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The Czech reaction to the IGC failure – disillusion or indifference?

When the Czech premier Vladimir Spidla was leaving for Brussels summit, he was moderately optimistic about the possibility that the heads of state could get a deal. Probably remembering the one-year-old experience from Copenhagen where he stayed with Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen until late trying to get a better deal for the Czechs when joining the EU. But this time it was not the Danes presiding over the European Council and questions at stake were much more controversial – while Copenhagen was mainly about money, Brussels was about power.

Spidla's position was not an easy one to defend. The government is weak, enjoying a very fragile support in the Chamber of Deputies. The opposition, consisting of Civic Democrats (=conservatives) and Communists has clearly taken up the question of the constitution to embark on criticism of the government for being willing to give up too much power to Brussels and paving the way to a European super-state. The debate in the Lower house on the government's mandate for the IGC was marked with populism and expressions such as "We will not allow any German to rule us from Brussels". On the other hand, Spidla's cabinet is clearly willing to demonstrate that the Czechs are "good" Europeans, committed to further deepening of integration.

Therefore the Prime Minister left for Brussels with several points. First was to show that the Czechs do not basically have any "red lines". The issue of the full representativeness of the Commission which seemed to be a foremost interest to be defended by the Czech representation at the IGC was suddenly off the agenda and Spidla suddenly announced that it is a priority to get a deal on voting. This was a sort of tactics because the issue of the Commission was basically settled.

In terms of QMV, the Czechs were apparently able to make various concessions to conciliate the two opposing camps. The Czech delegation tabled a few proposals which basically suggested that there should be a parity between the states and populations in the Council (either 50%-50%, 55%-55%, 60%-60%). But the Italian presidency did not take up this proposal and did not list it among its four alternatives, despite the fact that the proposal had some support of member states.

Secondly, the Czech delegation supported by the diplomatic corps in Brussels was making a lot of effort to make the Czech voice heard among the highest political circles. The fact that the Czech Republic was – apart from Poland – the only new member state that set up confessionals with Berlusconi on Friday night was supposed to be a signal that we really do not want Poles to kidnap all the attention regarding the newcomers.

Thirdly, Spidla's intention was to make sure his peers would understand that the Czech Republic has the intention to join core Europe if it does emerge. And the discussion precipitated by Chirac is clearly on the table after the summit failure, no matter how realistic it is in practice. If the core is going to emerge on some issues (like justice and

home affairs, harmonisation of criminal law etc.), Spidla will still have to think about practical consequences at home and gather a lot of political support for these moves.

The failure of the summit unfortunately puts Spidla again in a difficult position on the domestic scene. President Klaus has already taken up on the summit failure in the media, describing the outcome as an inevitable result of the deep-standing crisis of the EU and basically welcoming the failure. The fact that the negotiations over the constitution will drag on with a very unclear idea when they will resume or even end leaves the perspectives for ratification in the Czech Republic even more obscure – both in terms of its form (parliament or referendum) and outcome. If there is a switch in government (which is due to happen in 2006 only but earlier elections are still possible), it is highly probable that the possible new centre-right government will not be as positive on the Constitution as the current one is.