

## **New Czech Government Faces Stumbling Blocks**

**Article by Adéla Jurečková**

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Elections in autumn 2021 led to an unexpected transfer of power in the Czech Republic. From the outset, Prime Minister Petr Fiala's new five-party liberal-conservative cabinet generated much optimism. Hopes were high that it marked an end to Andrej Babiš's unbridled populism in matters of climate or immigration, his ice-cold opportunism in European and foreign policy, and the merging of economic, political, and media power. But critics warned of a conservative turn in neoliberal garb that would further divide society, marginalise the socially disadvantaged, and pave the way for a Babiš comeback.

The government declaration had initially confirmed hopes of a progressive turnaround. The new cabinet, consisting of the conservative alliance SPOLU (Civic Democrats – ODS and Christian Democrats – KDU-ČSL) and the liberal alliance PirSTAN (Pirates, Mayors and Independents), announced an expansion of renewable energy, a more rapid coal phase-out, a strengthening of relations with the EU and NATO, and a revision of the country's China and Russia policy.

Right at the beginning, the government passed its first baptism of fire when President Zeman blocked the government's appointment because he did not want to appoint the Pirate Jan Lipavský as foreign minister. Zeman particularly disliked Lipavský's allegedly distanced attitude toward the Visegrád Group and Israel, doubted his qualifications and even helped himself to the well-worn anti-Sudeten German topic when he recalled Lipavský's previous statement that he could imagine a Sudeten German Day on Czech soil. However, when Premier Fiala (ODS) threatened to have the president's powers over appointments reviewed by the Constitutional Court, Zeman finally relented.

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### **Nuclear power and coal? Yes, please!**

However, the government's positive image began to show the first cracks after a successful start. When the Ministry of Industry and Trade under the new minister Jozef Síkela (STAN) presented a draft of a government decree in the energy sector that, in contrast to the election promises of the parties and the government declaration, focused on natural gas and coal instead of photovoltaics and wind energy – this was met with criticism not only from the ranks of the climate movement. Shortly thereafter, the government sided with

France and Poland on the European Commission decision to classify nuclear power as a “green” energy source and even called for further relaxation of the regulation: according to the Czech government, nuclear power plants should be classified as low-emission not just for a transitional period, but for the long term. This demand hardly caused an uproar – it is in line with the long-term positions of the governing parties on nuclear power, and they also know that the majority of the Czech population is on their side.

Fiala’s cabinet, however, moved onto less solid ground with its steps in the case of Turów – the coal mine on the Polish side of the border between the two countries. The coal from Turów burned in the nearby power plant not only causes severe pollution in the German-Polish-Czech border triangle, but the mining also drains the groundwater from residents on the Czech side, which is why the Czech Republic filed a lawsuit against Poland with the EU Court of Justice demanding a halt to mining. When the government suddenly ended the years-long dispute in an all-night negotiation with the Polish counterparty excluding the public and waived further claims in exchange for compensation of 1 billion Czech crowns (45 million euros), many Czech citizens saw this as a betrayal. The government had sold its water and did not care about the concerns and needs of the population in the periphery, many criticised – rallies and protests followed. Still from the opposition bench, several of the current government members called for a halt to mining in Turów and strongly opposed any solution that would restrict residents’ access to water. For example, Markéta Pekarová Adamová, chairwoman of the liberal-conservative TOP09, two years ago, tweeted, “Poland’s economic interests must not take precedence over the fate of even a single Czech well.” She is now chairwoman of the Czech Chamber of Deputies and defends the agreement with Poland.

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## **Foreign policy: what would Václav Havel say?**

Where does the Czech Republic see itself within the global political interplay of major powers, but also in relation to its partners and neighbours in Europe? One rarely hears anything about this outside the country, which is due not only to its manageable size, but also to the ambivalence of the key figures and institutions relevant to foreign policy. Prime minister, foreign minister, president of the republic – all pull on different strands, often in opposite directions. In the past, President Zeman wanted to move the country closer to Russia and China, Foreign Minister Petříček toward the EU and the West, and Prime Minister Babiš mostly used foreign policy only as a big stage for his domestic political performance.

The new government, on the other hand, had set out to break with this inglorious “tradition” and speak clearly with one voice. Its foreign policy orientation was not only to follow Prime Minister Fiala and Foreign Minister Lipavský, but also to revive the spirit of none other than the first post-socialist president, human rights activist and playwright Václav Havel. “We will renew the tradition of ‘Havel’s’ foreign policy, including support for development and transformation cooperation,” the five parties announce in their joint

government statement. Even without a more detailed explanation of what “Havelian foreign policy” means to the government in light of today’s global political challenges, this announcement has raised many hopes for a more human rights-oriented, values-based policy that is able to look beyond the end of its own nose. When the aforementioned Pirate Party member Lipavský was appointed foreign minister, many saw this hope confirmed because of his previous positions as well as his party’s program.

However, the adoption of the state budget and the comprehensive cuts soon brought disillusionment. Of all things, the planned expenditures for humanitarian aid fell by a quarter, and for development cooperation by a fifth. The core area of democracy promotion abroad, so-called transformation cooperation, was spared the cuts for the time being, but the budget had already been slashed under the previous Babiš government. Even before these cuts, the Czech Republic had fallen far short of its voluntary commitment in terms of financing development cooperation.

Will the government’s additional foreign policy steps remain merely lip service, or will they be followed by deeds? After all, the Czech Republic is offering Ukraine not only verbal but also real support: donations of ammunition, treatment of wounded soldiers, and acceptance of Ukrainian refugees. Like other states, the Czech government has not sent any representatives to Beijing either – by this Olympic boycott, it is probably taking itself at its word in its promise to revise the Czech Republic’s relations with China. It is to be hoped that the government will continue to stand up straight when the east wind blows stronger. In any case, with President Zeman publicly criticising both the government’s stance in the Ukraine conflict and the Olympic boycott, no support can be expected from this direction.

What role the Visegrád alliance will play in government policy remains to be seen. On the one hand, there are also admirers of the Hungarian and Polish rulers, especially in the ODS, who certainly share their skepticism toward the EU and liberal, human rights-oriented policies. On the other hand, the current crisis surrounding Russia’s threatened invasion of Ukraine shows that the Visegrád Four are by no means a unified bloc, as they sometimes appear to be to the outside world: the allies Poland and Hungary are taking different paths, and suddenly Morawiecki and Fiala, rather than Morawiecki and Orbán, are on the same side.

As far as Europe is concerned, movement can certainly be expected despite the partly EU-sceptical stance of Fiala’s party. The Czech presidency of the Council of Europe in the second half of 2022 will put Europe in the spotlight, and despite the critical voices about the budget being too small and preparations starting too late, the government can be expected to want to present itself as a constructive partner during the presidency. A first sign of this is the reinstatement of the post of Minister of Europe, which has been filled by Senate member Mikuláš Bek (STAN).

*Prime minister, foreign minister, president of the republic – all pull on different strands of foreign policy, often in opposite directions.*

## **Family and tradition – but without violence?**

Right at the beginning of its term in office, the government announced that it wanted to expand the term “Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs” to include the term “family” as well. But what image of family is hidden behind this and how does the government statement address the needs of families? The two government alliances, the conservative SPOLU and the liberal PirSTAN, differ in their understanding of family. . On this issue, the conservative parties seem to have prevailed more: marriage for all, which had been discussed for years, did not make it into the government programme, although the Pirate Party and STAN advocated it in their election programs. The right to registered partnerships remains. Compared to ultra-conservative policies in, say, Poland, with its LGBTQI-free zones, or Hungary, which defines marriage as a “union of a man and a woman” in its constitution, the situation of queer people in the Czech Republic may seem very positive. But in a country where the majority of the population supports marriage equality, this postponement is clearly a step backwards.

Family seems to be a priority for the government and its document contains many points in this regard. However, one key measure for easing the burden on families and improving work-life balance is missing from it: daycare places available for children from the age of two. While the government provides hardly any answers as to how municipalities are to finance care services for the youngest children, the new family minister and father of five, Marian Jurečka (KDU-ČSL), apparently has a concrete opinion on how he envisions raising children. In a television interview in late January, the Christian Democrat expressed that he had no plans to ban corporal punishment towards children. While he rejects violence against children, one-time slaps could sometimes help to show a child the limits. Thus, contrary to clear expert opinions that see no positive but many negative consequences of such “educational methods,” the Czech Republic will probably remain one of the last countries in Europe where it is legal to hit one’s children.

It is not only children who need special protection – to stop sexual and domestic violence against women also requires determined politicians who recognise and tackle the problem. Although the new government generally professes in its government declaration to take an important step in this direction, it missed it right at the beginning: the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. The Czech debate on the document has dragged on for years, and the longer it goes on, the more it becomes the subject of disinformation and culture wars. Opponents of the convention – including politicians from some of the ruling parties – claim that the convention aims to indoctrinate society with so-called gender ideology and disrupt traditional family values. Not very surprising, therefore, is the decision of the new Minister of Justice, Pavel Blažek (ODS), to postpone ratification of the Istanbul Convention for yet another year. Sexual and domestic violence remains an underestimated problem – not only in the Czech Republic – and has increased further during the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **The fairy tale of the highly indebted state**

So far, the government seems to be pursuing one of its announced priorities consistently and without compromise: austerity. The spectre of national debt has settled into the minds of Czech politicians on the right of centre at the latest since the Greek crisis – from their perspective, the country is always on the verge of plunging into the abyss. Yet the Czech Republic is a model student in this respect: with a national debt of around 40 per cent of GDP at the end of 2021 – despite the pandemic, tax cuts and increased government

spending under the Babiš government – it is one of the least indebted countries in Europe.

The only recipe for paying off the national debt seems to be austerity for the liberal-conservative government, losing sight of economy-boosting and sustainable measures of intelligent government spending. Instead of relying on higher or new taxes, it wants to save on its own personnel: the salaries of state employees are not adjusted for inflation, and those of civil servants are frozen directly. As an employer, the state has long been unable to compete with the private sector for skilled personnel. Announced austerity measures will also hit the healthcare system, which has been battered by the pandemic. The angry medical staff is threatening to go on strike. These and other cuts, such as the abolition of discounts on public transportation for senior citizens and students, are only a drop in the bucket for the state budget, but for those disposing of fewer financial means, they are a major obstacle.

The inhabitants of the Czech Republic, who have been battered by the pandemic, inflation and rising energy prices and rents, would benefit much more from long-overdue investments in education, health care, social services, sustainable energy management and socio-ecological restructuring than from the austerity policy the government has embarked on without need. If the government fails to find more constructive approaches here, it could cost its hard-won trust in no time at all – not even the narrative of the highly indebted state racing out of the curve if the debt brake is not passed immediately will be able to prevent this. Competitors are already lying in wait to exploit the government's failings in the coming elections: Former Prime Minister Babiš has already announced that he could enter the race to succeed President Zeman in 2023.



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