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The Czech Republic and the Iraq crisis – oscillating between the two sides of the Atlantic

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One Back, Two Chairs?

An old Czech proverb says that you cannot sit with one back on two chairs. It seems that this proverb applies to the Czech government positions over the EU split over the military action in Iraq. Or to take another parallel, the situation can be described as that of a man standing on two boats that start going in different directions and he cannot decide which one to jump on.

The Czech government feels it has been forced to choose between the camp of allies (represented by the US and UK but also neighbouring Poland) and the Franco-German axis, taking a clearly anti-military stand and refusing any action without a UN Security Council mandate.

Public opinion – as in most European countries – is largely anti-war. Political parties and groupings have been rather undecided. The USA is still viewed as the most reliable Czech ally in defence terms and the only one who is able to act in case of an urgent need. It should not be forgotten that it was also the US who was the strongest advocate for the country to join NATO. Even though it is not exactly the question at a stake

here, the government feels that the Czech Republic's reputation in NATO could be damaged by a strongly anti-American stand. NATO is still a new phenomenon for the Czechs and its alliance identity still has to be built up.

Varied and Inconsistent Political Stances

As expected, the newly elected president (ex premier) Vaclav Klaus took a clearly anti-war stand by rejecting the military strike as an inappropriate way of solving the crisis. He was similarly against the NATO strike in Kosovo - which already at that time surprised many EU leaders as this was a far less controversial issue at the EU level. At a recent dinner with Mr Stapleton, the American Ambassador in Prague, he even requested him to intervene with the US administration to take the Czech Republic off the list of allies. Although the president (unlike for instance in France) does not really make foreign policy, the imprint given to this office by Havel makes it difficult to neglect what he actually says.

The position of the government is quite inconsistent. It is influenced by several factors. First there is the nature of the present government which is a coalition one (the Social Democrats - leading coalition partner, the Christian Democrats, the Freedom Union), this being quite a typical feature of Czech politics. The Christian Democrats and Freedom Union tend to support the allied action, while the Social Democrats are not so keen on it. Even in the Social Democratic Party there are two streams. Two weeks ago at the Party Congress a large part of the delegates adopted the so-called "anti-declaration" or anti-war declaration, insisting on the Security Council mandate. The inconsistency is further underlined by the fact that the Prime Minister and minister of foreign affairs come from different parties, again a typical feature of the Czech coalition governments.

Thus given the possibility of deep divisions in a fragile government relying on a majority of one in the Parliament (101 out of 200 deputies in the Lower Chamber, including ex-foreign minister Kavan who is currently

presiding the UN General Assembly), most of the discussion has focused on technical matters rather than on broad political issues (i.e. do we actually support the strike politically and morally).

The government position was actually never made too explicit and could be read probably as follows: we don't actually think that the strike is necessary but if the US decides for the military action, we will support them. The fact that Havel signed the letter of eight to the Wall Street Journal did not have much real weight as it was two days before he stepped down from the office so he acted more in a personal rather than in a political capacity.

Instead of making any strong political statements in support of the allies once the strike was launched, there was discussion about the mandate of the Czech chemical unit in Kuwait - whether it should be allowed to operate in Iraq or not. Eventually its deployment in case of chemical attack on the allies on the Iraqi territory was approved by the Parliament but the whole thing was seen as more of a necessary evil rather than an enthusiastic act. The Parliament has also assented to sending a field hospital to Iraq, which is viewed by most people as coming too late and a gesture that cannot create a credible image of the Czech Republic as a reliable ally.

Impact on Relations with France, Germany and UK

In terms of relations with the major EU players, one cannot omit Chirac's comments after the Brussels European Council in February that stirred up public opinion quite strongly. The deputies had to deal with many complaints from citizens who viewed this as an assault on Czech sovereignty and many experts feared that this could damage the popular mood before the upcoming referendum (June 13 and 14). In fact, this did not turn out to be the case, at least judging from the polls where the support for EU membership did not drop dramatically. Surprisingly enough

there were even some comments in the Czech press showing understanding for Chirac's stand.

The whole issue though disappeared quite quickly from the attention of media. It is also interesting to note that although Chirac did not speak in any EU capacity, his comments were still largely perceived as an EU related problem. It left huge doubts in the Czech population as to how much the Czech Republic will really be able to influence the EU foreign policy once it becomes an EU member. However, bilateral Czech-French relations have not been aggravated due to these concerns, certainly much less than in case of French-Polish relations.

As to relations with Germany, there does not seem to be any particular problem in connection with the crisis that will harm bilateral relations either. This was further highlighted by the recent official visit of Klaus to Germany (one of his first official visits in the presidential capacity) and by the fact that his views on the matter are very close to those of Schröder.

Britain is still viewed as quite a reliable ally in defence terms, especially as the Czech anti-chemical unit deployed in the Gulf since the first Gulf War was under British command and it seems that this collaboration has been a very smooth one. Plus there is a prevailing idea not only among politicians but also among experts that it is impossible to build strong European defence policy without Britain. Bilateral relations are very good on many other (largely economic) fronts – including social policy, European employment strategy, Lisbon agenda or the open method of economic co-ordination which might also be due to the same political colour of both governments.

The most likely development from the Czech perspective now is that the military action is a fait accompli and that most of the effort will concentrate on the reconstruction of Iraq. But as the situation in the

region is still uncertain with the threat of further military action against Syria, the government might face some further problems and divisions in this respect.

Sitting Comfortably?

So the Czech government actually did manage to “sit with one back on two chairs”, to some extent comforting the allies without aggravating too much the anti-military axis. Still, the country found itself uncomfortably torn between the US and Europe - trying to maintain strong transatlantic links but also to build up strong intra-community relations in view of the upcoming EU accession. The apparently irreconcilable polarisation of the problem, with the US on one side and Franco-German block on the other, goes against the traditional idea of multilateral diplomacy on which the Czech political community, especially Havel, relied strongly since the 1990s. The reliance on multilateral international organisations and on the conciliatory solutions within the transatlantic community is certainly not a thing that any Czech government would easily give up – indeed it might manage to make it an asset after our accession to the EU. From this perspective, Scandinavian countries can be considered as our best allies in this respect.

The question to be posed here is not only about the voice of the Czech Republic in the future EU foreign and defence policy but about the future of this policy as such. A lot will depend on the future developments in transatlantic relations but also on whether the Convention will be able to come up with any acceptable suggestions as to how to run this policy for a Europe of twenty five.