

The Czech Republic is strengthening its contingent in Afghanistan despite budget cuts

The Czech parliament, owing to support from centre-right MPs, voted in favour of the government's draft plan for foreign military missions until 2013. It envisages increasing the contingent in Afghanistan by 180 soldiers and an almost complete withdrawal from the mission in Kosovo. The votes regarding this issue (on 27 October and 3 November) took place shortly after the supplementary elections to the Senate, when its composition had not yet been changed, to which the left objected. The Czech Republic by strengthening its engagement in NATO's priority mission in Afghanistan at a time of major budget cuts manifested its loyalty as an ally before the NATO summit in Lisbon.

The Czech Senate and Chamber of Deputies voted for the governmental draft plan for foreign missions in 2011–2012, with a time prospect until 2013. According to the draft, next year the contingent in Afghanistan reinforced by 180 will consist of up to 720 soldiers. A year later this figure will stand at 640 soldiers. Czech troops, which operate mainly as part of the Czech Logar Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), are to focus on the process of reconstruction and the training of Afghan forces. The contingent will also include a one-hundred-strong special unit. The Czech parliament at the same time approved a restriction on the engagement in the KFOR mission in Kosovo. The contingent had already been reduced in October from 270 to 90 soldiers, and this number will be further reduced to a dozen or so in the middle of 2011. In 2012, four Czech JAS-39 Gripen aircraft will be patrolling the airspace of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as part of the Air Policing mission for four months.

The content and the way in which the governmental bill was adopted, has raised objections among the political left, which is in opposition and which will have a majority of seats in the upper house after the newly elected senators have been sworn in. The left does not wish to strengthen their country's engagement in foreign missions, but the approval of the bill – also with support from some left-wing senators – will allow for the avoidance of political disputes over the engagement of the Czech army abroad in the next few years. <grosz>