

THE POLITICAL TASK OF A HANDICAPPED PRESIDENCY

Jiří PEHE

[THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS WILL WITHOUT A DOUBT TRANSFORM
THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE CZECH PRESIDENCY.]

With the slogan “Europe without barriers,” the Czech European Union presidency commenced on the first of January and will continue through the end of June 2009. This slogan and the agenda it carries were, however, born before the world economic crisis. Now, in its midst, the crisis will without a doubt transform the political context of the Czech presidency.

As the new leaders of the EU, it is likely that the Czechs will have to rely on improvisation as the daily array of new challenges crop up out of this present sickly state of international affairs. The question remains, how will the Czech Republic deal with these challenges?

Organization versus Politics

The current government began preparing for the presidency fairly late due to the extreme polarization of Czech politics. Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek de facto dismissed the entire team in charge of the preparations for the presidency. Formed by the previous government, this team was led by Social Democrats. While most of the former presiding countries began to prepare three years in advance, the Czech Republic spent only a year and a half.

Even so, we expect that the Czechs will find reasonable success in the organizational aspect of the presidency. This is mainly because we have traditionally excelled at improvisation. It is possible, however, that some of the larger EU states may be skeptical about the organizational abilities of a former Soviet satellite. If such skepticism takes root, the direction taken in the next six months may fall under the joint auspices of “Old Europe” and the Czech presidency.

The political aspects of the presidency are more problematic for the Czech Republic. The current crisis has created what would be a difficult situation for any member of the EU to provide leadership. But a country that is relatively new to the EU and previously belonged to the Soviet bloc will have it even harder.

Unfortunately, this is not the end of Czech handicaps. Upon taking office, the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) adopted strong Euro-skeptic rhetoric. The ODS’s stance towards Europe had been a major source of differentiation between their own party and the governing Social Democratic Party (ČSSD). To immediately change their rhetoric after eight years in opposition would have

been difficult. As such, the Czechs dug themselves a deep hole out of which it will now be difficult to climb.

On the other hand, their inability in 2007 to replace their Euro-skepticism with pragmatism led the rest of Europe to view the Czech Republic as an ally of problematic Poland, who was at that time governed by the Kaczynski brothers. This behavior gave the Czech Republic a certain image which still persists today, despite the fact that the ODS and government amended their attitude towards the EU in 2008.

The ODS’s slow transition towards a more pragmatic attitude was related to the party’s inner situation. For many years, the party’s ideology has been formed by Václav Klaus who retained a relatively strong influence on party politics even after he ceased to be the party leader in 2002. When Mirek Topolánek became the new party leader in 2006, he hesitated to draw a connection between popular support for the party and support for Klaus.

Thus, the ODS wrestled for some years in this politically schizophrenic situation. Public opinion polls repeatedly showed that ODS voters were predominantly pro-European. But the post-Klausean leadership – perhaps fearing conflict with Klaus – stuck to the Euro-skeptic line. Perhaps this schizophrenia will come to an end after Klaus’s theatrical departure from honorary party leader at the ODS rally in December 2008. In any case, it will take some time for the party to

emancipate itself from old ideological structures.

The Lisbon Treaty

A significant handicap in the political dimension of the Czech presidency has become – rather symbolically – the Lisbon Treaty. Although the treaty, which would stand in place of the rejected European constitution, has been negotiated and signed by the pragmatic Topolánek, a significant number of party senators and MPs have remained skeptical of the treaty.

The decision made by ODS senators to send the treaty to the Constitutional Court for review was primarily an expression of inner disunity. Under question is the compatibility between some aspects of the Lisbon Treaty and the Czech constitution. In one way this move was advantageous for Topolánek – if the Constitutional Court does not find any contradictions between the Lisbon Treaty and the Czech Constitution, he will be able to convince more ODS legislators to support it.

But these aspects of the Czech attitude towards the Lisbon Treaty and the EU, which are a product of somewhat Byzantine standards on the domestic political scene, are hard to explain beyond Czech borders. And the delayed ratification of the Lisbon Treaty only further promotes this problematic image of the Czech Republic abroad. As a result, the EU's faith in the Czech's ability to lead the Union was weakened still more.

In this context, it will be especially difficult for the Czech Republic who must, as the presiding EU country, see through the successful ratification of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland. It will be necessary to change the view of Irish voters in the second Lisbon Treaty referendum through opening up a dialogue and promoting compromise. The rest of the EU rightfully suspected that this will be challenging for the presiding country, but especially for one which has not yet ratified the treaty itself.

Government Instability

The fact that Topolánek's government became a de facto minority government at the end of 2008 did not help the image of the Czech Republic abroad. After local and senate elections in which the govern-

ment coalition suffered a considerable defeat, the degree of support behind the government was no longer clear. The situation was further complicated by the inner struggle within the ODS as Topolánek and Klaus clashed personally and their respective supporters fell into conflict as well.

The ČSSD was willing to enter a truce with the government which would run throughout the period of the presidency. Due, however, to the lack of flexibility on both sides, no such agreement was reached before the presidency began. And so, while the ODS government is now firmly in the seat of the EU presidency, a real threat exists that it could receive a vote of no-confidence at home.

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Czech political crisis, there were nevertheless some voices from other EU states, which warned that the presidency was going to be held by a government with an unstable domestic situation.

Eurozone

As already mentioned, the Czech's EU presidency has been weakened by the economic crisis. It is clear that regardless of the Czech's desired agenda, the most imperative problems of 2009 will relate to the economy and European finances.

The presiding country, which is neither a member of the Eurozone nor has a definite date for adopting the Euro, is automatically in danger. Whether the Czech Republic wants it or not, a certain amount of sidelining will surely occur since Eurozone members will have to run their own agenda.

President Klaus

Another distinctive characteristic of the Czech presidency is the fact that the country's head of state is a politician who does not even try to mask his skepticism towards further European integration or his aversion to the Lisbon Treaty. Furthermore, according to the Czech constitution, the head of the executive is actually the prime minister, which makes the P. M. the president of the EU. It is obvious that many foreign observers do not know the separation of powers between president and prime minister in the Czech constitution.

And even if they are acquainted with the details, President Klaus' inclination to make certain controversial statements has the potential to do harm. After all, this already happened in 2008 when Klaus got into a bitter disagreement with the European MP delegation. Some foreign media failed to pay the usual respect to the head of the Czech state, and they portrayed Klaus as an extremist who would significantly damage the image of the Union.

Political Authority?

The aforementioned list of political handicaps for the Czech's EU presidency indicates that no one, perhaps not even the governmental team who prepared for it, can expect the Czech Republic to offer Europe real political leadership and in return receive the necessary international support. The governmental team created unnecessary complications themselves when they chose the ambiguous slogan "Let's sweeten it for Europe" for the presidency. The slogan's semantics imply, in one sense, that the Czech presidency will benefit and be good for Europe. The slogan's second meaning is, however, more sinister – it implies that the Czechs will stir up trouble.

The Czech's authority in the presidency is also predicated on the their ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. If the Czechs do not ratify the treaty, they will

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lack credibility when the time comes to convince the Irish to vote for something they themselves did not ratify.

On the other hand, the deputy head of government Alexander Vondra may be right. He indicated that Europe's low expectations for the Czech presidency

may become an advantage. The country may yet pleasantly surprise the rest.

The outcome will largely depend on the topics that the Czech Republic chooses as pivotal. With the reputation for being a fervent advocate for human rights, the Czechs could offer their skills to moderate an international crisis. Additionally, some governments in regions of crisis have shown a preference towards speaking with representatives of smaller EU nations, than with representatives from the larger and more powerful states.

Whether the Czech Republic will achieve any political authority during the presidency will depend on the diplomatic skills of her governmental representatives. But their situation is a difficult one due to the preponderance of Czech political provincialism, in which almost every international issue (regardless of importance) becomes entangled in a domestic political tug-of-war. The success or failure of the presidency will therefore

reflect not only on the government, but also on the ability of the political opposition to act, at least sometimes, with a little bit of statesmanship. ■

Jiří Pehe is the director of New York University in Prague.

For Further Reading

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Counseling and Information Center for Young Migrants

contact:
Rumunská 29
120 00 Praha 2
tel/fax: 222 521 446
mob: 775 339 003
e-mail: info@meta-os.cz
www.meta-os.cz

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