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Editors: Sławomir Dębski ● Bartosz Wiśniewski ● Rafał Tarnogórski

Karolina Borońska-Hryniewiecka ● Anna Maria Dynier ● Aleksandra Gawlikowska-Fyk  
Sebastian Płóciennik ● Patrycja Sasnal ● Justyna Szczudlik ● Marcin Terlikowski ● Tomasz Żornaczuk

## The Re-election of President Miloš Zeman: Consequences for Czech Domestic and Foreign Policy

Łukasz Ogrodnik

*Miloš Zeman owes his victory to an active electoral campaign, the endorsement of, among others, the largest grouping in the Chamber of Deputies (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens—ANO), and a misinformation campaign against his opponent Jiří Drahoš. The prolonged political deadlock connected with the creation of the Czech government strengthens the position of the president in both domestic and foreign policy. In his second term, Zeman will continue to focus on relations in the region. He will also devote much attention to relations with China and Russia. However, Zeman's perception of the latter limits cooperation with Poland.*

**Behind the Scenes of Zeman's Victory.** Zeman won in the second round of the presidential election, which took place on 26 and 27 January. He gained 51.4% of the vote, compared to 48.6% for his opponent Jiří Drahoš, a professor of chemistry and former president of the Czech Academy of Sciences. At 66.6%, turnout was the highest since the parliamentary election in 1998. Zeman won more than 100,000 more votes than in 2013. In the first round of the election, which took place on 12 and 13 January, he obtained only 38.6% of the votes. Although it gave him an advantage of 12 percentage points over Drahoš, this result was below forecasts. Therefore, contrary to statements by his spokesperson, Zeman expressed a willingness to participate in television debates. Two of these took place, with the private broadcaster Prima and the public Czech Television. Zeman's dominance in the first debate, in which he received much more air time, and which took place a few days before the election, contributed to his final victory. It was also built on an active campaign in the field that lasted several months. In addition, his supporters led a disinformation campaign, presenting Drahoš as supporting unrestricted migration to Europe, including the Czech Republic. Paradoxically, opposition to obligatory migrant relocation quotas was one of the few common platforms of the two candidates.

Support of five (out of seven) candidates who did not make it through to the second round did not help Drahoš. In total, these won over 33% of the votes in the first round. Pavel Fischer, Michal Horáček and Marek Hilšer, the three who came directly behind Drahoš, actively joined the chemistry professor's campaign. He was also endorsed by the centre right Conservative Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL). Meanwhile, Zeman received only the support of two candidates who obtained a total of less than 2% of votes in the first round. More important was the support he received from Andrej Babiš, the prime minister who was dismissed but still holding office, and the chairman of the largest party (ANO), which did not field a candidate in the election. Moreover, Zeman was backed by the leaders of the centre left Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), the extreme right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), and former president Václav Klaus.

**The Position of Babiš.** The Czech presidential election took place at a time when there were problems forming a government. Two days before the second round of the election, Zeman accepted the resignation

of the Babiš's government, which lost a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies. According to Zeman's announcements, he president will swear in Babiš as prime minister again, even if he does not have the necessary support of the parliamentary majority. If the Chamber of Deputies passes a second motion of no confidence, the president will appoint a prime minister at the request of the chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, a post currently held by Radek Vondráček from ANO.

Babiš, converted Zeman voters in 2013, saw his victory this time as an opportunity to form a government. The president supported Babiš's efforts in this respect. During an appearance with the leaders of ČSSD and SPD on the eve of the election, he encouraged the prime minister to consult with these parties to create a cabinet. Drahoš declared that he would not entrust the mission of forming the government to Babiš because of the accusations against him regarding the extortion of EU funds. Victory for Drahoš would have deepened the crisis related to the formation of a government and raised the spectre of an early parliamentary election.

**The President's Foreign Policy.** Zeman's re-election means he will continue to be involved in regional cooperation efforts. In his first term, he visited Slovakia and Poland seven times each. In the course of his campaign, he announced that, during his next foreign trip around Slovakia (traditionally the first port of call for a newly-elected Czech president), he would also visit another neighbouring state, but refused to specify which.

Zeman's views on the EU are contradictory. He describes himself as a "Eurofederalist" but criticises the transfer of powers of state authorities to EU bodies, and EU attempts to solve the migration crisis. On the one hand, he is in favour of reducing the competences of EU institutions, while on the other he believes that the EU could continue to lead not only a common foreign and security policy, but also, for example, social policy. Although it is not within the competence of a Czech president, Zeman supports a referendum on the Czech Republic's membership of the EU and NATO, stating that he would urge voters to opt to remain in both organisations.

Zeman strives to strengthen relations with China and Russia, stressing the potential for the development of Czech economic relations with these countries. In March 2016, together with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, he launched a strategic partnership. He consistently opposes EU sanctions imposed on Russia and supports the creation of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline. His policy towards Russia and China has led to conflict with the prime minister and members of government. In a speech to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in October 2017, Zeman suggested paying Ukraine compensation for the annexation of Crimea, which was criticised both by the Ukrainian government and the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka. In turn, Zeman joined critics of the October 2016 meeting of Culture Minister Daniel Herman with the Dalai Lama. It is no coincidence that the presidents of Russia and China were among the first leaders who congratulated Zeman on winning.

Although there are constitutional limitations on a Czech president's involvement in foreign policy, Zeman's activity suggests that he may weaken its effect, as proven by the previous cohabitation situation when the Czech government distanced itself from the president's moves. Examples of such activity include foreign visits, such as his trip to Moscow on the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, and statements, such as his appeal for the Czech Republic and other European states to move their Israeli embassies from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem.

**Conclusions and Prospects.** Zeman's re-election means the continuation of his tactical political alliance with the ANO leader. However, in the long term, these relations, based on mutual, political support, may become strained. Zeman will probably keep his promise and swear in Babiš as prime minister again. He will not renounce his own political ambitions and having won a second and final term as president means that he will not have to seek support from the ANO leader and voters anymore. Zeman's ambitions, which exceed the constitutional role of a Czech president, may cause conflict with the future government, especially as he already has a track record of opposition to government policy. Zeman's role in resolving the deadlock surrounding the Babiš government is an additional source of his gain in strength compared to the government.

Czech foreign policy may become less cohesive as a result of Zeman's failure to coordinate his actions with those of the government. His re-election means further development of cooperation with the countries of the region, especially within the Visegrad Group. However, his own vision of cooperation with Russia may limit the development of relations between the Czech Republic and Poland at the level of heads of state.

Zeman's attitude to the EU has so far been limited to vague, often contradictory slogans. Therefore, it is unlikely that he will successfully join the debate on the future of the EU, especially as Babiš's position will be decisive. However, the prime minister's support for the Eurosceptic Zeman weakens the credibility of the Czech government in discussing the future of the EU.