



Questions over the future shape of Czech EU policies – a Czech cohabitation?

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Recently the Czech public witnessed an unprecedented clash over the future of Europe emerging from apparently divergent perspectives of some of the key players on the Czech political scene. Namely President Klaus, Prime Minister Spidla and Minister of Foreign Affairs Svoboda got into dispute not only about the future shape of the EU but over more fundamental issues such as what is the position of the respective players over the formulation and implementation of foreign policy of the country.

The debate stems from an unclear constitutional division of competencies in this respect but also from largely diverging views of Klaus on the one hand and coalition representatives (Spidla and Svoboda) on the other. Klaus, formerly the leader of the main opposition party (Civic Democrats – right wing, conservative) has been renowned for his critical, even pro-thatcherite approach to European integration in its current form. His position of the President puts him in a slightly different perspective, however, he obviously finds it difficult not to articulate some of the concerns he has in this respect towards the present government. This is even more difficult in the context of his succession after Havel. Paradoxically enough, it was Klaus while he was the Prime Minister who criticised Havel for too much of his interference in foreign policy. The truth is that Havel's approach was – at least on the most important issues - always complementary to that of the Government regardless of its colour. He largely used his wide international connections to provide platform for various stakeholders.

This position is difficult for Klaus to assume. Firstly, he by far does not have such far-reaching connections as Havel did. Secondly his uncompromising approach alienated him from many leaders in the EU as well as elsewhere so he cannot really play the same role either. Thirdly, in respect to EU policies, he has been in the opposition since 1997 when the most crucial stage of EU-Czech relationship started with the negotiations. Hence he was deprived of the possibility to influence the negotiation process and he lost the touch with the pace of the Czech integration into the EU.

The fact that Klaus decided to go to the Athens accession summit and sign the Accession Treaty took many by surprise. Of course it was his Constitutional right to do so. In the media interviews he claimed that he simply had to do it because his not turning up could be interpreted as his disagreement with the Accession Treaty and thus a negative signal before the referendum. What were the real

motives remains unclear and subject to speculation. But it might well be that he really meant this to be a symbolic gesture – it was his government and him personally who signed the Association Agreement so he could have perceived this as a full stop behind the whole process. The problem was not that he went to sign the treaty but that he was commenting on many issues in much different way the Government did.

From the part of the Government, it was seen as an attack on its prerogatives in the realm of foreign policy. The sole fact that much more attention in the media was provided to Klaus than to the Prime or Foreign ministers even endorsed these concerns. Furthermore, the President articulated that he would like to hold regular briefings with the prime and foreign ministers so as to arrive to a single stance, and more particularly to co-ordinate the position of the Czech Convention members. The reaction of Svoboda (the foreign minister) was unexpectedly austere – he criticised Klaus for having “a superficial idea about the current development in the EU”. It was followed by him being “called to the carpet” by the President to explain his comments. A situation that Czech political scene has not experienced since the Velvet revolution in 1989, if ever.

Followed by another controversial gesture, Klaus invited speakers of both houses of Parliament as well as chiefs of the parties represented therein for a meeting at his country chateau of Lány to discuss the future of EU and the Czech position in it. The aim of this meeting was to try to harmonise the Czech attitudes towards the future shape of the EU. The point that was actually most noted by the media was the fact that the Communists were also invited to this meeting for the first time since 1989 – Havel never received a Communist leader. It is the only party whose mainstream is clearly against the EU membership altogether, even though a single party document has not been approved in this respect but it is likely to happen prior to the referendum. From this perspective, the meeting was doomed to failure from the beginning and along with this, the only outcome was a joint communiqué that “so far the main political leaders cannot find a common stance”.

The motives for Klaus’s behaviour are hardly justifiable. Firstly, all the constitutional lawyers agree that it is the Government responsibility to formulate, shape and exercise foreign policy. It can be understood that Klaus is concerned especially for the Convention and subsequent IGC as it is undoubtedly a major event that is likely to give basic imprint to the EU for quite some time. It probably needs a larger debate with different subjects of the political spectrum, but no one can deny that it is the final prerogative of the current government to decide (and also assume the responsibility) on what kind of the EU the Czech Republic would like to see. The present coalition does not hide its largely pro-federalist vision of future Europe, with strong role of the Commission and the community method, stronger European Parliament, possibly clear division of competencies etc. We could argue that if the opposition were in power, the picture could look quite different. But here we go – it is the risk or luck that all the EU governments run, and certainly it is not that history knows any “ifs”.

Obviously it would be quite unfortunate if once the Civic Democrats arrive in power (which will happen sooner or later) they would like to revert everything done by the previous government. That could damage the reputation of the Czech Republic as a predictable and reliable partner in the EU and lead to the

sort of isolation that Italy is facing at the moment. Furthermore with graver consequences as Italy is a big country whose voice cannot be easily dismissed plus one of the founding members of the European Communities. But this is not likely to happen. It is doubtful whether the Civic Democrats will ever be so powerful to rule on their own. They will probably have to create a coalition and their likely (and indeed the only possible) partners are current smaller and more centrist coalition parties (Freedom Union and Christian Democrats). These partners will moderate the strong stances of the Civic Democrats, and possibly even more in case of the grand coalition between the Civic Democrats and Social Democrats.

Secondly, it is quite naive from Klaus to think that the current parties can arrive to a common vision of future Europe. It can be discussed, arguments can be tabled, but absolutely impossible to achieve a consensus, even more with the Communists who as noted previously refuse the European integration as such. It is not the case in many other EU member states either – as political parties often diverge along the questions of future EU construction. It will be the IGC that will finally decide and possibly we can see a shift towards more citizen-oriented notion of approval of the fundamental EU documents.

Therefore Klaus' s hunt for "common vision of Europe" cannot be explained by any other motives but the fear that the current government will sign up to the project of more supranational and perhaps federal Europe. He has to accept the political reality, i.e. that the government has the power to formulate foreign policy because it has the democratic mandate to do so. The Czech system is not designed for possible co-habitation that we know from France. But if Klaus has any doubts about the Government legitimacy over such issues as the European Constitution which will eventually determine the Union structure and powers, he should rather search for a consensus among the major political parties to have a referendum on the future Constitutional Treaty.