



Czech president leaves office accused of treason

Vaclav Klaus ends his controversial tenure charged with violating the constitution by freeing thousands from prison.

By: Bruce I. Konviser – March 7, 2013

Vaclav Klaus steps down as president today accused of treason for freeing almost 7,000 prisoners in a sweeping New Year's Day amnesty that also halted hundreds of high-profile corruption cases.

The senate approved the charges on Monday by a vote of 38-30.

The decision caps a stormy, decade-long presidency during which Klaus was always combative and — according to his critics — seemingly autocratic and quasi-nationalistic.

He caused consternation throughout Europe by single-handedly holding up the signing of the European Union's Lisbon treaty in 2009, when he compared the EU to the Soviet Union.

He also denies man-made climate change and criticized a Prague gay pride parade saying, "I do not feel any pride in the event."

His reputation now badly damaged by his amnesty, Klaus steps down after dominating politics for two decades together with his bitter rival, the dissident playwright former President Vaclav Havel, who died in 2011.

Klaus oversaw the country's sweeping post-communist economic reforms in the 1990s after entering politics on the back of the Velvet Revolution. Critics say his privatization policies enabled the rise of wealthy business oligarchs.

He also raised eyebrows by his strong ties to Russia, which he supported during its short 2008 war with Georgia.

Although his treason charges include various counts, the driving force was the amnesty, which prompted outrage across a country grown weary of a seemingly endless succession of corruption scandals.

Czechs were especially incensed about more than 300 cases involving suspects accused or convicted of large-scale fraud or theft worth hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars in a country where corruption is endemic.

Among the first to support the treason charge, independent Senator Eliska Wagnerova — a former judge on the constitutional court, which will hear Klaus's treason charges — said the amnesty had badly shaken trust in the legal system.

"It's a signal that most people aren't equal before the law," she said. "People's belief in justice, equality and rule of law has been damaged."

Transparency International ranked the Czech Republic 54 of 176 countries on its corruption perception index for 2012. That put the country well behind some of its Central European neighbors such as Poland and Hungary.

Klaus has dismissed the treason charges as a “political game” by his opponents to humiliate him.

However, more than 70,000 people have signed a petition calling for his impeachment, and his approval rating plunged to less than 28 percent from 52 percent in December in a survey by the STEM polling agency.

Even among supporters of the right-of-center Civic Democratic Party, the ODS, which Klaus founded shortly after the fall of communism in 1989, his support dove from 85 percent in December to 51 percent by February.

Social Democratic Party Senator Jiri Dienstbier, who supported pursuing the treason charges, dismisses claims by Klaus and Prime Minister Petr Necas, an ODS leader, that they are politically motivated.

“That's nonsense,” he said. “Our intention is to protect our constitutional system against breeches.”

Besides his amnesty, Klaus is also accused of violating his constitutional obligations by refusing to sign various EU measures, including the Lisbon treaty and a bailout fund that had been approved by parliament. He's also charged with failing to appoint high court judges in a timely manner.

The constitutional court, which promised to expedite the case, says it may issue a ruling by the end of the month.

Even if found guilty, the 71-year-old president faces minimal punishment. The most severe penalty would be his removal from office — moot because his two-term limit expires today.

However, he would also be prohibited from running for president again and could lose his presidential pension, estimated at \$60,000 a year.

Even if Klaus is acquitted, however, there's hope the court will at least rebuke his actions and make potential abuses of office more difficult, says political science scholar Vladimira Dvorakova.

The constitution is so vague, she says, “it could be interpreted to mean almost anything.” She says the court should help define “what the president can and cannot do.”

Among the criticism of Klaus's amnesty is that it was not prepared by lawyers in the president's office, as per usual practice, but unidentified outside counsel.

“There are strong feelings in society that there was corruption involved,” independent journalist Jakub Patocka said. “Many people think it's obvious money was paid.”

The president's office did not respond to multiple requests for comment for this story.

Klaus will be succeeded by Milos Zeman, a socialist whom Klaus backed because his center-right opponent, Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg, was a Havel ally.

Despite the charges against him, no one is ruling Klaus out of politics in the future. He will become a fellow at the conservative US think-tank the Cato Institute and has indicated he may run for the European Parliament in 2014.