

Right-wing protests against the Czech president

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At celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the so-called Velvet Revolution, which led to the demise of the Stalinist regime in Czechoslovakia, protests broke out against the current President, Social Democrat (CSSD) Milos Zeman.

During a rally in which the presidents from Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Germany also took part, Zeman was booed by between 1,000 and 2,000 protesters and pelted with eggs and tomatoes. The demonstrators chanted “resign, resign” and symbolically showed him a red card.

They supported the coup orchestrated by Germany and the United States, loudly chanting “Ukraine, Ukraine.” The protesters applauded German President Joachim Gauck and celebrated the speech by Polish President Bronislav Komorowski and his Slovakian colleague Andrei Kiska. They described the overthrow of the president in Ukraine last February as a fight for freedom, and backed the Kiev government’s war against the separatists in the east of the country. At the initiative of Hungarian head of state Janos Ader, those present observed a minute’s silence to commemorate the victims of “Communist suppression.”

The pretext for the protest was not, as some reports claimed, Zeman’s sometimes sharp choice of words or harsh denunciation of the Russian punk band Pussy Riot. Rather it was due to his stance towards Russia. While the EU accuses Moscow of provoking the war in eastern Ukraine, Zeman has repeatedly described it as a “civil war between two groups of Ukrainian citizens,” and criticised the EU’s sanctions on Russia.

The Ukraine crisis and the conflict with Russia has produced major tensions in the countries of Eastern Europe, particularly those belonging to the Visegrad Group, which includes Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Poland and the Baltic states

have pushed a hard line and military action against Moscow. In the Slovakian government, there are differences on how to deal with Russia. While Prime Minister Robert Fico has expressed doubts about the value of EU sanctions on Russia, President Kiska and Europe minister Peter Javorcíc are demanding that the EU take a harder line.

Due to its extensive economic ties with Russia, Bulgaria has been especially critical of the EU’s actions. In neighbouring Romania, the election of Klaus Iohannis to the presidency will produce a stronger orientation to the west.

In Hungary, Prime Minister Orban has come in for criticism for his moderate stance towards Moscow. In the course of protests over a planned internet tax, an increasing number of voices have been raised calling for a harder line towards Moscow.

The participants in the protest in Prague were mainly part of the city’s privileged middle class. Interviews with protesters revealed that several businessmen and senior public officials were demonstrating. Martin Prikryl, who organised the protest on Facebook, is director of television advertising.

There is some evidence that the protest was organised by pro-western and pro-US NGOs. According to witnesses, the red cards were professionally produced and were handed out on the protest route by some people who only spoke English.

Zeman had already come under strong criticism from Czech politicians prior to the protest. Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka (CSSD) has attacked the president for his stance on Russia on several occasions. Sobotka visited the US this week to unveil a bust of Vaclav Havel in Congress.

Havel, the well-known playwright, was among the dissidents who spoke for those who hated the Stalinist

regime above all because it prevented their upward social mobility. They orientated to the privileged middle class in the west and showed no interest in the concerns of the wider population. After the transition, Havel was president for 14 years, first of Czechoslovakia, and then the Czech Republic.

Havel was among the leaders of the Velvet Revolution, which was not so much about the introduction of democracy, but the redivision of state resources under a new capitalist class of private property owners. This layer was recruited from the ranks of the Stalinist bureaucracy as well as rising elements from the democratic movement. It is no accident that the heads of state at the demonstration called Havel “the outstanding personality of the revolution.”

Zeman was a member of the Stalinist Czech Communist Party for many years and joined the Social Democrats after the restoration of capitalism. Between 1998 and 2002, he led a Social Democrat minority government through an agreement with the right-wing conservative ODS to tolerate the government. Among other things, Zeman negotiated the Czech Republic’s entry into the European Union (EU), privatised companies, cut wages and imposed mass layoffs.

In 2009, he broke with the CSSD to found the Citizens Rights Party (SPOZ). In 2013, he ran in the presidential election against the right-wing liberal Karel Schwarzenberg and won. In polls, he receives the highest level of trust among Czech politicians, which is above all due to the discredited political elite.

According to polls, around half of the population believe that life was better prior to the transition in 1989. The Median agency conducted a corresponding survey on behalf of the Czech and Slovak committees for radio and television, in which 54 percent of Czechs and 70 percent of Slovaks declared that they were disappointed with developments over the past 25 years.

The state of Czech politics is exemplified by the rise of billionaire Andrei Babis and his ANO party. This party is part of the government along with the CSSD and the right-wing conservative KDU-CSL. Babis is himself deputy prime minister and finance minister.

Babis is the country’s second richest man. Until the late 1980s Babis was a member of the Communist Party and, according to rumours, he worked for the notorious Stalinist secret police. Babis has vehemently

denied this. In 1993, with loans from American Citibank, he founded the holding company Agrofert. Forbes magazine estimates his wealth at \$2 billion. The buying of the Mafra media company, which publishes the major daily newspapers, resulted in him being nicknamed the Czech Berlusconi.

Babis, Zeman and the forces behind the protest in Prague are deeply antagonistic to the interests of the population. The protests against Zeman were ultimately aimed at diverting attention from social conditions, which are continually worsening. Currently 100,000 Czechs are homeless. Social institutions, soup kitchens and emergency accommodation are at breaking point. Almost 10 percent of the Czech population lives below the poverty line. Even for someone with double this income, it is not possible to survive in an expensive city like Prague.

Governments have made major cuts in social spending over recent years. As a consequence, the number of people requiring assistance has risen by 200,000 over the past five years. Unemployment has also exploded, with currently 625,000 people without a job, in a country with a population of 10.5 million.



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