

EU Fiscal Pact: Why are Czechs giving up on EU integration?



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The Czech cabinet, as a matter of fact, put itself in a rhetoric trap when it rejected to join the EU fiscal pact. At the beginning of its term, it called itself “the cabinet of budget accountability”. It also presented the catastrophic “Greek way” – allegedly being prepared by left-wing parties – as an alternative to its rule. Despite previous rhetoric, the cabinet refused to endorse the proposed institutional change, which aims at making the whole EU adopt a policy of fiscal accountability.

Klaus – Nečas

The decision made by PM Petr Nečas at the EU Council’s summit on 30 January lacked direct support from the coalition government; however, it was in accord with the will of the Czech president. In spite of the fact that the president is elected indirectly and doesn’t play a significant role in everyday politics, he is granted a constitutional authority “to negotiate and ratify international treaties”. Therefore, a possible ratification of the pact would have to be signed by the president too, which seemed highly unlikely. EU sceptic president Václav Klaus is entering the last year of his second (and last) term in office as head of state and uncertainty over his future political career elicits concerns within the Civic Democratic Party (ODS,

the party that Klaus established, is currently led by Nečas). Nečas in general lacks the courage to confront the president out of pure loyalty and also because of his weak position within the party. In this case, the PM refuses to adopt a pragmatic decision which he himself opposes (his predecessor, Mirek Topolánek, had the courage to confront Klaus).

Be Czech, be British

Since the beginning of the 1990s, the Czech conservative right wing has been sentimentally endorsing the UK, embodied in particular by the idealised personality of Margaret Thatcher. That sentiment has turned into Czech vigilance towards the EU as a socialist, “French” and bureaucratic juggernaut suffocating the free market. The ODS symbolically followed this policy even during the last campaign, when it completely copied Cameron’s electoral posters. The establishment of the European Conservative and Reformist fraction in the EP (together with the British Conservatives and the Polish PiS) set a clear ideological course for the ODS’s EU agenda. The refusal to sign the fiscal pact together with the Brits should symbolically materialise the dream of the Czech conservative right to be regarded by the EU the same as Britain. Nečas has been a traditional supporter of this policy orientation.

“Independency in the post-modern world means a free choice of dependency”.

Jiří Gruša, writer, diplomat

The End of Integration

Negotiations about the fiscal pact took place against the backdrop of the Czech domestic dispute between Nečas and Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg (head of the right-wing TOP 09 party with pro-EU constituents) about the division of powers over EU affairs. The division between pro-integration and anti-integration political parties has lost its relevancy within the Czech political scene and is currently being applied only by some national media. Czech political parties have become more reserved and hesitant in their stances towards particular issues related to EU integration policies since the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. Also, the Czech EU Presidency left society with a bitter aftertaste. The only voice heard in the Czech debate about EU integration was that of hypercritical Klaus. Eurozone debt problems and cabinet rhetoric about irresponsible countries have pushed even opposition Socialists to the corner as they realise that a political programme based on EU solidarity won't win new voters. On the other hand, public opinion that there has been enough EU integration and that Brussels is threatening our

sovereignty, together with European Commission bureaucrats who interfere extensively in our internal affairs, is resonating within ODS. The state budget is conceived as a symbol of state sovereignty (regardless of the fact that the Czech Republic has to borrow more than 11 % of its budget resources on the financial markets [2011]).

The cabinet decision not to join the fiscal union brings Prague-Brussels relations in harmony with the dominating political stance of Czech representation towards the EU. If the pact starts functioning and does not suffer the same fate as the previous Stability and Growth Pact, it is likely the future Czech government will join the fiscal union. However, the political losses will be detrimental to the whole country's credibility today.

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Newsletter is registered under the number MK ČR E 20375