

PROBLEMS OF GOVERNABILITY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

BY HUBERT SMEKAL – MARTIN HRABÁLEK

Introduction

The elections held in the Czech Republic at the beginning of June 2006 have brought a difficult situation on the Czech political scene. Two blocks of 100 votes in a 200-seat Chamber of Deputies have emerged, without a clear solution. The stalemate has lasted for more than seven months and the current government still does not possess majority and is based only on the support of two switched representatives of ČSSD.

The paper looks back to the history of the Czech Republic in order to compare the outcome of 2006 elections with former elections. Our study is based mainly on the comparison of strength of previous government coalitions and on a survey of coalition potentials of political parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament after elections in 1996, 1998, 2002 and 2006, with a short examination of current preferences and possible coalitions after hypothetical early elections, based on a public opinion survey from January 2007.

In this short paper we seek to prove the following statement: "The current situation after an extraordinary outcome of the 2006 election does not present a completely new scenario in the Czech politics as there have always been governments without a majority or with an only very narrow majority".

Survey of elections to the Chamber of Deputies

The Parliament of the Czech Republic is composed of two houses – the Chamber of Deputies, whose 200 representatives are elected on the basis of a proportional system, and the Senate consisting of 81 senators elected by a two-round majority electoral system. A crucial player in the process of legislating and decision-making is the Chamber of Deputies and accordingly, elections to this house are considered the most important. Thanks to the proportionate electoral system we can therefore examine a longer-term support for Czech political parties and for the political orientation of the Czech society. We divided relevant parties (those represented in the Chamber of Deputies) in two categories – the government coalition and the opposition and also examined their coalition potential. There are presented more data in tables, but the essential for our analysis is the percentage of the votes received and number of mandates for parties and for a government coalition.

Table 1a: 1996 elections to the Chamber of Deputies¹

Electoral participation: 76.41 %

Number of valid votes: 6 059 215

	Votes	% of votes	Mandates	% of mandates
KSČM	626 136	10.33	22	11
ČSSD	1 602 250	26.44	61	30.50
KDU-ČSL	489 349	8.08	18	9
ODS	1 794 560	29.62	68	34
ODA	385 369	6.36	13	6.50
SPR-RSČ	485 072	8.01	18	9

Government: ODS (rightist liberal-conservative), ODA (rightist liberal), KDU-ČSL (centre Christian) – 44.06 % votes, 99 seats (49.5 % of seats)

Opposition: ČSSD (leftist), KSČM (far leftist), SPR-RSČ (radical, nationalistic, extreme right) – 44.78 % votes, 101 seats (50.5 % of seats)

Table 1b: Coalition potential (green – possible cooperation, red – without potential; number of mandates of each party in the horizontal line)

	KSČM	ČSSD	KDU-ČSL	ODS	ODA	SPR-RSČ
KSČM	X	22	22	22	22	22
ČSSD	61	X	61	61	61	61
KDU-ČSL	18	18	X	18	18	18
ODS	68	68	68	X	68	68
ODA	13	13	13	13	X	13
SPR-RSČ	18	18	18	18	18	X

>From the Table 1b follows that the only viable government coalition resulting from the 1996 elections was the coalition of KDU-ČSL, ODS and ODA, because both KSČM and SPR-RSČ were without the coalition potential and ČSSD could establish a coalition government only with KDU-ČSL but did not have enough seats in the Chamber (61 + 18, *i.e.* 79 seats). It follows that the only strong government

¹ Data used in tables 1a and 1b taken from: Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 31.5. - 1.6.1996, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps1996-win/u4> and Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 31.5. - 1.6.1996, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps1996-win/u610>.

coalition had just 99 seats available. However, one ČSSD parliamentarian deserted to ODS in 1997, thus helping the government to be supported exactly by one half of the Chamber (100 deputies)².

Table 2a: 1998 elections to the Chamber of Deputies³

Electoral participation: 74.03 %

Number of valid votes: 5 969 505

	Votes	% of votes	Mandates	% of mandates
KSČM	658 550	11.03	24	12
ČSSD	1 928 660	32.31	74	37
KDU-ČSL	537 013	9.00	20	10
US	513 596	8.60	19	9.50
ODS	1 656 011	27.74	63	31.50

Government: ČSSD ("opposition contract" with ODS) – 32.31 % of votes, 74 seats (37 % of seats)

Opposition: ODS, KDU-ČSL, US (moderate rightist liberal), KSČM – 56.37 %, 126 seats (63 % of seats)

Table 2b: Coalition potential (green – possible cooperation, red – without potential; number of mandates of each party in a horizontal line)

	KSČM	ČSSD	KDU-ČSL	US	ODS
KSČM	X	24	24	24	24
ČSSD	74	X	74	74	74
KDU-ČSL	20	20	X	20	20
US	19	19	19	X	19
ODS	63	63	63	63	X

After early elections in 1998 after an internal rift within the previous governing coalition a single-party government of leftist ČSSD was formed with tolerance of the strongest rightist party ODS which could not overcome personal animosity with US which was established by its deserted members (therefore green-red in the table 2b). Otherwise, the coalition of natural ideological centre-right allies ODS, US and KDU-

² P. Fiala, R. Herbut et al. Středoevropské systémy politických stran, Brno, MPÚ, 2003, p. 32.

³ Data used in tables 2a and 2b taken from: Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 19. - 20.6.1998, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps1998-win/u4> and Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 19. - 20.6.1998, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps1998-win/u610>.

ČSL would possess a slight majority of 102 seats in the Chamber, nevertheless, ODS rather signed "opposition agreement" with its ideological rival ČSSD. Then, both parties agreed on a new electoral law which favours big parties. This incentive proved more attractive for ČSSD than stronger centre-left coalition with KDU-ČSL and arguably also with US whom ČSSD first rejected as a coalition partner but then offered to US seats in the government⁴ (therefore once red and once red-green in the table 2b). It is necessary to stress in these circumstances a very difficult position of Social Democrats (ČSSD) who are the sole subject on the left part of the political spectre with a coalition potential because the Communist Party (KSČM) played a role of an anti-system party with zero potential.

Table 3a: 2002 elections to the Chamber of Deputies⁵

Electoral participation: 58.00 %

Number of valid votes: 4 768 006

	Votes	% of votes	Mandates	% of mandates
KSČM	882 653	18.51	41	20.50
ČSSD	1 440 279	30.20	70	35
KDU-ČSL + US DEU	680 671	14.27	31	15.50
ODS	1 166 975	24.47	58	29

Government: ČSSD, coalition of KDU-ČSL and US-DEU – 44.47 % of votes, 101 seats (50.50 % of seats)

Opposition: ODS, KSČM – 42.78 % of votes, 99 seats (49.50 % of seats)

Table 3b: Coalition potential (green – possible cooperation, red – without potential; number of mandates of each party in a horizontal line)

	KSČM	ČSSD	KDU-ČSL + US-DEU	ODS
KSČM	X	41	41	41
ČSSD	70	X	70	70
KDU-ČSL + US-DEU	31	31	X	31
ODS	58	58	58	X

⁴ P. Fiala, R. Herbut et al., op. cit., p. 35.

⁵ Data used in tables 3a and 3b taken from: Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 14. - 15.6.2002, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2002-win/ps2?xjazyk=CZ> and Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 14. - 15.6.2002, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2002-win/ps63?xjazyk=CZ>.

The only viable coalition after 2002 elections consisted of leftist Social Democrats and the coalition of parties called simply Koalice (KDU-ČSL and US-DEU) which possessed the narrowest possible majority of 101 votes. The government coalition was united especially in its favourable views towards the European Union (EU) and during their functional period the Czech Republic accessed the EU. Ideologically and programmatically more natural coalition of rightist ODS and centre-rightist 4K would have had only 89 seats.

Table 4a: 2006 elections to the Chamber of Deputies⁶

Electoral participation: 64.47 %

Number of valid votes: 5 348 976

	Votes	% of votes	Mandates	% of mandates
KSČM	685 328	12.81	26	13
ČSSD	1 728 827	32.32	74	37
SZ	336 487	6.29	6	3
KDU-ČSL	386 706	7.22	13	6.50
ODS	1 892 475	35.38	81	40.50

Government: ODS, KDU-ČSL and SZ – 48.89 % of votes, 100 seats (50 % of seats)

Opposition: ČSSD, KSČM – 45.13 % of votes, 100 seats (50 % of seats)

Table 4b: Coalition potential (green – possible cooperation, red – without potential; number of mandates of each party in a horizontal line)

	KSČM	ČSSD	SZ	KDU-ČSL	ODS
KSČM	X	26	26	26	26
ČSSD	74	X	74	74	74
SZ	6	6	X	6	6
KDU-ČSL	13	13	13	X	13
ODS	81	81	81	81	X

The elections to the Chamber of Deputies in 2006 brought a stalemate situation when centre-right parties hold 100 seats in the lower house, as well as two leftist parties. Importantly, Social

⁶ Data used in tables 3a and 3b taken from: Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 2. - 3.6.2006, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2006/ps2?xjazyk=CZ> and Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny Parlamentu České republiky konané ve dnech 2. - 3.6.2006, <http://www.volby.cz/pls/ps2006/ps53?xjazyk=CZ>.

Democrats admitted for the first time on a high level that they would form a coalition with Communists in the future. However, the winner of the 2006 elections – Civic Democrats together with Christian Democrats and Greens managed to find the necessary majority in the chamber thanks to two abstentions of social-democratic deputies.

The next chapter describes more in detail an interesting situation after the last elections to the Chamber of Deputies.

The process of government-forming after the 2006 election

Due to the result of the election in June 2006, it was clear that the process of formation of a new government was going to be a very difficult task. The Czech political scene was paralyzed by a virtually insurmountable stalemate with two political parties on the left (KSČM, ČSSD) holding 100 mandates and three other subjects opposed to them (ODS as the winner of the elections, KDU-ČSL and SZ) holding the equal number of seats.

Leader of ČSSD Jiří Paroubek made a clear statement that his party would not mind to form a government with the support of the Communists, what would bring a new element to the Czech politics, as KSČM has been traditionally „out“ from any possible coalition since 1993.

However, as the winner of the election, ODS had the first chance to try to form a government. In August 2006, President Václav Klaus designated the leader of ODS Mirek Topolánek as the Prime Minister. The role of Václav Klaus in the after-election events was quite active, yet we would in some moments hesitate to qualify it as constructive, with the president clearly preferring the so-called “Grand Coalition” of ODS and ČSSD and opposing a government that would be based on votes of few parliamentarians of ČSSD that would decide to switch sides and to vote for the government.

This coalition of ODS and ČSSD was unlikely from the very first moment. ODS evidently preferred the coalition with KDU-ČSL and SZ (with whom they already signed the Coalition Agreement in June) or its own single-party minority government, but due to the fact that such a government would not obtain a majority of votes, they needed support of some of ČSSD members in the Chamber of Deputies which seemed quite improbable for the moment. Thus, negotiations between Civic Democrats and Social Democrats concerning a support for a minority government formed only by ODS intensified.

While negotiating with ODS, Paroubek (ČSSD) led also parallel talks with KDU-ČSL leader Miroslav Kalousek. Consequently, at the end of August, Kalousek, disquieted by the possibility that ODS would form its own minority government omitting KDU-ČSL, came with a shocking statement that Christian Democrats could form a minority government with ČSSD, supported by votes of KSČM. This possibility was strictly rejected by local organizations of KDU-ČSL and led to a very quick termination of Kalousek’s leadership in the party. Some experts call this a Christian Democratic „salto mortale“.⁷

The designed Prime Minister Topolánek decided at this stage to present a single party government of ODS supplemented by several independent experts (9 members of ODS, 6 experts). Analyst B. Pečinka identifies the budget for year 2007 as a main reason why Topolánek formed a government that had only

⁷ T. Foltýn and V. Havlík, *Teorie a praxe sestavování vlády v České republice*, in *Volby do Poslanecké sněmovny v roce 2006*, edited by D. Čaloud, T. Foltýn, V. Havlík and A. Matušková, Brno, Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2006, p. 196.

a negligible chance to gain support from the Chamber of Deputies^{8, 9}. As expected the government did not pass and president Klaus decided to wait for results of Senate and local elections to designate a new Prime Minister.

Senate and local elections confirmed a position of ODS as the most popular party in the country and Topolánek thus gained the second chance to form a government. With the Executive Board of ODS opposing the ODS-ČSSD coalition, Topolánek had no other chance but to create a ODS – KDU-ČSL – SZ government with support of some dissatisfied members of the Chamber of Deputies from ČSSD.

ODS has been much more broadminded when creating the second government and offered five ministries to KDU-ČSL and four ministries to SZ which possesses only six (!) seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Civic Democrats reserved for themselves nine ministries. But the core task still remained – to gain support from some of the ČSSD members. Finally, Topolánek persuaded two of them, Miloš Melčák and Michal Pohanka and on 20th of January 2007, the government has passed when both renegades from ČSSD abstained.

We consider the current political situation in the Czech Republic as sub-optimal, as the government still does not possess a majority of seats and its success depends in many aspects on a will of the „switched“ ČSSD members with their possible extortionate requirements. The stalemate is thus not completely broken. Yet, the sole fact that the country finally has a government after seven months of waiting, can be regarded as clearly positive. On the other hand, the government does not have enough support in the Chamber of Deputies in order to make much needed reforms of tax and pension systems.

Early elections??? What public opinion polls tell us?

Although early elections are not a frequently discussed alternative at the moment (February 2007), it is very interesting to take a look at public opinion polls and to examine how voters' preferences have changed during the past eight months. Provided that the current situation of two 100-votes blocks would emerge again is highly unlikely, we also examine new possible coalition potentials.

Table 5a: Public opinion poll – Preferences in January 2007¹⁰

Party	Preferences	Mandates ¹¹
ODS	32,3%	83
ČSSD	20,9%	53
KSČM	12,4%	28
SZ	11,1%	22

⁸ B. Pečinka, Sestavování vlády, Reflex 6/2007.

⁹ The reform of public finances is one of key issues in the current Coalition Agreement – see Koaliční smlouva, <http://www.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=20394>.

¹⁰ STEM, Preference politických stran, January 2007, <http://www.stem.cz/clanek/1190>.

¹¹ Warning: number of seats in the Chamber of Deputies computed by agencies on the basis of public opinion polls must be taken into account only with a great precaution because they are not often computed in accordance with the actual electoral laws.

KDU-ČSL	7,5%	14
SNK-ED	1,7%	-
Rest*	14,2%	-

* Other small parties; not decided yet; none.

As we can see, early elections would totally change the reality of Czech politics. Even if we take in mind the statistical discrepancy that usually oscillates between 1.5 % and 2.5 %, the changes in preferences would open space for ODS to create a more stable coalition government with a clear majority. On the other hand, a government without ODS would be practically unimaginable due to the negative attitude of the Greens towards the Communists.

It is also clear that no “new” party would take part in the Chamber of Deputies, so we could expect the same actors to try to form a coalition. With these presuppositions in mind, the following table of possible coalitions can be construed.

Table 5b: Coalition potential (green – possible cooperation, red – without potential; number of mandates of each party in a horizontal line)

	KSČM	ČSSD	SZ	KDU-ČSL	ODS
KSČM	X	28	28	28	28
ČSSD	53	X	53	53	53
SZ	22	22	X	22	22
KDU-ČSL	14	14	14	X	14
ODS	83	83	83	83	X

The current government coalition would have 119 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, a comfortable majority, although missing a constitutional majority (3/5 of the Chamber, *i.e.* 120 seats) needed for the most crucial decisions by just one seat. Another possible coalition would consist of ODS-SZ that would have 105 seats. On the other hand, the second strongest party – ČSSD – could form a coalition without ODS only with support of SZ and KSČM, with whom ČSSD did not reject for the first time a government coalition for the near future. Thanks to the stance of SZ, this coalition is highly unlikely.

Conclusion

From the abovementioned data clearly follows that the Czech Republic has a “tradition” of fragile and very narrow coalitions. The strongest government coalition yet resulted from 2002 elections and was backed only by 101 seats. The three remaining government coalitions did not even hold a majority in the lower house (1996 – 99 seats, 1998 – 74 seats, 2006 – 100 seats)! The party system of the Czech

Republic is described as relatively stabilized¹², but new parties still enter the Chamber and/or the government and new possibilities of cooperation evolve¹³. With the stabilization of the party system and also due to changes of electoral laws, the two strongest parties (ČSSD on the left and ODS on the right) continue to capture more seats in the Chamber¹⁴. Smaller parties around the centre dispose with a large coalition potential, while the party system is distorted by unreformed Communists with a very weak coalition potential but whose number of representatives in the lower house has always exceeded 10 % of the number of seats¹⁵. The overall characteristics of Czech governments may than be: fragility, low operational potential, necessity of compromises.

List of abbreviations

ČSSD – Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká strana sociálně demokratická)

DEU – Democratic Union (Demokratická unie)

KDU-ČSL – The Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (Křesťanská a demokratická unie – Čs. strana lidová)

KSČM – Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy)

ODA - Civic Democratic Alliance (Občanská demokratická aliance)

ODS – Civic Democratic Party (Občanská demokratická strana)

SNK-ED – Association of Independent Candidates-European Democrats (Sdružení nezávislých kandidátů – Evropští demokraté)

SPR-RSČ – Association for Republic – Republican Party of Czechoslovakia (Sdružení pro republiku – Republikánská strana Československa)

SZ – Green Party (Strana zelených)

US – Union of Freedom (Unie svobody)

¹² V. Dvořáková, *Přechod České republiky k demokracii v komparativní perspektivě*, in *Parlamentní volby 2006 a česká politika*, edited by B. Dančák and V. Hloušek, Brno, Mezinárodní politologický stav, 2006, p. 20.

¹³ Despite the alteration of governments, stabilization and simplification of relevant cleavages, it is still not possible to find stable patterns of interactions between poles of the Czech party system (M. Strmiska, V. Hloušek, L. Kopeček, R. Chytilík, *Politické strany moderní Evropy*, Praha, Portál, 2005, p. 451).

¹⁴ Number of representatives of ČSSD and ODS in the Chamber of Deputies.

Elections 1996	129 seats
Elections 1998	137 seats
Elections 2002	128 seats
Elections 2006	155 seats

Source: authors' calculation.

Pšeja remarks that tendency to bipolarity appeared already in 1990 and the 1996 elections confirmed the trend (P. Pšeja, *Stranický systém České republiky*, Brno, ISPO, 2005, 153-154).

¹⁵ Profesor Holzer talks about communism as about immanent political Czech tradition having roots in the first half of 20th century. (J. Holzer, *Platí ještě v české politice tranzitologické paradigma?*, in *Parlamentní volby 2006 a česká politika*, edited by B. Dančák and V. Hloušek, Brno, Mezinárodní politologický stav, 2006, p. 30-31.

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