

Czech Republic: Mudslinging dominates presidential election

Markus Salzmann
22 February 2008

Vaclav Klaus was confirmed as president last week by the Czech parliament. The conservative incumbent had only an extremely small majority, but now returns to office for another five years as Czech head of state. In the third ballot of the second round, 141 parliamentary deputies and senators voted for Klaus, who had been nominated by the Civic Democratic Party (ODS). His opponent, Jan Svejnar, who was supported by the Social Democrats (CSSD) and the Greens (SZ), received 126 votes.

Klaus, who had been unable to gain the necessary majority of 141 votes in the 281-strong electoral body in the preceding ballots, was only reelected thanks to the defection of a social democrat deputy.

The election process has been dominated by weeks of mudslinging, with the various parties accusing each other of blackmail and buying votes. The events had more in common with a film about the mafia than a democratic election, and throw a harsh light on the state of Czech society since the introduction of capitalism. The political elite has become thoroughly disconnected from ordinary people, and bitterly fights for political and financial influence—often with criminal methods.

Last week, two senators, Liana Janackova and Jana Jurencakova, received envelopes containing a bullet and a threatening letter because they had voted for Klaus, against the recommendation of their parliamentary grouping.

The Klaus camp has been exerting massive pressure and has tried to buy votes in order to secure a majority for its candidate; two independent senators, Josef Novotny and Josef Zoser, claim that ODS members offered them bribes worth 2 million koruna if they voted for Klaus.

The social democratic deputy Evzen Snitily, whose vote finally made possible Klaus's reelection, was apparently put under so much pressure by ODS deputies that he suffered a breakdown. Opposition leader Jiri Paroubek (CSSD) publicly accused Interior Minister Ivan Langer (OSD) of having blackmailed Snitily, presenting as proof a photo of the two meeting.

In order to protect defectors, the ODS insisted that the ballots be kept secret, but was unable to push this through. Government head Mirek Topolánek (ODS) afterwards made clear what he thought of the democratic process. "It's ridiculous! A democratic free vote! Total rubbish!... It's all a load of crap!" he said, not knowing that a live microphone had picked up his comments.

Some media outlets expressed their alarm at the consequences of the whole corrupt affair. In the daily *Lidové noviny*, political

scientist Toma Lebeda wrote, "What took place at Prague Castle [site of the president's office] exceeded the expectations of even the most pessimistic of observers." The newspaper *Mlada Fronta Dnes* called the vote "a disgrace."

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* raised some pertinent questions about the ballot: "What are the true motives of those deputies who defected and helped President Vaclav Klaus to a new majority? Who are the shady characters who sent bullets to Klaus sympathizers—or was this a manoeuvre to divert attention from attempts by the conservative ODS to manipulate things in favour of Klaus? Who was active in the background—the secret services, the nouveaux riches financiers, former communists or Mafiosi?"

The paper then questioned the effect this would have on the public: "Many ask themselves whether this is supposed to be the freedom for which they have so longed."

Klaus and ODS government leader Topolánek both played central roles in the "democracy movement" of 1989; and after the "velvet revolution" were staunch advocates of the introduction of capitalism. Under the pretext of creating democracy and prosperity for all, they organized an unparalleled redistribution of the country's socially owned property. The so-called "coupon privatisations" carried out by Klaus (who also founded the ODS) in the first years after the collapse of the Stalinist regime were notorious. At that time, state enterprises and institutions were sold off to foreign investment funds and speculators at ridiculous prices without any proper legal foundation, wiping out a large proportion of the nation's wealth.

As prime minister in the 1990s, Klaus had spoken in favour of an "unfettered free-market economy", i.e., without any social safety mechanisms. Since then, he has moved even further to the right. Last year, he published a book titled *A Blue Planet in Green Chains*, in which he expressly denies climate change and its consequences. In the book, he talks the language of unrestrained free-market economic policy, purely oriented to making profits, which takes no responsibility for its ecological and humanitarian consequences.

The social democratic opposition can only be distinguished from Klaus and the ODS by the smallest of nuances. They also unreservedly defend capitalist ownership, but would like a share for themselves. Milos Zeman, the former Social Democratic prime minister, is even suspected of being involved in the intrigues to promote Klaus. One of his closest confidantes, Miroslav Slouf, was observed meeting with Klaus's chief of staff in a Prague

hotel. Slouf is also said to have connections to organized crime.

The right-wing orientation of the Social Democrats can be seen most clearly by the fact that they did not stand their own candidate, instead supporting Jan Svejnar, who had been proposed by the Greens, which are a component of the ODS-led government coalition.

Economics professor Svejnar, 55, had emigrated to the US in the 1980s, where he currently teaches at the University of Michigan. Following the collapse of the Stalinist bureaucracy, he created the CERGE economic research centre in Prague and became an advisor to former president Vaclav Havel.

Economically and socio-politically, Klaus and Svejnar are very close. Both support continuing welfare cuts and the complete deregulation of the economy. Svejnar also does not reject the stationing of the American anti-missile defence shield on Czech soil, endorsed by Klaus and the ODS. He merely wants to involve the European Union more strongly in the project, in order to avoid discord.

The only significant difference of opinion between Svejnar and Klaus concerns the relationship to the European Union. While Klaus constantly encounters criticism in his own camp for his anti-European Union attitudes, Svejnar is far more friendly towards the EU. Svejnar wants to introduce the euro to the Czech Republic as soon as possible. This is also why the post of president is important, for although the office has little influence on policy, it does appoint both the country's highest judges and the chief of the Czech central bank.

The Communist Party (KSCM) played a particularly cynical role in the presidential ballot. At the last parliamentary elections, the KSCM received 13 percent of the vote and like the Left Party in Germany, talks about social justice and the nationalization of key industries. In the second ballot, the KSCM put forward as its own candidate, the right-wing nationalist European parliament deputy Jana Bobosikova, chair of Politika 21. Bobosikova does not call herself a "left" and her party programme hardly differs from that of the ODS.

Bobosikova withdrew her candidacy when it became clear that she would not even receive the votes of all KSCM deputies. As it had in the first ballot, the KSCM then supported Svejnar as "the lesser evil."

Bobosikova's candidacy was above all aimed at putting pressure on the Social Democrats and the Greens. The KSCM said it was ready to support Svejnar if the Greens and CSSD agreed to vote against the stationing of US missiles in the Czech Republic. As a further condition, it called for a "non-aggression and mutual respect pact" between the three parties, also demanding that Jan Svejnar promise as president to treat all parties equally.

The last two demands are clearly aimed at future government participation. Although arithmetically the Social Democrats, the Greens and KSCM have a majority in parliament, in order to form a government they would require the blessing of the president.

The Greens immediately spoke out against the demands of the KSCM, saying the stationing of the US missile system was a forgone conclusion; but sections of the political elite, and above all the social democratic CSSD, do not exclude cooperation with the communists. In view of the instability of the government, and the

inevitability of social conflicts, they regard the KSCM, which contains many members of the former Stalinist nomenclature, as a stabilizing factor and as a force for order.

Despite the bitter conflicts between the different camps expressed in the ballots for president, they are united in their contempt and enmity for ordinary working people. The Prague government relies on a coalition of the ODS, the Christian Democrats and the Greens, who are supported by two Social Democratic defectors, thus securing a majority.

Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, who is close to the Greens, recently demanded the Europeans show more support for NATO's Afghanistan mission. For many decades NATO has been weakened by the reluctance of European states to participate in armed actions, Schwarzenberg said. He underlined the fact that the Czech Republic was ready to strengthen its military commitment in Afghanistan. The present 135-strong force is now to be further supplemented, and would of course be deployed in the fighting in the south of the country, he said.

The conservative-Green Party coalition has already implemented a health "reform" which makes Czechs pay high fees to visit a doctor or hospital. In view of the rampant poverty in the country, experts are anticipating a significant worsening of medical care. The three-party coalition is presently about to conclude its reform of the pension scheme, which will involve a serious loss of income for pensioners and the introduction of private elements into the system.

Most people are opposed to the present government. Together with broad opposition to the attacks on the living standards of broad social layers, there is little support for the stationing of the US missile system and the country's ever more aggressive foreign policy. Last year, protests against the government's reform policies led to the largest demonstration since the end of the Stalinist regime.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact