

2008 Czech Presidential Elections: A Commentary

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Again after five years, the attention of the Czech public and politicians was focused on the Presidential elections, one of the most important milestones of 2008 in terms of Czech political developments. The outcome of the last elections in 2003 was a little surprising as the candidate of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), Václav Klaus, represented the opposition party without the necessary majority in both houses of Parliament. Instead, the ruling coalition of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the Christian-Democratic Union – Czechoslovak Peoples Party (KDU-ČSL), and the Union of Freedom – Democratic Union (US-DEU), accompanied by some independent and small party Senators was able – just mathematically – to elect its own candidate. However, a split in the major coalition party ČSSD, and support given to Klaus by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), brought the Honorary Chairman of the ODS, Václav Klaus, to the Presidential office.

In February 2007, on the day of the fourth anniversary of his first election, Klaus announced that he would seek reelection in 2008. His party, the ODS, later formally approved his nomination and filed his candidacy later in 2007.

Klaus succeeded in his reelection attempt, but the way to defending the Presidency was long and complicated. In 2003 members of both houses of Parliament, who – according to the Constitution of the Czech Republic – elect the President at the Joint Session, had to meet three times before they elected the President, and each attempt took three rounds. Also, this time legislators had to meet repeatedly. Klaus won in the third round of the second election process. This year's elections were enriched by new instruments of the political culture. It showed that the Presidential elections can be accompanied by filibustering, blackmailing, pressure, gunpowder and bullets in envelopes, mysteries concerning the disappearance and absence of some members of Parliament; all of which occurred in an environment of the negative evaluation the public gives – in a long-term perspectives – to politicians and politics generally.

“Pulling Rabbits from the Hat”

Looking for a challenger to Klaus was a long and complicated process. Several candidates were pulled out as a “rabbit from the hat”, as the Czech phrase goes. Their glory lapsed at the same speed it grew. Looking for a challenger invited scruples. It showed that Klaus – despite the controversies he evokes – is a very strong and charismatic political figure in the Czech Republic. He could rest upon a strong and compact corpus of 122 ODS Deputies and Senators, as well as intensive support given to him in the long-term by the Czech public.

If his challenger was supposed to be successful, he would have to carry almost the whole of the rest of the political spectrum. In contrast to Klaus, he would have to accost a very diverse, heterogeneous, and non-compact conglomerate of political ideologies. It seemed to be an almost impossible task: to find a candidate who would be acceptable to communists, socialists, liberals, greens, conservatives, and Christian democrats, especially when even within these groups were individuals who publicly declared their support for Klaus. Any potential challenger therefore could not rely on even all of the Deputies and Senators from an anti-Klaus coalition.

The names mentioned (and also rejected) during 2007 included the former Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jiří Dienstbier (proposed by ČSSD); the President of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Václav Pačes (independent); the Vice-President of the Senate, Petr Pithart (KDU-ČSL); and Chief Justice of the Constitutional Court, Pavel Rychetský (a former ČSSD member before becoming Chief Justice). The last two candidates mentioned rejected this idea themselves.

Émigré as President?

It became more and more obvious that Klaus’s challenger would have to be a relatively politically unshaped personality, or at least not so politically pronounced, and would have to be able to accost all anti-Klaus subjects. Klaus, who has been active in Czechoslovak/Czech politics since 1989, was challenged by the Green Party (SZ) nominee, the Czech-American economist Jan Švejnar, who left Czechoslovakia with his parents when he was 17 years old. The fact that this candidate for the Czech presidency spent most of his life in exile, and that he holds both Czech and U. S. citizenship, became one of the most frequent targets from anti-Švejnar and pro-Klaus activists. These criticisms even lead Švejnar to announce that, in case he was elected President of the Czech Republic, he would abandon his U. S. citizenship.

Let me remind readers that this was not the first time somebody has been judged according to his émigré status and returning to his or her former home country. It was President Klaus who in December 2006 confirmed the nomination of Karel Schwarzenberg for the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs in

the second cabinet of Mirek Topolánek. Klaus pointed out that Schwarzenberg also holds double citizenship (Klaus mistakenly thought Schwarzenberg was Czech-Austrian, whereas the truth is that he is Czech-Swiss). On the other hand, there were politicians in the past whose dual citizenship was not a problem (for example, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kavan, and the Deputy Prime Minister Egon Lánský, both of whom served in the minority government of Miloš Zeman in 1998–2002).

It is also worth mentioning that, for example, all three Baltic countries have had as their head of state returned émigrés. The President of Lithuania in 1998–2003, and again since 2004, Valdas Adamkus, spent the whole period of Soviet rule over Lithuania in the United States, where he was even politically active as a member of the Republican Party and a high ranking officer at the Federal Environmental Protection Agency. The Latvian President in 1999–2007, Vaira Vīke-Freiberga, spent most of her life in Canada. And the Current Estonian President, Thomas Hendrik Ilves, was even born in exile, in the United States, where he lived and worked for Radio Free Europe. The fact that they ran for the presidency after returning from exile did not pose a problem for any of them.

But let's return to Švejnár. As we have already said, his nomination was initiated by the Green Party. It was the only party of the current center-right coalition cabinet that openly rejected support for Klaus. They had been criticizing him especially for his environmental statements, but also for his euroscepticism. The Green candidate gained support from the ČSSD and the Club for Open Democracy, a Senate caucus representing small center-right, mostly liberal political parties and movements such as the US-DEU, the Civic Democratic Alliance (ODA), the Liberal and Reform Party (LIRA), Way of Change (CZ), and the European Democrats (ED).

While backing for Švejnár from the Greens and the Club for Open Democracy was not surprising at all, the support given by the Social Democrats was not expected. Many Social Democrats pointed out that Švejnár was not a typical Social Democratic candidate. His attitude towards governmental public finance reform is not as radically negative as the ČSSD would expect. Also, on the issue of the U. S. radar base in the Czech Republic, Švejnár totally opposed the ČSSD standpoint, not just on the question whether the radar should or should not be located in the Czech Republic at all, but also on the question of whether there should be a referendum about the issue. Švejnár thinks that strategic security and defense issues should not be decided by the people in a referendum.

So on the key topics of current internal political discourse, Švejnár is definitely not standing on the side of ČSSD. With a little exaggeration we could say that Švejnár's position on the radar issue is much closer to the coalition cabinet than Václav Klaus' position.

The Communist's Strange Strategy

The Communists also discussed Švejnar's candidacy for a while, and later they initiated quite an interesting strategic game. They decided to support Švejnar just in the first and second rounds so to ensure his progression to the third round, therefore allowing him to stand against Klaus during the whole electoral process. However, in the third round, Communist legislators (except 3 Senators) did not support any candidate, neither Švejnar nor Klaus, precipitating the failure of the first election process and calling for new elections. They wanted to show that their votes are necessary for electing the President, and therefore increase their price in political negotiations. The first part of the scenario was fulfilled according to the Communist's wishes: their strategic game ensured that nobody was elected in the first election process. The following process initiated by the Communists, however, called out scruples. The expected strengthening of the position of the Communists during elections did not happen.

Their strategy for the second election process shocked many observers of the Czech political scene. They decided to nominate their own candidate, and selected an independent member of the European Parliament and former journalist, Jana Bobošíková, a fairly controversial figure. Their choice called out scruples and was regarded by many as a ploy. Also, it seemed that the only meaning of her candidacy was to launch her campaign before the upcoming European Parliament elections, scheduled for spring 2009. Furthermore, by nominating her, the Communists wanted to attract the attention of the public. The Švejnar camp accused the Communists of splitting anti-Klaus forces, and Bobošíková later took her candidacy back. The official explanation was that the Communists didn't find her the support needed. However, it was clear from the very beginning that she would not receive any votes besides those of the Communists, and even inside the KSČM support for her was not unanimous.

The Communist's attempts to increase their price fell flat. What's more, the election results showed that the President can be elected without a single Communist vote anyway. Both candidates –Klaus and Švejnar – admitted before the elections that anybody who wants to be elected President needs Communist votes. The results showed that this is a myth, that there can be a presidential majority without a single Communist vote. Klaus, who faced criticism after the 2003 elections for being elected thanks to Communist votes, will now be able to define his position towards the KSČM more negatively, as he is not bound by any gratitude for voting for him. The fact that the new President was elected without the Communists hides the fact that he was elected by a close shave, as he received just one vote over the quorum.

If we say, on the one hand, that the elected President did not need a single Communist elector, on the other hand he still needed votes from deserters from

the opposition ČSSD party. Miloš Melčák and Michal Pohanka had deserted from the Social Democrats at the beginning of 2007 when they supported the formation of a center-right minority government of the ODS, KDU-ČSL, and Greens. They were both expelled from their party and since then have acted as independent Deputies, supporting, however, key governmental programs. Melčák and Pohanka both decided to vote for Klaus and so did another – and now also former – Social Democrat, Evžen Snítily. For supporting Klaus he was expelled from the party, although he says he will vote with the Social Democrats in parliament.

The KDU-ČSL and their Shift

Švejnár was, during both election processes, supported by part of the KDU-ČSL as well, although it was a minority group within the party. On the other side, this Švejnár group within the KDU-ČSL included, among others, the KDU-ČSL Chairman, Jiří Čunek, and the former Chairwoman of the KDU-ČSL parliamentary club, Michaela Šojdřová. Klaus supporters prevailed, which ended in the quite surprising resolution of the KDU-ČSL National Committee, suggesting its legislators and presidential electors vote for Klaus. It was known that there were a few KDU-ČSL representatives who would support the incumbent President Klaus – for example, the former Chairman and current Minister of Finance Miroslav Kalousek – and that few others were considering voting for Klaus. However, it seemed that a majority of Christian Democrats belonged to the anti-Klaus group.

In March 2007, I wrote in an article, about the relations of Klaus and the KDU-ČSL, the following: “The traditionally pro-European KDU-ČSL badly endures some of Klaus’s statements against the European Union. Differences between Václav Klaus and the KDU-ČSL on foreign and European policy were most visible when the KDU-ČSL former Chairman Cyril Svoboda headed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” We also have to add that the coexistence of the ODS and KDU-ČSL in two center-right coalition cabinets between 1992 and 1997 was not ideal at all. Many influential Christian Democrats – including Věra Luxová, the widow of Josef Lux, the former KDU-ČSL Chairman and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of agriculture in Klaus cabinets – pointed out this negative past experience they had with Klaus as Prime Minister.

When Klaus became President for the first time in 2003, the KDU-ČSL was a coalition partner in a government lead by the ČSSD and characterized by very tight relations between the President and the Government, especially on foreign policy and European issues. This conflict was – as stated above – personalized by Klaus and Svoboda. Paradoxically, it was Svoboda who made the most surprising shift when announcing he would support Klaus, although he had been considered a typical representative of the anti-Klaus left wing group in the

KDU-ČSL. His explanation was very unfortunate and intensified speculation that the KDU-ČSL had made a deal with the ODS: Christian democrats will support Václav Klaus, and in return the ODS will vote for a law allowing the restitution of some religious property and returning it to the Catholic Church. Although Christian democrats, the ODS, and even Klaus rejected the allegation, suspicion of the deal remained.

What made the KDU-ČSL change their attitude and officially support Klaus? President Klaus tried to present himself as a conservative politician. During his first term, for example, he vetoed a law allowing same-sex registered partnerships. His conservatism was most visible during his second candidate speech: “If you do not want to regard the thousand years of tradition of our civilization, its Christian values, its accent on the classic family and respect for life in every stage, then do not vote for me, because I respect these values. If you want to live in a future formed by the modern wave, when smoking will be prohibited but drugs will be tolerated, when the institution of marriage will be endangered and the town halls will be full just of same-sex pairs waiting for registration, when old and sick people will be mercifully devitalized, when we will be given orders what to eat, drink, how to speak, then this is not my program. This is not my vision of the future,” said Klaus. According to many commentators, this was an attempt to catch as many KDU-ČSL electors as possible.

A Clear Situation in the ODS

The clearest situation concerning support for the candidates was in the ODS. Its candidate, founding father, long time Chairman, and current Honorary Chairman, Václav Klaus, has enjoyed its support since the moment he first announced his intention to run again. Although relations between Klaus and the ODS froze due to some of his standpoints and opinions expressed during a seven month period of looking for a stable cabinet after the 2006 elections, the possibility that any ODS legislators would not support him was very low. The unity of 122 votes secured, by 81 Deputies and 41 Senators of the ODS, put Klaus in the position of frontrunner.

Reelecting Klaus for a second term was probably most welcomed by the Prime Minister and Chairman of the ODS, Mirek Topolánek. It stabilized his permanently weak and unstable party position and, if nothing critical happens, he may rest till the fall 2008 when not only Senate and regional elections are held, but the ODS National Convention leadership election will take place.