

Czech presidents, prime ministers, and war conflicts

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Introduction

- The foreign policy: sensitive field of tensions among the heads of states and governments (not only) in Czechia.
- The presidents do not have in many cases clearly defined constitutional powers in the area of foreign policy.
- The most important: the President "represents the state externally" (Article 63/1a of Czech Constitution).
- The aim: to examine the relationship between Czech presidents and prime ministers (and governments), in the field of foreign policy in times of international conflicts and to show the role and limits of presidential activism in this specific area.
- RQ: What extent does foreign policy influence intra-executive conflict?
- Three selected conflicts: the Kosovo (1999), the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine (since 2014), and the current Russian-Ukrainian war (2022-2023).
- The transition to direct elections of president (since 2012).

The structure of presentation

- Introduction
- Theoretical framework (the executive dualism and presidential activism)
- Kosovo crises
- Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine
- Russian-Ukrainian war since 2022
- Conclusions

Theoretical framework

- Executive dualism, e.g., Thomas Baylis (1996), Oleh Protsyk (2004, 2005).
- Giovanni Sartori (1994): the president "shares executive power with a prime minister, thus entering a dual authority structure (...). The dual authority structure allows different balances and also shifts of power within the executive".
- Presidential activism: e.g., Margit Tavits (2009), Philipp Köker (2017), Tapio Raunio and Thomas Sedelius (2020).
- Raunio – Sedelius: "presidents' use of their formal powers and their attempts to influence policy through informal channels".

Kosovo crisis (1999) between presidential humanitarian interventionism and a manoeuvring government



- Context: the final act of the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia; violent clashes between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo (part of the Serbia); the authoritarian regime of Slobodan Milošević rejected the Rambouillet agreement in March 1999 (the restoration of Kosovo's autonomy and the deployment of NATO peacekeeper forces); *NATO air forces started attacks on Serbia* (a doctrine of humanitarian intervention – the protection of human rights).
- The President Václav Havel: openly and strongly support (media and public speeches) the NATO action (influence of his past activities in human right sphere and support of NATO entry).
- The Social Democratic government of Miloš Zeman maneuvering between dissenting public opinion and loyalty to NATO.
- Czech public was dominated by sympathy for the Serbs.



Examples of different approaches

- Havel's publicly presented idea of sending Czech troops to Kosovo (sharply rejected by government).
- Zeman: formerly supported NATO action, but "Serbs are friendly nation" and "bombs would not solve the situation" etc.
- However, consensus between the president and the government on such issues as the transit of NATO troops through Czech territory.
- Visible some *lack of coordination* in Czech foreign policy and some *communication clashes*; the effect was unclear Czech foreign position, but not fatal.
- Strong influence: Havel was a de facto opposition president and had poor relations with both the prime minister and the foreign minister.

Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine (2014): the schizophrenic acrobatics of a pro-Russian president



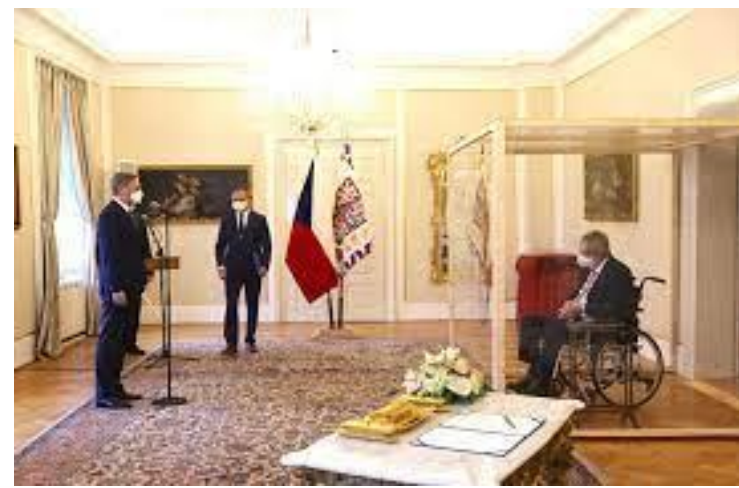
- Context: the tensions between the western part of Ukraine (with its Ukrainian identity and pro-Western orientation), and the south-east and east, which had a large Russian-speaking population and preferred ties with Russia; the fall of president Viktor Yanukovich close to Russia was followed by *flash annexation* of Crimea and later *Russian support of rebels* on eastern Ukraine (including the supply of heavy weapons to the rebels and the participation of Russian troops in conflict).
- The Czech president Miloš Zeman: a pragmatic line of support of Czech export; Zeman rejected Havel's line of human rights and democracy abroad; Russia is friend (Zeman 2014): "today's Putin's Russia is much more democratic than Stalin's or Brezhnev's Russia".
- Government of Bohuslav Sobotka also pragmatic in foreign policy, but mainly follows the EU mainstream.



Specific dynamics

- February/March 2014: Zeman denounced the occupation of Crimea, his verbal response was similar to PM Sobotka and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Several weeks later after Russia's formal annexation, Zeman began to argue Crimea is *lost* for Ukraine.
- Zeman warned against "nationalist and fascist forces" in Ukraine.
- Zeman's "schizophrenia" has become particularly visible in August and September of 2014 (the conflict in Eastern Ukraine): "the civil war" without Russian involvement (interviews in August), "Ukraine is facing Russian aggression" (NATO summit), later (again) "civil war".
- May 2015: Zeman traveled to Moscow (the celebrations of the end of the WWII) despite the government's dislike.
- President's inconsistency with the official government position (which confirmed Russian involvement in the conflict in Eastern Ukraine).
- *Intense verbal and symbolic activism*: the government position was *overshadowed* by the president's media agility; the result: a lack of clarity of foreign policy.
- The President used of the PM's lack of interest in foreign policy.

Russia-Ukraine war from February 2022: unity created by a security threat



- Context: Russian's grand attack to take over the whole of Ukraine.
- Czech context: Zeman's openly pro-Russian stance until the final days before the aggression: "the Russians are not crazy", his tensions with the (new) government led by Civic Democrat Petr Fiala with pro-Ukrainian stances.

Surprising consensus

- The Russian aggression caused a shock to Zeman; radical turnaround ("an act of unprovoked aggression", "a crime against peace", Putin is "madman" etc.); His stance remained continuous until the end of his presidency in Spring 2023.
- Almost complete consensus with a government that strongly (militarily, humanitarian) supported Ukraine.
- Several factors/explanations of Zeman's attitude, e.g., the opinions in Czech society and among elites, which quite consistently rejected Russian aggression, the analogy with 1968 and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia (Zeman's traumatic moment of life).
- The contradiction between the president and the government was not renewed with new president Petr Pavel (followed the government line).
- Czech foreign policy was *united by the security threat*.
- Significant: decrease in presidential activism in the media and public space (clear dominance of the PM and the government) - partly due to the Zeman's recent pro-Russian stances (and compromise him) and partly his poor health.

Conclusion remarks

- The results show a large space for presidential activism and the risks of intra-executive clashes.
- Influence factor - the ambiguity of the constitutional text; political factors, especially the influential position of the president in the country, determined by historical and cultural circumstances and his *visibility*.
- The space offered to the presidents was used in different ways.
- Two (Kosovo 1999 and Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014) of the three cases show *a low level of coordination* between the government and the president, as well as *different communication* with negative impact on cohesion of the Czech foreign policy.
- Impact of the direct election of the president (introduced in 2013): the cases of (indirectly elected) Havel and (directly elected Zeman) do not show a big difference.

Thank you for your attention