



Freedom in the World 2013 - Czech Republic

Publisher [Freedom House](#)

Publication Date 10 April 2013

Cite as Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2013 - Czech Republic*, 10 April 2013, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/5171049d18.html> [accessed 5 November 2013]

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2013 Scores

Status: Free
Freedom Rating: 1.0
Civil Liberties: 1
Political Rights: 1

Overview

The government of Petr Nečas faced a significant decline in popularity in 2012 in the face of criticism over multiple corruption scandals and unpopular austerity measures. The three-party government terminated its coalition agreement in April, though Nečas subsequently survived a no-confidence vote that same month; Nečas's cabinet survived another confidence vote in November. In the spring, the European Commission suspended European Union funding for development projects due to suspected fund mismanagement and misallocation.

Czechoslovakia was created in 1918 amid the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Soviet forces helped establish a communist government after World War II, and in 1968 they crushed the so-called Prague Spring, a period of liberalization under reformist leader Alexander Dubček.

In December 1989, a series of peaceful anticommunist demonstrations led by dissident Václav Havel and the Civic Forum opposition group resulted in the resignation of the government, in what became known as the Velvet Revolution. Open elections were held the following year. A new constitution was adopted in 1992, and the country began an ambitious program of political and economic reform under Václav Klaus of the center-right Civic Democratic Party (ODS), who became prime minister that year. In 1993, the state dissolved peacefully into separate Czech and Slovak republics.

Close parliamentary elections in 1998 brought the center-left Czech Social Democratic Party (CSSD) to power. Klaus was elected president by Parliament in 2003. The Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999 and the European Union (EU) in 2004.

The 2006 legislative elections divided the Chamber of Deputies, the country's lower house, evenly between left- and right-leaning parties, leading to a series of short-lived, ODS-led coalitions and caretaker governments. Independent Jan Fischer took over as prime minister in 2009 and led a

caretaker government until May 2010, when parliamentary elections resulted in 56 and 53 seats in the lower house for CSSD and ODS, respectively. The center-right, free-market Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 (TOP 09) party placed third with 41 seats, the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSCM) took 26 seats, and the right-leaning Public Affairs (VV) party captured 24. In June, Klaus appointed ODS leader Petr Nečas to serve as prime minister; Nečas formed a center-right coalition government with TOP 09 and VV.

In response to a 2009 recession, Nečas's government pledged to implement an unpopular austerity package in 2011. The move helped the opposition gain control of the Senate in October 2010 elections, giving the CSSD and other opposition parties the power to obstruct legislation passed by the Chamber of Deputies. In October 2010, the lower house declared a legislative state of emergency, allowing it to bypass the opposition and expedite the passage of several controversial austerity bills. In 2011, the Constitutional Court rejected the government's austerity package and declared the fast-tracked legislation procedures unconstitutional. After months of infighting and a veto by the CSSD-controlled Senate, the lower house pushed through healthcare and welfare reforms in June. In November, Klaus signed the healthcare reforms into law, as well as amendments to unemployment and welfare benefits. After a long battle against the opposition, the lower house passed major pension reforms in November that would partially privatize the pension system.

Nečas's government faced a significant decline in popularity in 2012 due to continued criticism over austerity measures, as well as a series of corruption scandals. In April, the country's deputy prime minister, Karolina Peake of VV, and several other VV ministers quit the junior coalition party after its unofficial leader, Vit Barta, received an 18-month suspended prison sentence for paying off party members in exchange for their support. The ODS and TOP 09 then agreed to terminate their coalition agreement with the remaining members of VV on April 22. Without VV, the coalition was left with only 92 of the 200 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, but Peake pledged to maintain support for the prime minister. On April 27, Nečas's government narrowly survived a parliamentary confidence vote. Peake subsequently formed a new faction – LIDEM, meaning "for the people" – which became a coalition partner. However, Peake threatened that LIDEM would leave the coalition after she was fired from her position as defense minister in December, leaving the government at risk of collapse at year's end.

Meanwhile, in Senate elections held in late October, the CSSD increased its representation to 46 seats in the 81-seat chamber, while the ODS captured only 15 seats. Nečas's cabinet survived another vote of confidence in November, avoiding early elections that would likely result in a leftist cabinet.

Ratings agencies and investors have commended Nečas for pension reforms and other spending cuts that have moved the country toward full compliance with EU deficit limits. After initially being vetoed by the upper and lower houses of Parliament, a bill to increase the value-added tax and income taxes for top earners was eventually adopted in December; the hikes will take place beginning in 2013. In September, Klaus vetoed the 2011 pension reforms, but Nečas was able to cobble together enough support to overturn Klaus's move in a November 7 vote. The Czech Republic joined the United Kingdom in January in opting out of an EU fiscal compact that limits the borrowing and spending of EU member states. Nečas, who said the treaty was not in the country's best interest, subsequently faced criticism from his coalition partners and others, who accused him of failing to stand up to euroskeptics within the ODS.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

The Czech Republic is an electoral democracy. The 200 members of the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Parliament, are elected to four-year terms by proportional representation. The Senate has 81 members elected for six-year terms, with one-third up for election every two years. Under a 2012 constitutional amendment, the president will be elected directly by Czech citizens,

instead of by Parliament, beginning with the presidential elections scheduled for January 2013. The president can veto legislation, and appoints judges and central bank officials as well as the prime minister and other cabinet members, but the post holds few other formal powers.

The two main political parties are the center-left CSSD and the center-right ODS. Two other right-leaning parties, TOP 09 and VV, entered Parliament for the first time in 2010, though VV splintered in 2012 following the conviction of one its de facto leaders, Vit Barta, on bribery charges.

Corruption and lack of transparency remained serious problem in 2012. In October, the labor and social affairs minister, Jaromír Drábek of TOP 09, resigned after police accused his first deputy of bribery. In the spring, the EU suspended funding for development projects due to suspected fund mismanagement and misallocation. For example, in May, David Rath, a CSSD member of parliament and the governor of the Central Bohemia Region, was arrested on suspicion of corruption related to the diversion of EU funds meant for the renovation of a hospital and manor house. While some payments were resumed in July after Czech authorities agreed to implement reforms in the administration of EU subsidies, as of December, the European Commission had cut around €500 million (\$650 million) of EU aid to the Czech Republic.

Freedom of expression is respected, though the constitution-based Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms prohibits threats against individual rights, state and public security, public health, and morality. Most media outlets are owned by private foreign companies and do not appear to be influenced by the state. Journalists have complained that the 2009 "muzzle law" – which prohibits the press from identifying victims of serious crimes and publishing information obtained through police wiretaps – prevents them from effectively reporting on corruption. An amendment to the law that took effect in August 2011 allows for exceptions in cases where it is deemed in the public interest.

The government generally upholds freedom of religion. Promoting denial of the Holocaust or past communist crimes is illegal, as is inciting religious hatred. In July 2012, the lower house passed legislation under which the state would return some of the church land confiscated under the 1948-89 communist regime and pay compensation for the rest. While the Senate vetoed the bill in August, the lower house approved the legislation in November. Academic freedom is respected.

Czechs may assemble peacefully, form associations, and petition the government. Trade unions and professional associations function freely but are weak in practice. There were a number of anti-austerity protests in 2011 and 2012. In April 2012, some 90,000 Czechs demonstrated against austerity measures and government corruption in Prague's Wenceslas Square, in what observers called the largest antigovernment demonstration since 1989.

The independence of the judiciary is largely respected, though its complexity and multilayered composition has led to the slow delivery of judgments. A 2010 report produced by the country's counterintelligence agency found that corruption within the Czech Republic's judicial system was "very sophisticated," making detection difficult. The rule of law generally prevails in civil and criminal matters, though corruption also remains a problem within law enforcement agencies. Prisons suffer from overcrowding and poor sanitation.

The 2009 Antidiscrimination Act provides for equal treatment regardless of sex, race, age, or sexual orientation. However, members of the small Roma community sometimes face threats and violence from right-wing groups, and Romany children continue to face discrimination in the country's public school system.

New legislation came into force in January 2011 that increased the possible time for immigration detention to a maximum of 18 months, raising concerns that foreign nationals could remain in custody for extended periods of time solely for immigration reasons. Asylum seekers are routinely

detained in the Czech Republic. Conditions in detention centers are generally poor. The remote location of detention and reception centers limits the ability of nongovernmental organizations to visit them.

Gender discrimination is legally prohibited. However, sexual harassment in the workplace appears to be fairly common, and women are underrepresented at the highest levels of government and business. Women nevertheless increased their parliamentary presence in the 2010 elections, capturing 44 seats in the 200-member Chamber of Deputies; there were 14 women in the Senate following the 2012 elections. Trafficking of women and girls for the purpose of prostitution remains a problem.

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