

Czech government survives no-confidence vote

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Last week, the conservative Czech government of Prime Minister Petr Nečas survived a vote of confidence. A vote of 105 deputies of the 200-member House of Representatives in favor of the government and 93 against, temporarily prevented its collapse.

Nečas is now relying on a coalition of his Civic Democratic Party (ODS), the liberal conservative TOP 09 of Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg and a newly formed group around the Deputy Prime Minister Karolina Peake. Peake's group consists of eight parliamentarians who had split away from the previous coalition party Public Affairs (VV) two weeks ago.

The disagreements between ODS and TOP 09 with the VV, the smallest coalition partner, have triggered a simmering government crisis for weeks.

Founded in 2001, VV, which had previously achieved only local significance, came to national prominence in 2009, when the former television presenter Radek John took over its leadership. It mixes radical pro-market views with right-wing populism.

In the 2010 elections, the VV entered parliament with 24 deputies and took over three ministerial posts in the coalition government. Following allegations of corruption, Radek John and another VV politician, Vit Barta, resigned their ministerial posts in April 2011. A year later, Barta was sentenced to 18 months' probation for bribery.

Against the backdrop of massive pressure on the government, the allegations against Barta unleashed fierce conflicts within the VV, bringing the party to the brink of collapse. In addition, a large part of the VV rejected the Nečas government's tax increase plans. Two weeks ago, Karolina Peake resigned from the party and announced the formation of a new platform that would continue the work in the government.

The Nečas government wants to restructure the

Czech budget with a programme of ruthless austerity measures. Nearly 100,000 people demonstrated in Prague against these plans in mid-April. It was one of the largest demonstrations in the Czech Republic since the restoration of capitalism in 1989. The demonstration was called by the unions, political organizations and environmental and student groups.

The protest was directed against the increase in VAT (sales tax), cuts in the public service, health and education as well as against the freezing of pensions. Jaroslav Zavadil, chair of the largest trade union federation CMKOS, called at the rally for the resignation of the government.

The cuts implemented so far—including cutting public sector pay by nearly ten percent and the elimination of many state investments—have brought the Czech Republic to the edge of recession. Even the employers' associations have urged the government to slow down the austerity measures.

Nevertheless, immediately after the vote of confidence, Nečas said that the government would uphold the aim of reducing the budget deficit below three percent and would implement further cost-cutting measures.

Defence Minister Alexander Vondra (ODS) was equally unmoved by the protests against austerity. "I was not surprised by the demonstrations—you see the same things across Europe, in Spain, in Greece and Italy—everywhere", he told the *Financial Times*. "Still, I do not believe that society is on the verge of some kind of breakdown, and we will continue our policies."

The social situation has dramatically sharpened for the general population. In 2004, about 400,000 Czechs were living at subsistence level; now it is more than 500,000. Youth unemployment is extremely high, at about 18 percent. In parts of North Moravia and North

Bohemia it is above 30 percent. Unemployment and poverty are particularly pronounced among the Roma minority, where joblessness is above 50 percent.

The precarious social situation is increasing ethnic tensions. Last year there were violent attacks on the Roma minority in the Czech Republic. The immediate cause was fierce clashes between Roma and young Czechs. As in Hungary and other European countries, bourgeois and far-right parties are exploiting the discriminated-against and disadvantaged minority to push social tensions into racist channels.

In the Czech Republic, there are now about 4,000 neo-Nazi militants, 400 of them belonging to a “hard core”, as a study by Masaryk University in Brno noted recently. The authors of the document fear that the neo-Nazi violence, especially against the Roma minority, will gradually increase in the coming years.

According to recent polls, the ruling parties would suffer a devastating defeat in an early election. The opposition Social Democrats (CSSD) are polling 37 percent, 20 points more than the ODS. Even the Stalinist Communist Party (KSCM) is only slightly behind the conservatives.

No fundamental opposition to the austerity measures of the ODS is to be expected from the Social Democrats or Stalinists. After 1989, the CSSD formed coalitions with the ODS over several legislative periods, and enforced cuts in all areas.

As in previous years, the two major union federations, CMKOS (Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions) and ASO (Association of Independent Trade Unions in the Czech Republic) have limited themselves to protests and strikes that serve mainly as an outlet to blow off some steam. During the early 1990s, about 90 percent of workers were unionized; today it is less than 30 percent.

In face of the government crisis, the Communist Party is adapting even further to the Social Democrats. According to a report by *Noviny.cz*, on 1 May in Chomutov, KSCM chair Vojtech Filip spoke for the first time at a meeting of the CSSD. Obviously, many Social Democrats regard a coalition with KSCM as an option, in order to suppress opposition in the population with the help of the Stalinists. Recently, calls have increased in the CSSD to lift the ban on forming a coalition with the KSCM, which the party had adopted in the 1990s.



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