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The First 100 Days: The Controversial Presidency of Miloš Zeman

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Milos Zeman, the Czech first popularly elected president.

When Miloš Zeman was inaugurated as the first directly-elected President of the Czech Republic on March 8, 2013, one could have imagined that the future of the presidency was bright. M. Zeman enjoyed a significant voter mandate, held popular left-wing views on a variety of policy issues, and was openly critical of former-President Vaclav Klaus' controversial amnesty of thousands of criminals from jail.

Yet within the first 100 days of office, the Zeman presidency has become not bright, but clouded. According to the STEM polling organization, public trust in his presidency is now a mere 51%, much less than the 70% V. Klaus enjoyed before the amnesty scandal. M. Zeman certainly received international praise for the signing of the amendment to the Lisbon Treaty that establishes the European Stability Mechanism in his first hours of office, as well as domestic praise for his four nominations to the Czech Constitutional Court. Yet these positive steps have been overshadowed by his missteps, which I will outline below. These missteps have brought into stark relief the fact that far from being a unifying force for the country he has continued to divide it. And while M. Zeman's agenda can be contrasted

with his predecessor's, for example in their opposing stances towards EU integration, such differences have been far eclipsed by the commonalities the two leaders share.

Whilst on opposite sides of the political spectrum, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman have lived parallel lives. Both graduated from the University of Economics in Prague in the 1960s, and both went on to work in economic prognostics during the communist period. While Klaus founded the Civic Democratic Party in 1991, M. Zeman became chairman of the Czech Social Democratic Party in 1993. Both men led their parties to become the main representatives of the right and the left, respectively. In a widely unpopular deal, M. Zeman became Prime Minister from 1998-2002 on the basis of the "Opposition Accord" with

Klaus; in the deal, the Civic Democrats supported a minority Social Democratic government, in exchange for the chairmanships of both houses of parliament and leadership of key anti-corruption institutions, thus limiting investigations into the wrongdoings of the past.

The characteristics of the M. Zeman presidency could already be seen in the national populism of his presidential campaign, which frequently evoked anti-German and anti-elite sentiments to discredit his opponent, the conservative aristocrat Karl Schwarzenberg. When the Czech- and German-speaking Schwarzenberg, the head of the TOP09 party, suggested that the Czech expulsion of the Germans after WWII would be considered a violation of human rights today, M. Zeman seized the moment, claiming that Schwarzenberg was "speaking like a Sudeten German, not like a president." V. Klaus shared M. Zeman's sentiments, and in fact put conservatism to the side to endorse M. Zeman as President, stating that his successor should be a "person who belongs to this country and who has spent his entire life in it." M. Zeman's campaign also issued a press release aiming to connect Schwarzenberg's wife with the Hardegg castle where Nazi swastikas once hung. While M. Zeman later apologized – it was proven that Therese Schwarzenberg's family hadn't owned the castle for 300 years – the impact that these populist appeals had on the presidential race was enormous.

Miloš Zeman's presidency has been defined by a number of features, or controversies. First, M. Zeman appeared what many judged as drunk at an important ceremony when the Czech crown jewels were on public display, unable to keep his balance on several occasions. The video of the ceremony went viral on the Internet, which has become a natio-

nal embarrassment equalled only by Václav Klaus' infamous pocketing of a ceremonial pen in Chile. The Office of the President insisted that M. Zeman came down with a virus.

That controversy also cast light on the second feature of the M. Zeman presidency, which is his strategy of balancing pro-EU and pro-Russian positions. The day before, at the May 9th Victory Day celebration at the Russian Embassy in Prague, Zeman expressed hope for more Russian investment in the Czech economy – a key statement given the sensitive nature of the public tender for the expansion of the Temelín nuclear power plant, which both US and Russian firms are vying to win. Martin Nejedlý, a key member of M. Zeman's presidential campaign team and now an advisor to M. Zeman, also runs a Lukoil subsidiary in the Czech Republic, and personally donated a million Czech crowns to the campaign. Those revelations led to many claims in the Czech media that M. Zeman's campaign was Russian-sponsored. To make matters worse, the anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International Czech Republic gave the M. Zeman campaign a poor assessment in terms of its financial transparency.



Czech President Miloš Zeman with President of the European Commission José Manuel Barroso. The strategy of balancing pro-EU and pro-Russian positions is one of main features of M. Zeman's presidency.

A third feature of Zeman's Presidency is his expansionist interpretation of the presidential powers granted by the Czech constitution. This can best be seen in Zeman's controversial decision not to grant Martin C. Putna, a respected,

openly gay literary historian and former director of the Václav Havel Library, the title of professor. According to the Czech constitution, only the President has the authority to grant professorships. However, this has always been seen a symbolic and ceremonial gesture, given that potential professors have first to be approved by universities on the basis of rigorous academic credentials. Given Put-



Zeman's legacy as President will not be decided by its first 100 days.

na's long-standing activism and criticism of M. Zeman, the latter's move has been regarded as both anti-gay populism and an attack on academic freedom. Due to the backlash by the public and by university rectors, M. Zeman was forced to reverse course, ultimately confirming the professorship but refusing to give M. C. Putna the title in person.

A fourth feature of M. Zeman's presidency has been his continued conflicts with Czech Foreign Minister and rival in the presidential campaign, Karl Schwarzenberg. M. Zeman has refused to confirm some ambassadorial posi-

ting that she would not like a future first lady who does not speak Czech, in a clear reference to Therese Schwarzenberg. The stand-off between the President and the Foreign Minister has yet to be resolved.

Admittedly M. Zeman's legacy as President will not be decided by its first 100 days. What matters much more is how he will act during the next parliamentary elections, which may come sooner than

expected, given the ongoing and extremely serious police investigations of abuse of power within the Czech government. If public opinion holds, the Social Democrats will win the next elections by a landslide, but would be able to form a government only with the direct or indirect support of the Communists. M. Zeman, it should be noted, was an advocate of the Bohumín declaration of 1995, in which Social Democrats agreed that they would not cooperate with extremist political parties, including the unreformed Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia. The reality is that the two parties do indeed cooperate, particularly at the regional level of government. What role M. Zeman will play in the formation of the next government – or advocate the inclusion of his own party, M. Zeman's Party of Civic Rights, should they enter parliament – is an open question.

Another question that will determine M. Zeman's legacy as president is how his strategic use of populism will unfold. He has continued his relentless attacks on the media, calling reporters "excrement" and "idiots," among the more polite expressions. These statements should be considered alarming given recent restrictions on media freedom in the post-communist world, such as in Hungary. As a centerpiece of his anti-corruption agenda, M. Zeman has also been a strong advocate of the proposal that wealthy Czechs should be required to submit declarations of their assets, which would violate current privacy rights, but this proposal is also supported by the Social Democrats and Communists. Despite the controversies thus far, the drama of the M. Zeman presidency is yet to unfold. ■