

The Czech Republic: the deadlock in parliament is making the president stronger

Jakub Groszkowski, Czechy: pat w parlamencie wzmacnia prezydenta

On 17 July MPs representing the centre-right parties voted against a proposal to shorten the term in office of the Chamber of Deputies and to schedule a snap election. This move is strengthening the political position of President Milos Zeman, especially with regard to parliament. The difficulties with finding the necessary three fifths of votes to end the term early has given the president the certainty that it is he who will have the decisive impact on the shape and the policy of the government until spring 2014 when – according to the constitution – the parliamentary election is to be held. The failure to schedule a snap election has dealt a strong blow to the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD), which is leading in the pre-election polls. There is a dispute inside the party as to whether President Zeman, who once was a charismatic leader of CSSD, should be treated as an ally or a threat. If the party leaders decide to co-operate with him, they could become marginalised and will have to relinquish their power on the left of the political scene to the president. If CSSD chooses to oppose Milos Zeman, who is a popular politician, it may risk giving rise to dislike among part of the electorate and lead to achieving a worse result in the election, especially if it forms an anti-Zeman alliance with the centre-right.

The cabinet led by Prime Minister Jiri Rusnok, who was nominated by the president on 10 July, is formed by individuals who are loyal to the president and it has little chance of gaining a parliamentary majority. However, the constitution does not set a timeframe for when the president would be obliged to nominate the new prime minister. This means that the dismissed Rusnok government could continue ruling until the spring election. Even if the president decides to nominate a new government, one has to assume that he will retain a strong influence on it.

Who will back the pro-presidential cabinet?

The president's decision to nominate the Jiri Rusnok cabinet, which was taken against the will of parliament, has perpetuated the existing divide on the political scene. The centre-right groupings which were until recently in power – the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and TOP 09, with uncertain support from a small party named LIDEM – are insisting that the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, Miroslava Nemcova (ODS) should be nominated prime minister,

pointing out that she is supported by a majority of MPs. The Social Democrats, the Communists and the centrist party Public Affairs are calling for a snap election. However, some of them are willing to co-operate with the Rusnok cabinet. Public Affairs, which has no chance of entering parliament after the election, is likely to back the new government. The Rusnok cabinet may expect support from at least a part of the members of LIDEM for the same reason. The government is also likely to be backed by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM), which is isolated in parliament.

The situation is more complicated inside CSSD. On the one hand, several former or suspended members of this party are in the new government, and some tasks on the government's agenda are in line with this party's manifesto. On the other hand, the Social Democrats do not wish to take the responsibility for a government which will be beyond their control, especially given the fact that some of the cabinet members have rather opaque business connections. The greatest controversies concern the deputy prime minister and minister of finance, former prime minister, Jan Fischer, who paid off his outstanding debts surprisingly quickly with the help of unidentified individuals after he was invited to join the new government. The dispute inside CSSD over the stance the party should adopt in dealings with the president also has a personal aspect. Its president, Bohuslav Sobotka was the leader of the left wing of the Czech political scene until the presidential election this year and he stands a great chance of becoming the prime minister. He is, however, the key opponent of Zeman in CSSD. The party's first deputy president, Michal Hasek, who has a strong position at the regional level, is in turn closer to President Zeman. However, strong support for CSSD in the pre-election opinion polls is mobilising this party to keep up an appearance of unity. CSSD is unlikely to split – both factions in the party are aware of the fact that their key rival in the election will be the Party of Civic Rights – Zeman's people (SPOZ), which is backed by the president and which currently has no representatives in the Chamber of Deputies.

Zeman's long-term strategy

President Zeman is probably hoping that by weakening the CSSD and ensuring parliamentary seats to SPOZ in the future election he will be able to remain the leader of the left and maintain his influence in the left-wing government after the election. This scenario allows the Rusnok cabinet to focus on popular decisions (e.g. raising the minimum wage). This will help promote the ministers who could be placed on SPOZ party lists during the upcoming election. In turn, all controversial issues will probably be shelved until the time after elections. The Rusnok cabinet has announced, for example, that they do not intend to make any decision regarding the construction of new reactors at the Temelin nuclear power plant, although many facts seem to indicate that this investment is of vast significance for President Zeman's milieu. According to the schedule, CEZ, the state-owned company in charge of the tender, was to announce in autumn 2013 whether the tender had been won by the US-Japanese company Westinghouse, or the MIR.1200 consortium, which is controlled by Russia's Rosatom. However, on 22 July, a representative of CEZ's management announced that due to the unclear situation on the political scene, the final decision (either

one of the bidders being chosen or withdrawing from the investment) would be taken in 12 to 18 months' time.

The corruption scandal is dying down

Both the prime minister and the president are currying favour for the Rusnok government. This is taking place against a backdrop of an investigation underway into political corruption and abuse of power, which led to the fall of the government led by Petr Necas. The Supreme Court's decision of 16 July, under which three former ODS MPs were excluded from the investigation, seriously undermined the actions of the prosecution authorities. The judges ruled that these MPs by agreeing to relinquish their seats in parliament in exchange for the promise to be employed as members of the boards of state-owned companies, and thus enabling parliament to pass important laws, were carrying out their duties as MPs; they can therefore plead immunity. Thus the effective actions taken by the police and prosecution authorities in mid-June, which included a search of government and ministry facilities at night, will probably end up with litigation on the illicit use of military intelligence to spy on Prime Minister Necas's wife. For the time being, nothing seems to indicate that the police and the prosecution authorities are ready to present the effects of their work on the most important aspect of the scandal which gave rise to the entire investigation, namely the connections of the 'godfathers' from ODS, who were operating at the interface between politics and business. Meanwhile, attacks – especially from ODS and TOP 09, against the public prosecutors engaged in the investigation are intensifying.