to what it used to be before the Maastricht Treaty.

A silent president

Klaus himself refused to reveal how he would vote in the referendum, becoming the only head of state in any candidate country to do so. Political analysts argued that Klaus had, in fact, endorsed the 'yes' vote by travelling in April to Athens for



President Klaus prepares to cast his vote.

the signing of the accession treaty. His actions before the referendum, however, suggested otherwise; in public speeches, the Czech president even hardened his criticism of the EU.

An analysis of Klaus's views clearly suggests that if he in the end voted 'yes' he did so against his beliefs. In fact, the Czech president not only refused to say how he would vote before the referendum but also refused to reveal how he had voted after he cast his ballot, commenting only that he "made the right decision". After the results of the referendum were announced, Klaus remained silent for several hours, skipping a big celebration that took place at Prague Castle (the president's seat) which was attended by government officials, including the prime minister.

Mirek Topolánek, the chairman of the Civic Democrats, also refused to say how he voted. The party's shadow minister of transportation Martin Říman and shadow minister of internal affairs Ivan Langer

had said before the vote they would vote against membership.

There are many possible reasons for such attitudes. The main source of opposition to the EU among leaders of the Civic Democrats does not stem from their proclaimed conservative views but from the fact the party presided over the privatisation process that created powerful economic groups tied to the party. Many of those entrepreneurs have become rich only because they have political connections and have been able to operate in the legal twilight zone. EU standards and emphasis on the rule of law are a threat to what former president Vaclav Havel described as "Mafioso capitalism".

A victory for the government

The ruling coalition did its best to convince the Czechs, including the voters of the Civic Democrats and the Communists, that they should support membership. The government-sponsored

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campaign was criticised by political opponents but, in fact, it was quite canny. Rather than bombarding people with information they could not absorb in the last few days before the referendum, TV spots and billboards focused on portraying positive experiences of other small nations that had become members of the EU. A Portuguese fisherman, a Greek restaurant owner and an Austrian pensioner became household figures for many Czechs.

Civic groups of different kinds received funds from the government to run their own campaigns. Representatives of some of them managed to travel to hundreds of places across the country, to explain the benefits and the possible drawbacks of EU membership. Perhaps the most visible of those groups, called 'Yes to Europe', managed to gain direct backing from Havel, who endorsed EU membership three days before the referendum at the group's rally in the centre of Prague.

In the end the Czechs ignored the political bickering, and voted calmly on the issue before them. The resolute 'yes' vote is not perhaps an expression of great idealism and philosophical considerations that they could hear so often from, for example, Vaclav Havel. It is instead a pragmatic vote of a pragmatic nation which realised that the advantages of EU membership by far exceed the drawbacks.

Unfortunately, the strong presence of Eurosceptic forces suggests that the Czech Republic may be the *bête noire* of Europe. It is almost certain that Vaclav Klaus and his political allies will not miss a chance to slow the process of European integration.

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On the other hand, the very political future of the Czech Eurosceptics is in jeopardy now. The referendum showed that they have become quite alienated from their voters: almost 90 per cent of the supporters of the Civic Democrats and some 40 per cent of Communist Party supporters voted in favour of membership. The referendum could thus become a turning-point not only in the Czech Republic's relations with the EU but also in Czech domestic politics. **EB**