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Taking sides

Czech officials disagree on Russia-Georgia conflict

By Kimberly Hiss
Staff Writer, *The Prague Post*
August 20th, 2008 issue

As uncertainty over Russia's withdrawal from Georgia continues, the Czech government's response to the conflict in the Caucasus has become increasingly fractured. On Aug. 18, President Václav Klaus, known for his pro-Russia views, strongly criticized Georgia in the media, asserting that President Mikheil Saakashvili's "fatal" actions against the separatist region of South Ossetia were to blame for the current conflict.

However, Klaus' position, which opposition Social Democratic and Communist Party officials share, is at odds with the pro-Georgian opinions expressed by other government leaders.

"The Czech Republic supports Georgia's effort to strengthen its sovereignty," Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek said in an Aug. 8 statement shortly after Russian military action against Georgia began. Foreign Affairs Minister Karel Schwarzenberg echoed the sentiments the same day, allotting 5 million Kč in humanitarian aid including medical equipment and blood plasma, which were flown to Georgia Aug. 13. Schwarzenberg has also expressed his enthusiasm for participating in international peacekeeping missions in the Caucasus.

Such splits are typical of Czech foreign policy, with deep divides also characterizing the government's handling of Lisbon Treaty ratification and the installation of the U.S. radar base.

"The biggest problem is not that top officials have different opinions," said political analyst Jiří Pehe of the New York University in Prague. "However, it is highly problematic when they are not able to compare notes and speak with one voice. Czech foreign policy is a real cacophony of voices." Regarding the current split, Pehe added, "The government immediately engaged in Russia bashing; Klaus is hitting on Georgia."

Klaus' position seems out of place when put into the context of his own country's history.

"To hear this from someone who experienced the communist era, who knows what it means to live under communist rule, is surprising and disappointing," said Radio Free Europe Georgia Service Director David Kakabadze in Prague. "I agree with his statement that it is important to know who started the conflict, but I'm surprised he doesn't know Russia is the side provoking its neighbors."

Considering that history, the conflict in the Caucasus takes on added significance with the 40th anniversary of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia Aug. 21 — an episode that's been invoked repeatedly in recent weeks for its similarity to events in Georgia.

Schwarzenberg has called it a "sad coincidence" that the conflict is taking place during such a solemn occasion in his country. The parallel has also been cited by other officials, including U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who said during her Aug. 15 visit to Tbilisi, "This is no longer 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, when a great power invaded a small neighbor and overthrew its government."

Despite such frequent and high-profile comparisons, Klaus hotly rejects the parallel, pointing out in the press that Czechoslovakia did not act provocatively by attacking Subcarpathian Ruthenia 40 years ago, and that then Czechoslovak leader Alexander Dubček's conduct bore no resemblance to that of Saakashvili during recent events.

Considering current political dynamics, it seems unlikely that Czech officials will reach a unified position on Georgia.

"Klaus doesn't care what the government has to say," Pehe said. "And the prime minister is not strong enough vis-a-vis the president to discipline him, that is, to explain to him that under the Constitution it is the government that is responsible for official foreign policy stands."

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Georgians protested outside the Russian Consulate in Brno Aug. 15, calling on the Czech government to pressure Russia to withdraw.

Opposing views

A look at the official opinions on the Russia-Georgia conflict

"Russia might think its massive military operation against a sovereign state would pass unnoticed. It is mainly we Czechs, with our own experience, who should not tolerate something like this."

Alexandr Vondra, deputy prime minister for European affairs, quoted in *Lidové noviny*

"The [Georgian] attack on South Ossetia was politically an absolutely unwise and amateurish step and by this, Saakashvili has lost the confidence of the democratic thinking world."

Vojtech Filip, Communist Party chairman, quoted in *Lidové noviny*

"The same politicians who did not respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia are now calling on Russia to respect the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia."

Miloslav Vlček, Chamber of Deputies chairman, quoted by the Czech News Agency

"It was an inappropriate reaction from the Georgian government. An inappropriate reaction from the Russian side only followed."

Jan Hamaček, Chamber of Deputies foreign committee chairman, quoted in *Lidové noviny*

Source: ČTK

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However, Kakabadze points out that the Czech Republic's fast-approaching role at the head of the European Union starting Jan. 1 increases the need for a unified position.

"Because the Czech Republic will take over the EU presidency soon, it is important what its position is regarding the Georgia conflict." He added his belief in the likely continuation of Russia's expansionist conduct. "Today it's about Georgia. Next it's Ukraine. If Russia gets away with this, it will go on intimidating its neighbors."

Meanwhile, activist groups have condemned Russian actions across the country. Pro-Georgia demonstrators rallied in front of the Russian Consulate in Brno Aug. 15 and the Russian Embassy in Prague Aug. 12, and dozens of Czechs have signed a condolence book for Georgian victims at the Georgian Embassy.

"This is not an ethno conflict as it's presented by the Russians," said Georgij Alanija, head of the Prague-based Georgia activist group Samšoblo. "This is an occupation of Georgia. And the conflict did not start a couple days ago, but 19 years ago." He added his own take on differing opinions among Czech officials. "We are happy with the way the Czech government and the foreign affairs minister expressed their feelings about the conflict. On the other hand, we are horrified by Klaus' latest statements and also by the Czech communists." Samšoblo is considering filing suit against Klaus over his comments.

Outside of such organizations, many Czechs with close ties to the Georgian conflict are feeling powerless to help.

"I am really worried. I am shaking with fear," said Prague resident Rita Avlastimová, who left Georgia in 1994 but whose parents, brother and many friends remain there. She too considers Russia's actions an occupation similar to the Soviet advance on Czechoslovakia in 1968. "I am listening to the news all the time. It's horrible. My mother's relatives are in Gori, you know. And all their things are now destroyed."

Avlastimová has no doubt where the blame for the current conflict lies. "Russia wants to show its power. It destroys everything, and poor, ordinary people are suffering for it." And her anger extends to her current president for his failure to recognize Russia's role.

"I would suggest Klaus go there and see the reality," she said. "Only then can he come up with a position."

— *Hela Balínová and Nada Černá contributed to this report.*

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