

## **Political parties of the Czech Republic on the way to consolidated democracy**

The paper deals with the development of the political process in the Czech Republic in the first post-communist decade. It is characterized by a special struggle between two biggest political parties, which surprisingly for the Czech society made a political deal – “Agreement on the Creation of a Stable Political Environment in the Czech Republic”, signed by the Czech Social-Democratic Party and the Civic Democratic Party. Other parties considered this agreement to be a “deception of voters” and during the course of the election campaign severely criticized both “pro-communist” social-democrats and “entirely corrupted” civic democrats. The abovementioned period was characterized by controversial, complicated and ambiguous development, but the outcomes are clear – transformation of the Czech Republic into a stable European country with a well-established market economy and sustainable political system.

*Keywords: the Czech Republic, political parliamentary parties, political agreements, president of the republic, political class, oppositional agreement.*

## **ПОЛІТИЧНІ ПАРТІЇ ЧЕСЬКОЇ РЕСПУБЛІКИ НА ШЛЯХУ ДО КОНСОЛІДОВАНОЇ ДЕМОКРАТІЇ**

У статті досліджено розвиток політичного процесу в Чеській Республіці у перше посткомуністичне десятиліття. Він позначений особливою боротьбою між двома найбільшими політичними партіями, які несподівано для чеського суспільства уклали політичну угоду – «Договір про створення стабільного політичного простору в Чеській Республіці, укладений між Чеською соціал-демократичною партією і Громадянською демократичною партією». Інші партії вважали цю угоду «обманом виборців», а в ході передвиборної кампанії виступали з гострими нападами і на «прокомуністичних» соціал-демократів, і на «наскрізь корумпованих» громадянських демократів. Означений період мав суперечливий, складний та неоднозначний розвиток, але його результат очевидний – перетворення Чехії в стабільну європейську державу з уже сформованою ринковою економікою та усталеною політичною системою.

*Ключові слова: Чеська Республіка, політичні парламентські партії, політичні угоди, президент республіки, політичний клас, опозиційний договір*

Analyzing the first decade of the development of the political process in the Czech Republic it is necessary to state that it is characterized by a distinct time frame. On the one hand, on January 1, 1993 the Czech Republic became an independent state and this is commonly believed to be a lower limit. On the other hand, an upper limit was designated by February 2003 when Vaclav Havel, the eternal head of the state (and before he was the president of Czechoslovakia) left the office and further election of Vaclav Klaus, the former prime-minister and leader of the Civic Democratic Party (CDP), as new head of the state.

The abovementioned period was characterized by controversial, complicated and ambiguous development, but the outcomes are clear – transformation of the Czech Republic into a European country with a well-established market economy and sustainable political system. The Czech Republic is a state which joined the European Union and NATO being one of the well-prepared applicants. Finally, it is the state where the change of leaders, from “devotionalist-idealist” V. Havel to “pragmatist” V. Klaus (though some elements of idealism are inherent to him) took place rather painlessly, by constitution means, even despite previous conflicts which had existed between them and complicated nature of electing the second president of the Czech Republic, presupposed by dominance of the social-democrats (CSDP) and their allies in the parliament, who offered their own alternative candidates.

The author by means of the institutional approach and conflict resolution techniques analyzes the role of the political class in the Czech Republic within the transformational shifts over the last years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Studying the changes which took place in main political institutions of the Czech Republic, the author applied axiomatic, ideographic, comparative, systematic and statistical methods, which contributed to objective coverage of political compromises in the Czech Republic. The article is based on the materials of the central Czech civil-political magazines, including “Lidové noviny”, “Mladá fronta dnes”, “Přítomnost. Politický a kulturní čtvrtletník”, “Právo”, “Respect” and others, which efficiently described all events of the political life of the state.

In 1997 the Czech Republic, in comparison with previous years, after another scheduled elections to the parliament experienced a reduction in numbers of parliamentary parties from six to five, what to some extent promoted factual accomplishment of restructuring of political forces in the state: on the left wing social-democrats enhanced their predominant position, on the right wing, as a result of disintegration of a former Civic Democratic Party emerged two parties, characterized by liberal-conservative views. One of them, (“renovated” CDP) managed to defend its positions under the pressure of a new, but a small and amorphous Freedom Union (FU). Eventually, the Christian-Democratic Union – Czech People’s Republic (CDU-CPP) remained the status of the most popular and distinctly formed centrist party.

Formally, despite the victory of the social-democrats, the parties of the former right of center coalition one more time gained the majority in the parliament: the Civic Democratic Party, the Christian-Democratic Union – the Czech People’s Party and the Freedom Union

in total had 102 representatives out of 200. However, in fact it was a stalemate situation. The administration of the Christian-democrats did not want to give their votes for V. Klaus to elect him prime-minister, while the latter did not consider the possibility of cooperation with the leaders of the Freedom Union in the frames of the same cabinet, and this almost destroyed him as a politician. When President Havel charged M. Zeman, as a head of the party, which won the elections, to conduct negotiations concerning government formation, there appeared a possibility of a non-standard “left-right” coalition including the CSDP, CDU-CPP and FU. However, the Freedom Union from its ideological points of view refused to take part in formation of such a cabinet. M. Klíma notes that “the fact that they did not manage to form a standard majority government, either right- or left-of-center, testifies of retention of ideological prejudices and importance of personal enmity...”<sup>1</sup>. It should be mentioned that relations between almost all parliamentary parties’ leaders – V. Klaus and J. Ruml, V. Klaus and J. Luks, J. Ruml and M. Zeman – over the analyzed period were not just far from friendly or even neutral, but even far from tactful, what was underlining that among the highest representatives of the Czech political classes there was no mutual understanding or even a desire to sacrifice own interests for the sake of stability in the domestic policy of the country.

At the same time, the arrangements offered by the social-democrats to their potential partners were extremely beneficial. In negotiating with J. Luks (CDU-CPP) and J. Ruml (FU) the CSDP leader M. Zeman agreed with a division of ministerial posts in future coalitional cabinet between three parties in the ratio 8:4:4 – despite the fact that the number of places in the Chamber of Deputies, gained by the social-democrats, the Christian-Democratic Union – the Czech People’s Republic and the Freedom Union was approximately 3 : 1 : 1 to the advantage of the Czech Social Democratic Party<sup>2</sup>. Besides, in spite of the fact that his party achieved the majority of votes M. Zeman displayed readiness to refuse an appointment of the prime-minister in favor of J. Luks who could become a compromise figure, more acceptable personality for liberals from the Freedom Union than M. Zeman himself as he acquired a reputation as a left socialist<sup>3</sup>. The Christian democrats agreed on the proposal of the Czech Social Democratic Party, however J. Ruml refused it from ideological positions. He stated, that the Freedom Union did not want to “deceive their voters”, as in the course of the election campaign the FU severely attacked both “pro-communist” social-democrats and “entirely corrupted” civic democrats<sup>4</sup>. Thus, in the first days of July 1998 there was no possibility in the Czech Republic to form the government which would enjoy parliamentary support of the majority.

The way-out of the situation was found on July 9, 1998 in Prague when a political deal – “Agreement on the Creation of a Stable Political Environment in the Czech Republic between

<sup>1</sup> Klíma M. Kvalita demokracie v České republice a volební inženýrství. Praha, 2001. S. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Klíma M. Kvalita demokracie v České republice a volební inženýrství. Praha, 2001. S. 18.

<sup>3</sup> Právo. 1998. 3. červenec.

<sup>4</sup> Lidové noviny. 1998. 6. červenec.

the Czech Social-Democratic Party and the Civic Democratic Party” was signed. It became the result of several-day negotiations between the leaders of the Czech Social-Democratic Party (CSDP) and the Civic Democratic Party. In the Czech political elite and mass media this document was shortly named an “oppositional agreement” and scientists characterized it as a “political earthquake”<sup>5</sup>. Actually, for the majority of the Czech society it was difficult to comprehend and come to terms with the fact that two leading parties, which over the last five years had been acting like irreconcilable opponents not just made a political truce, but divided power in the state. Not long before the event the leaders of the CSDP and the CDP categorically denied any possibility of cooperation between the parties. Thus, M. Zeman stated that “a large coalition of the Czech Social-Democratic Party and the Civil Democratic Party from the both sides would be a deceit of the voters”<sup>6</sup>. The same thought was expressed by V. Klaus, who underlined that “speculations on the fact that the Civil Democratic Party after the elections could put up with the formation of a social-democratic government of minority are groundless”<sup>7</sup>.

To our mind, among the crucial arguments for the oppositional agreement, first of all, was an actual stalemate situation, which occurred on the Czech political arena after the 1998 elections; secondly, the need to preserve standard mechanisms of parliamentary democracy, though by means of such an unordinary political decision as this agreement – a result of classic interpretation of policy as an “art of possible”. Consequently, the oppositional agreement unblocked the political system of the Czech Republic, without applying mechanisms of changing Constitutional principles of parliamentary democracy and at the same time preserving representativeness of political parties in the Czech parliament.

Similar examples of cooperation between two leading political parties had been registered before. Thus, after the 1996 elections the Czech Social-Democratic Party and the Civic Democratic Party came to an agreement, according to which the social-democrats gained a right to hold main posts in the lower chamber in exchange for assistance for the right-of-center minority government while voting for confidence in the government. But the 1998 oppositional agreement significantly broadened the boundaries of cooperation between the CSDP and the CDP. First of all, the social-democratic cabinet which, according to the agreement, was formed and led to power by M. Zeman in July 1998 enjoyed much lesser support of the parliament than the last government headed by V. Klaus in 1996-1997 (74 and 99 deputies correspondingly). Therefore, support of the Civic Democratic Party was the only sufficient precondition for M. Zeman’s cabinet functioning. The oppositional agreement was not limited to division of positions in the government and both chambers of the parliament between two parties, but designed a further program of cooperation, aimed at changing the whole model of the state-political order in the Czech Republic. Limitation of the presidential authorities became the second important goal of

<sup>5</sup> *Vonáček E.* *Mitteleuropäische Lage und politische Stabilität in Tschechien. Zivilgesellschaft und demokratische Konsolidierung // Transition – Erosion – Reaktion. Zehn Jahre Transformation in Osteuropa / Ed. D.Schorckowitz. Frankfurt a. Main, 2002. S. 321.*

<sup>6</sup> *Právo.* 1997. 15. květen.

<sup>7</sup> *Lidové noviny.* 1998. 10. červen.

the party-partners, as V. Havel severely criticized new relations between the Civic Democratic Party and the Czech Social-Democratic Party, considering the oppositional agreement to be a brute deceit of voters and a shameless division of power, which potentially may threaten the fundamentals of civil society in the Czech Republic<sup>8</sup>.

For the system of political parties in the Czech Republic and the Czech society in general the agreement between the CSDP and the CDP had two main consequences. First of all, there occurred consolidation of a number of small political subjects, whose existence was threatened by the monopoly on power of two large parties formed after the 1998 elections. Secondly, there appeared and growth estrangement between the elite of the political class in the Czech Republic and the civil society, which started comprehending parties as structures, interested in division of authorities, lobbying interests of separate groups of the ruling elite (big business, officials etc.), instead of executing primary function of political parties – representation and protection of interests of broad layers of population.

The former tendency revealed in 1998 when the Christian democrats, who had to become opposition for the first time since 1918, made close ties with another small oppositional party – the Freedom Union and later with the Civic Democratic Alliance and the Democratic Union. Cooperation of these political parties started in autumn 1998 when they created a coalition and participated in the elections to the Senate and local authorities. Later on these political forces formally made an agreement as to mutual political strategy (September 1999), and in a year they enhanced their decisions in the so-called “The Treaty of Saint Wenceslas”, signed by the leaders of four parties on September 28, 2000 (on St. Wenceslas day). The agreement presupposed a common position of a new “coalition of four” as to several main questions of political life of the country. Firstly, it was an opposition to the following monopolization of the Czech political arena by the Civic Democratic Party and the Czech Social-Democratic Party; and close cooperation of four parties in the course of local and parliamentary election campaigns. Members of coalition decided to create a common list of candidates for the elections to the Senate in autumn 2000 and the Chamber of Deputies in 2002<sup>9</sup>.

The coalition tried to position itself in the political life of the Czech Republic as a force which equally opposed both to the social-democrats and the civic democrats, blaming them of sacrificing their program goals for the sake of power ambitions. Not less role was played by the social initiatives (1999) aimed at the initiators of the oppositional agreement, which represented anti-system protest of a large part of the Czech society.

On July, 1999 was published a dissertation “Impulse – 99”, which was signed by 186 leading social activists. The authors’ dissertation aim was later explained by one of its initiators, political

<sup>8</sup> *Žadoucí je člověk zásadový a konsensuální. Rozhovor s prezidentem republiky Václavem Havlem // Přítomnost. Politický a kulturní čtvrtletník. 2001. Č. 1. S. 14.*

<sup>9</sup> The test of the Treaty of Saint Wenceslas, see for instance: *Lidové noviny. 2000. 29. září.*

counselor of V. Havel, political scientist J. Pehe, who stated that it was the protest against “the partners of the (oppositional – T. F.) agreement, who carried on preserving the political regime, which essentially was anti-civil”. J. Pehe believed that the main aim of the agreement was “to give two parties control over the majority of spheres of social, political and economic life. This partocracy is dangerous as it narrows down democratic discussion in the country to the agreement of two party administrative offices, which primarily act in their own interests... A citizen is being imposed a role of a passive consumer of the party policy, which most commonly is just a virtual game... This refers to the fight between the adherents of democratic open society and those who wish to limit it in the interest of preserving own power and personal benefits”<sup>10</sup>.

Till the beginning of autumn 1999 almost 2 000 people had signed the declaration “Impulse – 99”, including the archbishop of Prague and primate of the Czech church M. Vlk, president of the Czech Academy of Science R. Zahradnyk, vice-president of the National Bank Z. Tuma, leader of trade unions, senator R. Falbr, famous film director, “Oscar” winner Z. Sverak and others<sup>11</sup>.

Despite the names of such famous signers, a distinct parallel, drawn by the organizers of the “Impulse – 99”, between their initiative and dissident “Charter – 77”, and indirect, but doubtless support of the new movement on the side of Grad (in Grad situated the residence of the head of the state)<sup>12</sup>, “Impulse – 99” did not unite social layers and groups, which were disjointed and unsatisfied with the oppositional agreement and its political consequences. The main reason, perhaps, must be principally anti-system orientation of this social initiative, moralized pathos of the organizers, who condemned not only the specific political course of two biggest Czech parties, but also “immoral” character of politics itself.

More specific and organized display of civil dissatisfaction in the Czech Republic was a campaign “Thank you, get away!”, organized in November-December 1999 on the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Velvet” revolution by the former leaders of the students’ movement, who participated in the events of 1989. In many cities throughout the Czech Republic took place mass meetings, where the participants demanded resignation of leaders of the “negotiated” parties, government and parliament<sup>13</sup>. But those meetings had no serious consequences. The organizers were not ready to such mass social support and lost their heads, having heard the appeals to create an effective political “third force”, able to resist the Civic Democratic Party and the Czech Social-Democratic Party. Thus, the movement “Thank you, get away!” more than the dissertation “Impulse – 99” revealed the desire of a certain part of the Czech society to institutionalize political forces, which stood against the oppositional agreement and its main outcome – domination of two biggest parties.

<sup>10</sup> Pehe J. «Impuls – 99» v kontextu současného politického vývoje // Respect. 2000. 29. března.

<sup>11</sup> Stránský M.J. «Impuls – 99» – Consensus and Confrontation // The New Presence. 1999. № 9. P. 2-8.

<sup>12</sup> A Crying Need for Intellectuals. Interview with Czech President Václav Havel // The New Presence. 1999. № 4. P. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Lidové noviny. 1999. 18, 20, 21. září; Právo. 1999. 18-20. září. та ін.

However, long-expected changes did not take place and dissatisfaction with the political situation grew into a latent phase, being represented at best in political scientists' and analysts' complaints that belliciously apprehended an "oppositional-negotiated" system. "Politics in the Czech Republic, – stated J. Pehe – became a senseless ritual, a set of political combinations... None of the veterans of the Czech political life for the last 10 post-communist years has shown readiness to work out new ideas and conceptions. Politics reached the level of continuous fight for power and personal benefits. The Czech Republic is suffering from absolute inefficiency of its political elite"<sup>14</sup>.

Negative attitude of the biggest part of the society towards the political elite and its activity in the late 90s found its representation in the fall of confidence to the majority of political institutions. It is significant, that the level of confidence to some individual politicians was much higher than to the "institutions-collective bodies, whose effectiveness depends on their ability to search consensus and reach compromises"<sup>15</sup>. Thus, according to the survey, conducted by the specialists from T. H. Masaryk University in 1998, president of the Czech Republic V. Havel enjoyed 60% support, while 23% did not trust him: M. Zeman was supported by 50% of respondents, non-confidence was expressed by 27%. At the same time, the Cabinet of Ministers in general had support only of 26% of people, while 51% did not support it; level of confidence to the parliament was even lower – 15% in each case (non-confidence – 64% and 55% correspondingly)<sup>16</sup>.

Dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs, expressed by the broad layers of the society led to the growth of apolitical attitudes among population, disgust to politics as it was, which resulted in an abrupt decrease of activity among the Czech voters. It was clearly displayed in November 1998, when the elections to the Senate and local authorities took place. It should be mentioned, that in accordance with the Constitution of the Czech Republic, the Senate (the upper chamber of the Czech parliament) consists of 81 senators. One third of them, i.e. 27 people, are elected every two years according to the majority voted system in two rounds in single-seat electoral districts. The first elections to the Czech Senate, when all senators were elected took place in 1996; second (partial) elections were in 1998; third – in 2000; fourth – at the end of 2002<sup>17</sup>. For the first time in the post-communist history of the Czech Republic during the first round of the Senate elections only 42.4% of people who had the right to vote came to polling stations. During the second round there was a kind of "electoral collapse" when only 20.4% of the Czech population were voting and in some electoral districts voter turnout was even lower – 14-15%<sup>18</sup>. However, some political analysts saw the reason not in general dissatisfaction of the population with the political situation in the Czech Republic, but in unpopularity

<sup>14</sup> Pehe J. A Year of Stagnation // The New Presence. 1999. № 2. P. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Muller K., jr. Češi a občanská společnost // Politologická revue. 2001. Č. 2.S. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Muller K., jr. Češi a občanská společnost // Politologická revue. 2001. Č. 2.S. 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Konstitutsiia Cheskoj Respubliky z 16 hrudnia 1992 roku* // Konstitutsii novykh derzhav Yevropy ta Azii. Kyiv: Pravo, 1996. Pp. 496-499.

<sup>18</sup> Právo. 1998. 23. listopad.

of the Senate as an institution, insufficient clearness of its functions and doubts in the society concerning reasonability of existence of the upper chamber of the Czech parliament<sup>19</sup>. Level of confidence in the Senate at the end of 1998 – beginning of 1999 equaled 11-15%<sup>20</sup>.

Resounding triumph at the elections to the Senate gained parties, which entered the “coalition of four” (the CDU-CPP, the FU, the CDP and the DU). They were struggling for 13 senator seats out of 27. Civic democrats had 7 representatives; quite unexpectedly the social-democrats sustained crushing defeat and gained only 3 seats. Two communist-candidates entered the Senate<sup>21</sup>. For the Czech Social-Democratic Party a period of the first year and a half after signing the oppositional agreement was especially difficult. In 1998-1999 a steady decline of the social-democrats’ rating was observed and in December 1999 it bottomed 16%, whereas popularity of the civic democrats and communists reached 20-22%<sup>22</sup>. Prime-minister M. Zeman, being to some extent “more right” than “the right parties” themselves (thus, only when the cabinet of the social-democrats was in office started privatization of the biggest Czech banks and there was observed the growth of foreign investment in the Czech Republic), however, at every opportunity he criticized his predecessors from the right wing. The expression “burned earth” (*spalená země*), which was used by the social-democratic prime-minister to characterize the state of affairs in the country at his coming to power, became a part of the Czech political folklore, as it earlier happened with the phrase “to take the government by the throat”<sup>23</sup>.

At the same time, despite all the causticity and figurativeness of M. Zeman’s expressions, a psychological influence of the oppositional agreement on that part of the Czech Social-Democratic Party’s electorate, which supported the party at the elections as a direct alternative to the rights was negative: these voters were extremely disappointed with the agreement between their party and the Civic Democratic Party. On the contrary, being clearly formed and ideologically consolidated electorate of the civic democrats apprehended the oppositional agreement much easier, as a felicitous political instrument, which gave the rights an opportunity to some extent control the policy of the left cabinet. Comparative growth of the communists’ popularity, first of all, might be explained by the fact that a part of left-radical protesting electorate quitted the Czech Social-Democratic Party (after signing the oppositional agreement). Besides, the communists won support of those citizens, who stood against joining NATO in spring 1999.

In autumn 1999 the social-democrats and the civic democrats conducted complicated negotiations as to the draft of the law on elections. The Civic Democratic Party by all means tried to gain advantage over the Czech Social-Democratic Party, but when negotiations did not bring desired results, the former proposed an initiative to liquidate the oppositional agreement, to resign the social-democratic cabinet and to create a government of broad (so-called

<sup>19</sup> Právo. 1998. 18. listopad.

<sup>20</sup> Právo. 1998. říjen; 1999. 27. leden.

<sup>21</sup> *Statistická ročenka České republiky*. 1998. Praha, 1999. S. 577.

<sup>22</sup> *Černák M.* Václav Klaus, Miloš Zeman: Souběhový portrét. Praha, 1998. S. 86.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* S. 88-89.



“iridescent”) coalition, which could be formed by the representatives of all parliamentary parties, except the communists, i.e. the civic democrats, the social-democrats, the Christian democrats and the Freedom Union. Most likely such proposal of the Civic Democratic Party was just another new way to exert pressure on the social-democrats, a “crack of a whip”, which had to make an impression on the unmanageable Czech Social-Democratic Party<sup>24</sup>.

Additional measure of such influence was a refusal of the civic democrats to adopt the 2000 draft budget, which was introduced by the government. Consequently, in October 1999 the Czech Republic entered another streak of political crisis, which, on the one hand, was marked by an escalation of contradictions between the partners to the oppositional agreement, and, on the other hand, by a general social tension, which found its representation in the mass movement “Thank you, get away!”. In fact, the budget became a subject to political bargains: the Civic Democratic Party showed readiness to adopt it, only in the case the Czech Social-Democratic Party agreed to adopt a draft of an electoral reform in the version which would be advantageous for the civic democrats. Eventually, the crisis within the political class was resolved in January 2000, when was signed the so-called patent of mutual support, which was the continuation of the oppositional agreement and heralded a new stage of modern political process in the Czech Republic.

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<sup>24</sup> *Respect*. 1999. Č. 45. S. 20.

17. *Právo*. 1998. 3. červenec .
18. *Právo*. 1999. 18-20. září.
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