

The New York Times

Czech Senate Accuses Outgoing President of High Treason

By Dan Bilefsky March 4, 2013

The Czech Senate voted on Monday to accuse the outgoing president, Vaclav Klaus, of high treason. The vote was a largely symbolic rebuke of Mr. Klaus, a vociferous euroskeptic who has often polarized Czech society.

The decision to forward a treason complaint to the country's Constitutional Court was prompted by an amnesty granted by Mr. Klaus on Jan. 1, freeing more than 6,000 prison inmates and halting the prosecutions of some prominent business executives and officials who were charged with fraud. Czechs across the country, which has grappled with endemic corruption since it overthrew Communism in 1989, reacted with anger, tearing Mr. Klaus's portrait from the walls of schools and offices. Senators also accused Mr. Klaus, 71, of undermining the Constitution by, among other things, failing to sign a plan to set up a bailout fund for Europe, even though it was approved by Parliament.

The Senate, which is dominated by the president's political opponents on the left, took the matter up in a closed session Monday and voted 38 to 30 in favor of the charges, according to three senators who were present.

If Mr. Klaus is found guilty, it would have little practical effect on his presidency. He would be stripped of office, but his term ends on Thursday anyway; he would also lose his presidential pension and the right to run again for president. Even so, analysts said, the Senate's action tares his legacy, and may inhibit future presidents, who play a largely ceremonial role but have the power to appoint judges, issue pardons and influence foreign policy.

"I do not think that even Vaclav Klaus, the well-known egotist that he is, would say that this is a happy or respectful departure," said Tomas Sedlacek, former adviser to a previous president, Vaclav Havel. "Nor do I think he realized just how deeply he had upset people."

Eliska Wagnerova, an independent senator who formerly served on the Constitutional Court, said it was Mr. Klaus's disrespect of the rule of the law and the constitution, that led her to vote in favor of the treason charges on Monday. "This decision will make the people realize that the president can't act as a monarch, and must behave as a first among equals," she said in an interview.

Mr. Klaus, an iconoclast known for his conservative views, dismissed the vote as a political game.

To his many supporters, he is a courageous renegade and defender of liberty in the mold of Margaret Thatcher, and helped shepherd the Czech Republic to a market economy after Communism fell. But to his critics, he has been all too willing to turn a blind eye to corruption. After his term ends on Thursday, he is scheduled to join the Cato Institute, a libertarian research and advocacy group in Washington.