

# Czech president-elect calls for new parliamentary elections

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The Czech Republic, long regarded as one of the more politically stable countries in Eastern Europe, faces increasing instability following the presidential election last Saturday. After the result was announced, the president-elect, Milos Zeman of the Party of Civic Rights—Zeman’s people (SPOZ), immediately called for new parliamentary elections, although, according to the constitution, he is not entitled to take such a step.

Prime Minister Petr Necas (Civic Democratic Party, ODS) and representatives of his coalition partners rejected Zeman’s call. “Under the constitution, the government is responsible to the Chamber of Deputies, not to the president”, Necas said. “The government will continue as long as it has a majority in the Chamber of Deputies and is able to pursue its coalition programme”.

Following an election campaign dominated by mud-slinging and demagogy on both sides, Zeman emerged the winner in the second round of the presidential election, picking up around 55 percent of the vote against his right-wing opponent, Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg. Zeman is due to be sworn in March 8. As president, he is entitled to appoint the head of government, the constitutional court and the chief of the council of the country’s central bank.

Zeman is a former Social Democrat, who now heads the small party bearing his name. Although he campaigned as an advocate of the interests of ordinary people and called for a welfare state along the lines of the “Scandinavian model”, while at the same time promoting the European Union, Zeman was endorsed by the outgoing president, Vaclav Klaus, who leaves office after completing his maximum of two terms.

Klaus is a member of the right-wing ODS, which dominates the current Necas coalition government, and

a neo-liberal opponent of the EU. Following the collapse of the Stalinist system in the Czech Republic, Klaus, as head of government, led the campaign for the systematic privatization of public enterprises and the destruction of the country’s social infrastructure.

The alliance between Zeman and Klaus shows that what was at stake in the election were not competing political programs or the defence of social interests, but rather the distribution of political power in a ruling elite increasingly divided in the face of growing social tensions. Against this background, both Zeman and Klaus sought to stir up nationalism.

Schwarzenberg (formally Karel, Prince of Schwarzenberg) previously led the chancellery of former President Vaclav Havel and is the head of a centuries-old aristocratic dynasty. He defended the austerity program of the current government and strongly advocated a pro-EU course. In his post as foreign minister, he criticized the Czech Republic for not joining the Euro Plus Pact and the Fiscal Pact. In addition, he called for the country’s accession to the euro zone without a popular referendum.

During the election campaign, he also advocated the abolition of the Benes decrees, which earned him the support of the Catholic Church. Following the Second World War, Czechoslovak president Edvard Benes ruled on the basis of the decrees, ten of which dealt with the dispossession and expulsion of German minority groups. The demand for the rescinding of these decrees has caused many Czechs—not without justification—to fear claims for restitution from the German side.

Zeman responded by denouncing Schwarzenberg as a “Sudetjaken” (a contemptuous term for displaced German officials). His nationalist rhetoric was hailed by the neo-fascist Labour Party (DSSS), which

eventually called for a vote for Zeman in the presidential election.

The collaboration between Zeman and Klaus is not new. Between 1998 and 2002 Zeman headed a Social Democratic minority government that had agreed a pact with Klaus's ODS. Zeman then finalised Czech entry into the EU, privatized a number of large enterprises, cut wages and carried out mass layoffs.

Political and business cronies of Zeman and Klaus were able to rake in millions in the process. Just prior to the expiry of his term, outgoing president Klaus arranged an amnesty for many of his pals from that period who were subsequently prosecuted for fraud and numerous other crimes.

Following his victory, Zeman tried to distance himself from this mire of corruption and nepotism. He promised to act as president of the "10 million ordinary people" of the country, which has a total population of 10.5 million. "I will not be president of Godfather mafias that act as parasites on our society and suck blood from its body", he declared.

Such rhetoric cannot disguise Zeman's real political character. His closest advisers include lobbyist Miroslav Slouf, who has close ties to the underworld and the Russian oil company Lukoil. It was Slouf who allegedly was behind Zeman's decision to re-enter the political arena and compete in the presidential election.

Given the ongoing economic slump and growing popular opposition to austerity measures, Zeman is now calling for the replacement of the Necas ODS government, which has been mired in crisis for many months.

The other coalition partners of the right-wing ODS are Schwarzenberg's TOP 09 (Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09) party and the small neo-liberal party LIDEM (Liberal Democrats), which emerged from a split in the Public Affairs party (VV). Together the coalition controls just 98 of the 200 seats in the lower house. Necas has survived five votes of no-confidence only with the help of defectors. His term is due to end in 2014.

Zeman is now banking on an alliance of his own party, which is expected to enter parliament in a fresh election, with the Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) and the Communist Party (KSCM).

The Stalinist KSCM (Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia) is the second-largest opposition party,

with 26 seats in the current parliament. In the presidential election, the party waived its own candidate in order to support Zeman and the Social Democratic candidate, Jiri Dienstbier, who supported Schwarzenberg in the second ballot. The Communist Party has been seeking a direct role in government for several years, but has been unable to do so due to the opposition of the Social Democrats.

There are, however, many indications that the latter are now preparing to bring the KSCM on board. After the regional elections last year, the two parties formed coalitions in ten of the country's 13 regions. Both Dienstbier and Zeman have appealed to the Stalinist party leadership for its support.

The deputy chairman of the Social Democrats, Lubomir Zaoralek, told Czech Radio that the Communists remained "the only possible partner". "Their program resembles our own and some of their representatives have even spoken quite reasonably in public", Zaoralek explained.

Zeman also enjoys the support of the unions. Shortly before the election, the Czech Confederation of Trade Unions (CKMOS) declared that Schwarzenberg was an unacceptable presidential candidate. Union spokesman Jaroslav Zavadil declared that Zeman, on the other hand, had thrown his weight behind national trade union policy and, according to some reports, was even considering a union representative appointee to head the central bank in Prague.

The main task of a "left" alliance led by Zeman will be to continue the radical austerity policies demanded by the European Union. Closer collaboration with the unions will be used primarily to suppress protests against such measures.



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