

The Czech Republic: a long way to the vote of confidence for Andrej Babiš's cabinet

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The results of the referendum held inside the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) in which 58% of the voters backed the formation of a minority government led by the ANO movement (which won the autumn 2017 election to the Chamber of Deputies), were announced on 15 June. The new government was set to win a vote of confidence owing to support from the deputies of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), which in return was promised concessions in the political agenda and positions in state-controlled companies. However, the unwillingness of President Miloš Zeman and the Communists to accept Member of European Parliament Miroslav Poche as the ČSSD's candidate for foreign minister is an obstacle. Zeman is accusing him, for example, of adopting an overly lenient stance on immigrants. The president has ruled out nominating Poche for the post, and the Communists have made their support for the government dependent on the withdrawal of this candidacy. This is another attempt at winning the vote of confidence in the cabinet led by the leader of ANO, Andrej Babiš, whom the president nominated for prime minister for a second time on 6 June. Babiš's single-party minority government, which is currently governing the country, lost the vote of confidence in January. Regardless of the complications, Babiš is declaring that the vote of confidence for the new government will be held on 11 July.

Commentary

- The pressure on withdrawing Poche has escalated splits inside the ČSSD. Those who are opposed to the coalition with ANO view this as proof that the ČSSD will not be treated as an equal partner in a coalition with Babiš, while the section supporting the coalition believes that insisting on this candidacy is harming the party. After all, Poche guaranteed the support of the ČSSD's Prague office for the coalition with ANO, and withdrawing this politician would come as a painful blow to the party leader, Jan Hamáček, who has been pushing through this candidate. The leaders of the ČSSD still hope that it will be possible to convince Zeman during the meeting with Poche on 22 or 23 June, but are also considering solutions that will minimise a possible prestige defeat. The solutions include exchanging ministries between the coalition members or a reshuffle among the ministerial positions offered to the ČSSD, as a result of which Poche would be nominated, for example, as the minister of agriculture. The president and most political parties want to avoid the scenario of a snap election.

- Given the conflicts and the fragmentation of the Czech political scene, President Zeman is strengthening his position, and some of his moves are close to exceeding his constitutional prerogatives. His announced refusal to nominate Poche would mean exceeding the president's competences which are limited to formally nominating government members other than the prime minister. Zeman has also been making efforts to strengthen his real influence on foreign policy and would prefer to have a politician who is close to him as the minister of foreign affairs. Since friction inside the coalition is expected to escalate further, the president's informal influence on the government is expected to grow still further.
- During this tense situation, Prime Minister Babiš has been at pains to present himself as a mediator who wishes to avoid a constitutional dispute (which would mean conflict with the president) and has appealed to the ČSSD to withdraw the candidacy of Poche. He would like his cabinet to win the vote of confidence as soon as possible in order to become less dependent on Zeman. The long period between the election and the vote of confidence – the longest in the Czech Republic's history – is also having a negative impact on the country's international position, complicating the calendar of visits and contacts on the top level.