

The new Czech President might bring about a change of rhetoric on Europe but a policy shift towards the EU appears unlikely

Blog Admin

*In the weekend's presidential election in the Czech Republic, voters chose Miloš Zeman to succeed Václav Havel and Václav Klaus as the first directly elected President in the country's history. A former prime minister for the left, he defeated the current foreign minister Karel Schwarzenberg (centre-right) in the second round of the elections on Saturday. **David Cadier** considers the potential policy implications of the result, arguing that despite Zeman's previous pro-Europe rhetoric, a major policy shift away from the country's cautious approach towards the EU seems unlikely in the short term.*



The first major outcome of the presidential election in the Czech Republic this past weekend concerns the incumbent who is leaving office. A fierce politician, skillful in behind-the-scenes strings-pulling and in go-it-alone sorties, it would be an understatement to say that Václav Klaus has been a vocal and influential President. His most ferocious battle has notoriously been waged against European integration. He has partly imprinted his views on the ODS, a conservative party he had created in the early 1990s but has since left. In fact, under the current ODS-led government, the Czech Republic has been one of the most hostile member states towards further budgetary or political integration, opting out along with the UK from the European Stability Mechanism in 2009.

Will the outcome of the presidential elections bring about a change in the Czech Republic's EU policies? Answering this question means extrapolating President-elect Miloš Zeman's preferences but also reflecting on the actual influence that Presidents have in Czech foreign policy. While the media were prompt to label Zeman as pro-European, and while he might indeed contribute to altering the rhetoric, a sharp policy turn appears unlikely.

Miloš Zeman is undeniably a more enthusiastic supporter of

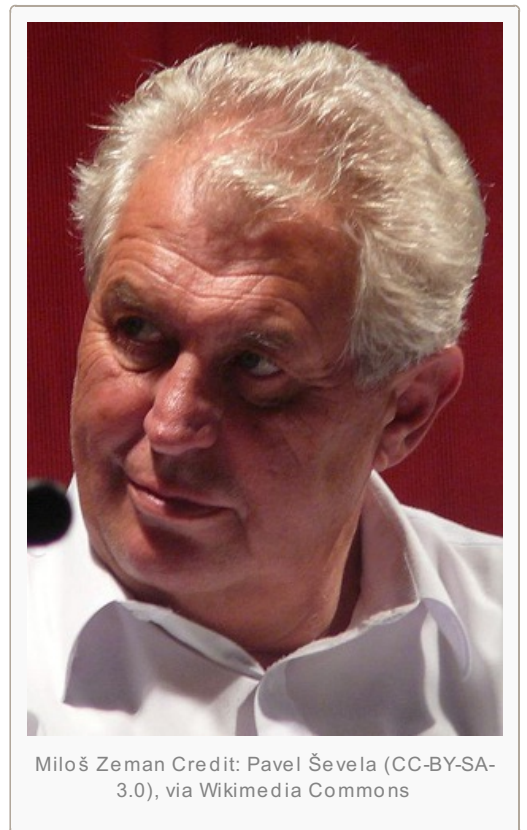
Miloš Zeman is undeniably a more enthusiastic supporter of European integration than Václav Klaus. During the campaign he vowed to bring the country back to the EU mainstream and declared himself in support of the adoption of the euro. At the same time, looking at Mr Zeman's political record means that his words should be taken with caution. As a matter of fact, he has sought to retain some room for manoeuvre on the European question. While he naturally leans towards the pro-European ČSSD – a party he turned into a major political force in the 1990s – he also reached out during the campaign to the anti-European Communist Party. He called for the establishment of a European federation in the long run, but rejected the idea of a European 'super-state'. When announcing his intention to fly the EU flag on top of Prague castle – a symbolic move as his predecessor adamantly refused to do so – he evoked the hope to receive, in return, subsidies for the [Danube-Oder-Elbe water corridor](#).

Another aspect of the last few weeks invites caution in anticipating the course of Zeman's presidency: namely the support he received from Václav Klaus. The two politicians were arch-rivals in the 1990s, each representing the poles of a deep left-right ideological divide. Nevertheless, Klaus backed Miloš Zeman's bid very early in the campaign, implicitly at first but then heavily criticising [Karel Schwarzenberg's comments on the Beneš decrees](#) between the two rounds. Miloš Zeman followed suit in these attacks even though he had [acquiesced in the past](#) to the views expressed by Karel Schwarzenberg. While having markedly different views on the EU, Zeman and Klaus do share certain views in foreign affairs; both for instance opposed the recognition of Kosovo's independence and put the blame on Georgia for the South Ossetia conflict of 2008. But more than common positions, what they may both have as President is a similar posture: independent and interventionist, often provocative and at times leaning towards populism, one that renders them rather unpredictable.

The question then is to what extent style might affect substance. Here it is important to recognise that in the Czech political system the government has the largest responsibility over foreign policy, with presidential powers being limited in this area. The late Václav Havel – who sealed the reconciliation with Germany in 1997, against public opinion, and signed the 'letter of the 8' supporting the 2003 Iraq war, in spite of his government – was in that (and other matters) an exception. Václav Klaus has been less powerful: he delayed, but did not manage to prevent the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. Nor did he have an impact on the Czech Republic's official stance on Kosovo or Georgia. If not powerful, there are nevertheless three ways by which Czech Presidents can be influential.

First, the President has ratification powers and therefore the ability to influence the adoption of EU treaties (his veto however can be overruled by a vote in the lower-house). We can expect fewer instances of blockage on the part of President Zeman in this regard, but the adoption capacity remains with the government. Second, the Constitution states that the President is to represent the country abroad. Václav Klaus has not hesitated to use this prerogative to promote his own ideas, meeting with fellow Eurosceptic figures and presenting at overseas conferences to promote his book refuting the theories of climate change. It is difficult to predict whether President Zeman will be more parsimonious in his state visits, but what we can maybe expect is some gestures of rapprochement towards Russia.

Third, and most importantly, Presidents can be influential on foreign policy if they have leverage over domestic politics. They have a role of ultimate arbitrator when the party system fails to produce a governing coalition or when one collapses. Miloš Zeman might favor the ČSSD in such a configuration. By retaining a certain clout inside major political parties, the President may sometimes directly influence foreign policy discourses. The most telling recent example was Prime Minister Necas' attempt, in the face of intra-party contestation in the ODS, to reach out to Klaus' ideas by overtly dismissing the diplomatic tradition of support for Human Rights activists abroad, which has been one of the main pillars of Czech



Miloš Zeman Credit: Pavel Ševela (CC-BY-SA-3.0), via Wikimedia Commons

foreign policy since 1989. Petr Necas and the next ODS leader will still need to reach out to Klaus in the future.

This later point on domestic politics adds to the argument that a sharp U-turn in Czech EU policies is not to be expected in the short-term. Some of the [underlying causes](#) of the Czech Republic's cautious approach towards European integration will not evaporate with the departure of Klaus. After all, if the current government does not feel compelled to set a date for the adoption of the euro – to which Prague is bound by the Accession Treaty – it is because Czech public opinion remains opposed to it. Most importantly, Václav Klaus himself will not disappear; he will leave office but certainly not the sphere of public debate. He announced his intention to devote time to his think tank, the [Centre for Economics and Politics](#). But some wonder whether, with the ODS candidate collapsing in the first round, Klaus' attacks on Schwarzenberg before the second-round could be a way to prepare the ground for his return as the savior of the Czech right.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/14o1RAS>

About the author

David Cadier – LSE International Relations

David Cadier is a Fellow in Diplomacy and International Strategy at LSE IDEAS and a teaching fellow in the International Relations Department at the LSE. David Cadier received his PhD from Sciences Po and was a visiting scholar at the Centre for Transatlantic Relations at SAIS Johns Hopkins University (2011), at the Prague Institute of International Relations (2010) and at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (2009). His research interests include, Central Europe, Foreign Policy Analysis, EU policies towards the East and transatlantic relations.



Related posts:

1. [A last minute surge in support for Karel Schwarzenberg has set up a potentially close second-round run-off in the Czech Republic's presidential elections. \(17.5\)](#)
2. [Brussels blog round-up for 5 – 11 January: Czechs go to the polls, France's changing foreign policy, and is Romania a democratic inspiration? \(11.3\)](#)
3. [Silvio Berlusconi's anti-European rhetoric means that he may yet hold the balance of power after next year's Italian elections. \(8.9\)](#)