

Pro-austerity contenders in Czech Republic presidential election

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On January 25-26, the Czech Republic will vote for state president in the first direct presidential election since the division of Czechoslovakia in 1993. The incumbent president Vaclav Klaus and his predecessor Vaclav Havel were elected by the Czech parliament in a complicated process that often led to bitter parliamentary conflicts.

According to the constitution, the Czech president can appoint or dismiss governments as well as generals and judges. He or she also has the right to veto legislation.

The first round of voting on January 11-12 saw the exit of a number of candidates, including Senator Jiri Dienstbier, the son of a Czech foreign minister who died in 2011. Dienstbier had the backing of the Social Democrats (CSSD).

Also failing to make the final round was the art professor and composer Vladimir Franz, who attracted attention with his full-body tattoos and his single-issue campaign against the "immorality" of the government. The result for the candidate of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), which currently heads the government, was a disaster. Former Senate President Premysl Sobotka, standing for the party of which President Vaclav Klaus is also a member, won just 2.5 percent and came in last among the nine candidates.

The two men remaining, Milos Zeman and Karel Schwarzenberg, are familiar figures in Czech politics. Both advocate right-wing policies, including radical austerity measures. Unlike the current president, Klaus, they are both staunch supporters of the European Union.

Schwarzenberg belongs to the blue-blooded elite of the Czech Republic. He is leader of the right-wing, neo-liberal party TOP 09, which is part of the current centre-right coalition government. Until the early 1990s, he

lived in exile in Austria and Germany. Following the collapse of the Czech Stalinist regime, he became chief of staff for President Vaclav Havel. He served as foreign minister from 2007 to 2009, a post he took up again after the elections in 2010.

The 75-year-old multimillionaire Schwarzenberg is head of an old Bohemian aristocratic family that possesses a multitude of castles and estates across the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany. In 2007, he was nominated by the Greens (SZ) as foreign minister. Since then, he has been a firm advocate of strict austerity measures.

In the presidential campaign he was clearly the favourite of the media, which regard him as the best candidate to ensure the continuity of the current government's austerity policies.

Zeman officially represents "the vision of a welfare state based on the Scandinavian model," and is therefore often referred to as a leftist. In fact, he has repeatedly made offers to work with both the social democratic CSSD and the right-wing ODS coalition. He also supported the right-wing government of Prime Minister Petr Necas (ODS).

Zeman calls for a strengthening of the European Union. In a recent interview he said the Czech Republic should "undertake steps for stronger EU structures, including a single European economic policy." Between 1998 and 2002, he was head of a centre-left minority government and was responsible for the Czech Republic's accession to the EU. At that time he was still a member of the social democratic CSSD. Then, in 2009, he founded the civil rights party SPOZ.

Zeman had originally run for the presidency in 2003 after party members refused to back him in a secret parliamentary ballot.

Regardless of whether Zeman or Schwarzenberg wins

the runoff election in two weeks, there is little prospect that the country will be politically stabilized. The conservative government of Petr Necas has been in crisis for months. Following massive cuts in public services, pensions and health care, his party was punished in Senate elections held last November.

All of the parties in the governing coalition suffered heavy losses, with the ODS retaining just 15 seats in the 81-member Senate—the lowest number in the history of the party. Schwarzenberg's TOP 09 has just three senators. Only 36 percent of eligible voters went to the polls.

Since then, Necas has faced a series of no confidence votes. In the latest crisis the government just managed to hang onto power when the smallest coalition party, the liberal LIDEM, backed down from a threat to withdraw its ministers.

"We are concerned about program priorities and the implementation of the government program," LIDEM Chairman Karolina Peake said, adding that this was possible only in government and not in opposition. In fact, LIDEM would have had little chance of re-entering parliament in new elections.

The reason given by LIDEM for withdrawing its ministers was the dismissal of Peake as defence minister after only one week in office. Premier Necas justified her sacking on the basis of a "complete breakdown of confidence" due to changes made by Peake in the leadership of the Defence Ministry.

According to recent opinion polls, a "Left Alliance" consisting of the CSSD, Zeman's SPOZ and the Communist Party (KSCM) would win a comfortable majority if early elections were held. The presidential election is still regarded as open because Schwarzenberg can draw on support from both the conservative and social democratic camps. Significantly, CSSD top candidate Jiri Dienstbier, whose father was a close friend of Schwarzenberg, has made no recommendation on how to vote in the second round.

The political decline of the established parties was underlined by the recent amnesty for thousands of prisoners awarded by outgoing President Klaus. With the agreement of the government, more than 6,000 prisoners have been released since the beginning of the year.

Among those amnestied are a host of figures

convicted for corruption and crimes committed in the 1990s—a period when the Czech elite enriched itself in princely fashion through the privatisation and exploitation of state-held companies and services.

This looting process was carried out with the assistance of former Stalinist cadres, right-wing politicians from the dissident movement and the trade unions. Vaclav Klaus was head of the ODS and Czech prime minister at the time. He set out to create a so-called "market economy without attributes", i.e., free of social concessions to workers. Now he has provided one last service to his cronies.

Among the beneficiaries of the amnesty are the manager of the Poldi steel mill, who was imprisoned for insider trading, and the former head of the investment fund Trend and Marcia, who made a fortune hiving off former state-owned companies.



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