

A presidential cabinet in the Czech Republic

Jakub Groszkowski, Gabinet prezydencki w Czechach

On 25 June President Milos Zeman appointed an economist, Jiri Rusnok prime minister without parliamentary backing. Rusnok was minister of finance in 2001-2002 in Zeman's left wing cabinet and since 2010 had been part of a team of economic advisers to the Petr Necas government. The cabinet formed by Rusnok, which will most likely be appointed by the president in the coming weeks, has no chance of winning a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies. Despite this, it will exercise authority up until the president nominates another government; and there is nothing in the constitution which can force a deadline for this upon the head of state. In this situation there is the possibility of cabinet serving for several months without support from parliament (Mirek Topolanek's first cabinet functioned this way) until a new government is in place following elections.

For and against

The social democrats and the communists are calling for the current term of the Chamber of Deputies to be curtailed. This requires a three fifths majority but is being blocked by the parties forming the coalition that was in power up to now: the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), TOP 09 and LIDEM. The coalition is demanding the head of the Chamber of Deputies, Miroslava Nemcova (ODS), be nominated prime minister; she is supported by the majority of the Chamber of Deputies. The conflict between the president and the centre right means neither the nomination of a majority government nor snap elections are possible and threatens a political crisis which could drag on for several months. It could even last until the parliamentary elections scheduled for spring 2014.

According to declarations made by party leaders, it appears that a vote of confidence for the presidential cabinet (the government is obliged to present this within 30 days of its nomination) could only be supported by a small group of MPs from fringe parties and independent MPs. According to the constitution, in this situation the president, following the dismissal of Rusnok's cabinet, should again nominate a prime minister. If the following cabinet fails to win a vote of confidence, the president nominates a prime minister put forward by the chair of the Chamber of Deputies. If that candidate also fails to win a vote of confidence, the president may call new elections.

Zeman's goals

The fact that there are no determined deadlines in the constitution enables the president to leave the cabinet in power without support from the majority in the Chamber of Deputies. This situation will enable President Zeman to achieve two goals: he will be able to promote people from his own circle, placed in ministerial posts, ahead of parliamentary elections. They will be able to bolster the party lists of the Party of Civic Rights – Zemanovci (SPOZ), which is not overly popular and whose honorary leader is the president himself. Success for SPOZ could be defined by as much as entering parliament. It would also weaken the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) which is leading in the polls and which will be trying for a majority win in the elections which would allow it to rule without forming a coalition. It should be expected that the new government will submit to parliament projects from President Zeman's agenda, though these are doomed to fail, for example: support for large state investments, introducing a system of presumption of guilt in cases of financial irregularity, electoral reform making it possible to vote for several candidates from different lists. The new government will also most likely prepare the project for next year's budget. This situation will be uncomfortable for CSSD since they will find it difficult to criticise the pro-growth projects of the left-wing cabinet. The parties of the right, however, that will be moving into opposition, will be able to jointly take advantage of the rivalry between Zeman's team and CSSD and will mobilise the electorate and warn them of the dangers of "catastrophic left-wing governments".

The second of the president's goals may be to gain influence on the day to day functioning of the state via a loyal government. Rusnok's cabinet is able to control the functioning of state institutions (including the police and the state prosecutor which are dealing with the corruption issue in the cabinet of ex-Prime Minister Petr Necas) and the state-controlled firms without support from MPs. The tender being held by the corporation CEZ for the construction of new nuclear reactors in Temelin is crucial in this context. If everything goes according to the schedule, in autumn 2013 CEZ will announce that the tender has been won either by the American-Japanese Westinghouse or by the MIR.1200 consortium controlled by Russia's Rosatom. During his visit to the Russian embassy in Prague in May, President Zeman called for the level of Russian investment in the Czech Republic to be increased, including in the context of the construction of the new reactors in Temelin. It is characteristic that Martin Pecina, who has accepted the proposal to become the minister of internal affairs, is the boss of the heavy industry firm, Vitkovice Power Engineering. This company has signed preliminary agreements with both Westinghouse and MIR.1200.

The new government is also very likely to set the parameters of the system for gaining European funds in the framework of the financial perspective for 2014-2020. The decision on whether to extend the lease of the multirole fighter aircraft JAS 39-Gripen beyond 2015 will also be among its competences.