

ACTA POLITOLOGICA

www.acpo.cz

RECENZOVANÝ ČASOPIS | PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL

2023 | Vol. 15 | No. 3 | ISSN 1803-8220



KUTNAROVÁ, Pavlína; HLOUŠEK, Vít (2023). An Unorthodox Euro-federalist: Miloš Zeman's Changing Discourse on European Integration. *Acta Politologica*. Vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 93–111.
https://doi.org/10.14712/1803-8220/12_2023

Published: 31/10/2023

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An Unorthodox Euro-federalist: Miloš Zeman's Changing Discourse on European Integration¹

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Abstract:

This paper deals with the changing discourses of former Czech president Miloš Zeman on European integration and the European Union. Together with his predecessors Václav Havel and Václav Klaus, Zeman symbolises the period of democratic transition and consolidation after the Velvet Revolution and, as prime minister from 1998–2002 and president from 2013–2023, he co-formulated Czech European politics. Although labelling himself a Euro-federalist, Zeman never spared any effort to criticise the EU. The paper assumes that the change in his Eurosceptic discourse was due to the institution of direct presidential elections. Zeman followed the Czech political mainstream, which is softly Eurosceptic. Moreover, Zeman's Eurosceptic critique of the EU corresponded with the positions shared by his electorate. Euroscepticism, therefore, helped Zeman's re-election in 2018. The authors analyse key texts from various periods of Zeman's political career to describe and interpret his discourses on the EU in particular and European integration in general, to demonstrate that beyond the façade of his Euro-federalism, one can find a specific version of the mainstream Czech Eurosceptic discourse.

Key words: *Miloš Zeman; Direct Elections; European Integration; Euro-federalism; Euroscepticism*

Introduction

The following paper analyses changes in Miloš Zeman's discourse on the European Union and European integration. We pay primary attention to his two presidential terms and set them into the context of his long-term narratives on European integration and the context of direct presidential elections. There are three reasons to investigate Zeman's views of the European Union. First, empirical exploratory research is valuable due to the lack of a comprehensive account of Zeman's opinion on European integration, in contrast to the extensive literature on the views of former presidents Václav Havel (Baer 2000) and Václav Klaus (Havlík et al. 2017: 116-125).

The second reason relates to the changing nature of presidential elections and the introduction of a direct vote in 2012. For pragmatically minded Zeman, his discourse on the

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European Union remained functionally driven by his concerns over his electoral campaign in 2013 and even more so his re-election campaign in 2018. The directly elected president followed the public mood while in office, especially when seeking re-election. While EU-related issues are not among the most prominent topics in Czech political debate, they have a solid potential to polarise the electorate. They can be used as a point of dispute in presidential elections, where questions of “high politics”, such as foreign, security, and European policies, represent an essential source of conflict. For directly elected Zeman, the “natural” course was to follow the mainstream of Czech public opinion, which has remained (soft) Eurosceptic since the late 1990s (Kaniok, Hloušek 2020).

Therefore, our research poses primarily an exploratory question on Zeman’s European discourse and changes to it over time. Further, we will discuss whether the shift to direct presidential elections created fertile ground for the “hardening” of his approach. In our paper, we confirm our assumption and show how Zeman’s (already rather idiosyncratic) federalist narrative transformed into the soft Eurosceptic mainstream quite typical for Central European populist leaders (Csehi, Zgut 2021), and we discuss continuities and changes in Zeman’s European discourse during his time as president.

We start the paper with a literature review of Zeman’s views on the European Union and European integration. In the second part, we theorise about how the system of direct election may affect presidential policy orientations, and policy narrative turns. Further, we summarise Zeman’s European discourse before 2013 to demonstrate that his opinion remained anchored in pro-integration narratives despite all his idiosyncrasies. We present evidence and analyse his first and second five-year presidential terms separately, allowing us in the last part of the article to discuss our empirical findings in the light of our theoretical assumptions.

Miloš Zeman and European Integration: A Literature Review

Miloš Zeman, although somewhat overshadowed by Václav Klaus and even more so by Václav Havel, has already been the subject of many books and scholarly papers, allowing us to sum up the state of knowledge of his political career. Lubomír Kopeček (2017: 284) described Zeman’s political characteristics as a mix of “rhetorical skills, pragmatic adaptability and highly developed talent for politics”.

Populism and anti-intellectualism characterised Zeman’s rhetorical style almost from the outset. Kopeček (2017: 286) argues that his anti-intellectual stances stemmed from his pragmatism since they allowed Zeman to expand his electoral support both in his position as the chairman of the Czech Social Democratic Party and as a candidate in direct presidential elections. Naxera and Krčál (2019) demonstrate how his populist style encouraged the polarisation of Czech society. However, there is no need to analyse Zeman’s specific rhetorical style. It was full of touches of sarcasm, vulgarity, defamation of opponents, and many times unsubstantiated claims, both in domestic political utterances and speeches about foreign and European policies. This is sufficiently described, for example, in Naxera, Krčál (2018: 193-194) and Kopeček (2017: 178).

A distinct trait of Miloš Zeman’s political discourse was his patriotism. As Červinková and Kulhavá (2013: 20-22) show, he accentuated patriotic tones already in his 2013 presidential campaign, stressing his patriotism, the fact that he did not emigrate from the former Czechoslovakia during the Cold War, promises to defend national interests, and his ability

not to “bow” to powerful institutions and politicians in the EU. Cadier (2013) described Zeman as having a wishy-washy approach, leaving a great deal of space for changes in his EU discourse according to changing public moods, and noted the superficiality of his Euro-federalism. This ambiguity changed significantly when he ran for the presidential office. Especially the European migration crisis of 2015 proved to be a critical factor turning Zeman's rhetoric even more populist (Naxera, Krčál 2018). During the crisis, his rhetoric was characterised by strong Islamophobia and rejection of refugees (Kopeček 2017: 256-258; Kopeček 2022: 416-417). Part of Zeman's political strategy as a directly elected president contemplating the possibility of re-election was to resonate with the mainstream of Czech public opinion by rejecting any relocation of migrants to the territory of the Czech Republic (Kratochvíl, Sychra 2019). This strategy paid off since the migration crisis overlapped with the period of his highest popular support (Šedo, Věrtěši 2018: 46).

Speaking of Zeman's opinions on the European Union and European politics, Kopeček (2017: 263-266) stresses the change in his strategy. Before the 2013 election, he fostered the image of a pro-European politician. Zeman repeatedly stressed his pro-EU activities as prime minister from 1998–2002 and proclaimed himself a Euro-federalist. To commence his presidential mandate, he symbolically flew the EU flag over Prague Castle. In the 2018 campaign, Zeman turned into a populist critic of the EU's handling of the migration crisis, comparing the EU with the USSR in a fully Klausian way, talking much of Czech sovereignty, and making vague promises to repeat a referendum on Czech EU membership. His foreign policy preferences increasingly turned in the direction of Russia and China (Kopeček 2017: 243-251 and 263-270; Kopeček 2022: 436-447). One explanation for Zeman's pro-eastern foreign policy turn is that at the end of the 2010s, the circle of his political supporters who founded the Party of Citizens' Rights – Zemanites (*Strana práv občanů – Zemanovci*) had growing economic ties with both the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (Kopeček 2017: 244-245).

Marek and Brusenbauch-Meislová (2022) draw attention to a particular layer of Zeman's discourse on Europe: his critique of the Eurozone during the Eurozone crisis. They demonstrate that at the beginning of his first presidential term, Zeman did not criticise the common currency in general but criticised leading European politicians in a patronising way, ridiculing other politicians, including Greeks and Cypriots. Zeman repeatedly said the crisis was an opportunity for further integration. The vital elements of soft-Eurosceptic criticism were already there, though: Zeman very firmly rejected the common solutions, such as the European Stability Mechanism (ESM), because he said the Czech taxpayer should not have to bail out indebted Greeks (Marek, Brusenbauch-Meislová 2022: 62-64).

As we have seen, many elements and aspects of Zeman's stances on European integration and his following of popular critical moods have already been examined by scholars. However, there is no comprehensive account of Zeman's European narratives in general and narrative changes in his two presidential terms in particular. Therefore, our paper contributes to the discussion of how the direct elections for president shape the treatment of politically prominent and controversial topics and offers a fuller picture of the European dimension of Zeman's political legacy.

Directly Elected President and the Power of Talk

Issues related to European integration lie within the traditional domain of interest of the Czech president. As Borčány (2016: 55) shows, the president is not the dominant actor in Czech foreign policymaking, yet he is an important actor following the tradition set by Václav Havel and Václav Klaus of actively intervening in foreign, security, and European policy debates. According to the Czech Constitution, the president is not a fully independent actor since his activities in the abovementioned fields are objects of countersignature by the prime minister or another cabinet member. On the other hand, a president can play the role of agenda-setter (Borčány 2016: 60-67). Therefore, his role is rather symbolic and uses the means of soft power.

For Havel and Klaus, European integration was one of the crucial fields of their political activities, and both tried to impact Czech European policy and public opinion (Rovná, Rovný 2019). Miloš Zeman seemed to follow in Havel's footsteps at the beginning of his presidential term. He proclaimed himself a Euro-federalist and stressed that "we do not 'co-operate' with the European Union [because] we are part of it" (cited in Borčány 2016: 77). Yet European integration was not a prominent topic until the migration crisis unleashed the populist potential to criticise the EU. Zeman capitalised on this potential, especially before his re-election in 2018, turning from Euro-federalist to a critic of the deeds and intentions of the EU. How to explain this turn?

The changes in Zeman's discourse in the 2013–2018 period cannot be explained only by his sheer pragmatism and populist "instincts" nor by the opportunity window for heavier critique opened by migration crisis, but by the fact that he needed to follow the wishes and will of his electorate. One reason for this was undoubtedly the change to direct elections to the office of president. The scholarly literature on presidential activism (Baylis 1996; Duverger 1980; Linz 1994; Metcalf 2000) connects direct elections with a presidential self-perception of having independent legitimacy and acting more independently. Winter et al. (2016: 147) pointed out that even though the direct election did not change the parliamentary nature of Czech democracy, apart from the form by which the head of state is chosen, a directly elected president has stronger legitimacy and, typically, is a strong political personality. Kopeček and Mlejnek (2013: 75) formulated the same assessment regarding Zeman's particular role: "The adoption of direct popular presidential elections ... [gave] ... the third Czech president, Miloš Zeman, a very powerful weapon in the form of his own independent legitimacy, and from the beginning Zeman has been prepared to use it". As Naxera and Krčál (2020) confirmed, Zeman's political style was that of a populist politician. A combination of factors – his presidential activism, populist political style, and strategy for popular re-election – implies that Zeman tuned his ideas on European integration to public opinion, which was critically positioned against the EU, especially since the migration crisis. Czech politics offered fertile ground for Zeman to plant and grow populist messages (Voda and Havlík 2021). As Kneuer (2019) argues, populism and Euroscepticism are close allies in contemporary European politics, mobilising the "losers" of the emerging transnational cleavage (Hooghe, Marks 2018). Although the literature on populist incumbents tends to argue that incumbency downplays their radicality, Hegedüs (2021) determined that maintaining and fostering radicalism can work in Central Eastern Europe. We might assume that in Zeman's case, the fact that he did not plan for a further political office run after the end of his second term might have contributed to radicalisation, putting aside all tactical concerns connected

typically with the vision of a new round of electoral competition. We do not claim that direct elections and will to be re-elected *per se* steered Zeman's opinion on the EU in a Eurosceptic way, but we will discuss this particular aspect as one of the sources of his radicalisation.

We will select from Zeman's speeches in the 2013–2022 period for evidence to analyse the turn mentioned above. We will pay primary attention to the 2012–2018 speeches but also include available entries on European integration from Zeman's second presidential term as well. The 2012–2018 period is crucial for testing our assumption of a correlation between direct elections and Zeman's reaction to his electorate's preferences. The period after 2018 helps us identify lingering trends and complete a coherent overview of his attitudes while in office.

Before we present our methods and data, we must define Euroscepticism. Taggart coined the classical definition of Euroscepticism, which “expresses the idea of contingent or qualified opposition, as well as incorporating outright and unqualified opposition to the process of European integration” (Taggart 1998: 366). Vasilopoulou (2009: 3) offered the most straightforward definition of Euroscepticism as a “negative party position on European integration and the European Union”. Taggart and Szczerbiak's (2008) classic hard and soft Euroscepticism divide helps us to clarify the different degrees and nature of Euroscepticism as opposition against the current form of the EU. Hard Euroscepticism is “[w]here there is a principled opposition to the EU and European integration and therefore can be seen in parties who think that their countries should withdraw from membership, or whose policies towards the EU are tantamount to being opposed to the whole project of European integration as it is currently conceived”. Soft Euroscepticism means that “there is not a principled objection to European integration or EU membership but [...] concerns on one (or a number) of policy areas”, which “leads to the expression of qualified opposition to the EU or [...] there is a sense that ‘national interest’ is at odds with the EU trajectory” (Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008: 2). Both principled and qualified opposition can be traced in the discourses of politicians and how such discourses create a more coherent narrative on European integration and the EU. As the previous research showed, especially the 2015 migration crisis provided a new impulse for increase of Euroscepticism in Central Eastern Europe (Taggart and Szczerbiak 2019). We will see that change of Zeman's position was not any exception to the rule.

Euroscepticism is not any full-fledged ideology but can be defined as a specific political discourse (Flood and Usherwood 2005: 7). Following the constructivist turn in EU studies (Leconte 2015: 257-259), we will use the method of narrative analysis (Shenhav 2015). Political narrative is a specific subcategory of discourse that aims at building a “story” (Patterson, Monroe 1998) to explain a situation, and includes the steps taken by politicians to interpret the broader context (Czarniawska 2004). We follow the definition of Nordensvard and Ketola (2021: 1), understanding narrative as “the presentation of a series of events in such a way as to promote a particular point of view or set of values”, a specific sort of political activity. In our case, we will analyse and interpret Zeman's discourses to re-construct his narratives on European integration and Czech position within the EU. A typical political narrative serves not only as a passive interpretation but as a tool for the justification of policy goals and political action (Hagström, Gustafsson 2019). Therefore, we will employ narrative analysis to determine how Miloš Zeman framed European integration and the European Union.

The first step of our endeavour is to describe what EU-related topics Zeman discussed, how he framed them, and what picture of the EU he drew. We will analyse all the documents available on the personal webpage www.zemanmilos.cz and select those

bearing any message on the EU and European integration (32 entries in the 2013–2018 period and 18 entries in the 2018–2023 period) and reconstruct the elements of narratives characteristic for a given period. We will analyse the topics and foci and reconstruct a trend of an increasingly populist narrative and a tendency to replace once-proclaimed federalism with soft Euroscepticism to satisfy the Czech mainstream. Simultaneously, we will have to contextualise all such trends in the context of a directly elected president seeking popular trust and support.

Miloš Zeman on Europe Before 2013

The topic of European integration was never a prominent issue in Miloš Zeman's discourse and writing. Before focusing on his post-2013 performance in office, we should cover at least briefly his ideas of European integration and the Czech position vis-à-vis the European Union during Zeman's leadership of the Czech Social Democratic Party and time as prime minister. We use Zeman's two significant works, books he wrote during his temporary retirement from politics. The book *How I was Mistaken in Politics* (Zeman 2005) falls into the category of classical political memoir, representing his views on his deeds, colleagues, and opponents. The book *The Rise and Fall of Czech Social Democracy* (Zeman 2006) represents a different genre of political analysis oriented to Zeman's "mother", the Czech Social Democratic Party.

In both books, the issues and thoughts related to European integration are scarce and not systematically covered. Zeman's general tone in his remarks about the EU and European integration is positive, such as at the moment Zeman saw the country's EU membership, in May 2004, as a reconciliation of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, allowing for a "return to the common and even broader family" and "repaired breaking of the common state" (Zeman 2005: 117). He consistently labelled himself as a Euro-federalist (Zeman 2005: 205) who wished for unified foreign, defence, environmental, social, and economic EU policies, including even harmonisation of taxes across the member states (Zeman 2006: 124-125), and who maintained direct opposition to the viewpoint of hard Eurosceptic Václav Klaus (Zeman 2005: 246; Zeman 2006: 139).

Returning to his prime ministerial period, Zeman constructed the narrative of a government working hard for harmonisation with the *acquis communautaire* and paving the way for Czech accession (Zeman 2005: 205-206). He rejected both Euroscepticism and uncritical support for deepening EU integration (*eurohujerství*), accepted the reduction of sovereignty in order to strengthen the "unified European voice", and called for broader cooperation among small and medium member states (Zeman 2006: 138-139). Zeman advocated unanimous eastward EU enlargement, including to Ukraine, Belarus, and even the Russian Federation, because of their cultural proximity to Euro-American civilisation and the Christian roots of Russia (Zeman 2006: 139-140). On the other hand, he rejected the very idea of Turkish membership in the EU because of its Islamic roots, stressing that "I acknowledge that not all the Muslims are terrorists ... (but) ... almost all terrorists are Muslims" (Zeman 2006: 138).

The pro-integration position was depicted as a natural consequence of the social democratic effort to maintain and augment international solidarity (Zeman 2006: 15). However, Zeman did not build any concise narrative of the future development of the EU, and his framing of EU affairs within the context of foreign policy and the limited attention devoted to it in comparison with regional cooperation (Visegrad Group, Austria, Germany)

and the Russian Federation and China evidences his lack of interest in building any personal vision (see Zeman 2005: 204-209 and 304-305). Zeman “compensated for” his declared Euro-federalist position with an unsystematic critique of some EU policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy and the Lisbon Strategy (Zeman 2006: 126).

Zeman retained his essential point of view in the 2012 presidential campaign, as the following citation from a book composed of conversations with Zeman demonstrates (Žantovský 2012: 56-57):

The Union is trying to behave as a superstate. I am Euro-federalist, and the Euro-federalists are the primary opponents of the European superstate or Eurostate ... It means that stupidities of the kind of energy-saving lamps, butcher's chopping blocks, contactless taps, etc., belong to the repertoire of a superstate, not of a federation. The federation shall care for unified foreign and security policies; it has to decide the minimal level of taxation... but it shall not, in no case, try to establish such regulatory mechanisms I talked about.

Apparently, Zeman's Euro-federalism went beyond the federalist mainstream. Zeman called for the European Parliament to take legislative initiative for creating a European army, including European expeditionary forces, and for the complete adoption of the Euro currency with common fiscal and tax policies. He claimed to write a brief and clear European Constitution, which primarily dealt with foreign and defence policies (Žantovský 2012: 58-67 and 73-75). At first sight, his ideas resembled the vision of a political union from the late 1940s. Given the context of the EU in the early 2000s, however, Zeman filled the bottle of Euro-federalism with a rather strange brew.

Summarising his early discourses, we find a relatively “thin” narrative, emblematised by the Euro-federalist label, which frames the European Union as a natural arena where the Czech Republic belongs, the polity that is struggling with some policy and regulatory challenges, but the narrative is optimistic about the future of integration which, for Zeman, shall connect both deepening of integration and widening of the EU. We can summarise his narrative as unorthodox Euro-federalism. Why do we call his narrative thin? Zeman's narrative is surely less complex than the one of his predecessors, yet it constructed more or less an optimistic story of the EU and Czech membership leading to progress and growth.

The First Term (2013-2018)

Miloš Zeman started the first term of his presidential mandate as an energetic and activist politician and, most importantly, as a self-proclaimed Euro-federalist, who, early on, flew the flag of the European Union over Prague Castle. However, as illustrated in his pre-presidential discourse, looking closely at his Euro-federalism something does not seem to fit quite right since he offered a peculiar definition of the term. According to the former president, one can label oneself a Euro-federalist yet actively criticise the Brussels bureaucracy and its useless regulations, plus accuse the EU of interference in inter-state issues. Zeman explained his attitude as “self-criticism” because, as he enjoyed saying throughout both of his presidential terms, “we are the European Union” (Zeman 2013a; compare with Zeman 2022a for confirmation of continuity).

Miloš Zeman's vision of the future and his general discourse about the European Union centred around four main topics. He primarily focused on structural changes, the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the economy, and European values. At the start of his first term, he even aspired to be an active lobbyist for specific agendas, mainly regarding European funds (Zeman 2013b).

Zeman continued in his unorthodox Euro-federalist narrative. He wished for the European Union to tighten and deepen its integration. In the same breath, he hoped for the Czech Republic to become "the hard core" of the EU (Zeman 2013c). His vision of the Community's future was ambitious – he wished for the EU to become a federation in the form of a parliamentary democracy, in which case the European Parliament should become a regular parliament with all-European electoral lists without a single transferable vote, complemented by creating posts of European ministers (Zeman 2014a; Zeman 2014b). However, he said the federalisation of taxes and finance should resemble the system known in the United States (Zeman 2014c). Another lingering theme of Zeman's pro-European discourse was an accent on the Common Foreign and Security Policy and an EU army (Zeman 2015a). In the future, he hoped for further enlargement to include the Western Balkans (Zeman 2016a).

Zeman's narrative of deeper integration revolved strongly around economic issues. The European Union should harmonise taxes, bank systems and fiscal policy across all member states, the common currency being obligatory, without any opt-outs (Zeman 2014d; Zeman 2014e). He repeatedly stressed the Czech Republic's need to adopt the euro within five years (Zeman 2013c), wished to strengthen the European Trade Union Confederation and create a European tripartite with a Scandinavian-style welfare system prevailing throughout Europe (Zeman 2014c; Zeman 2014e). Zeman also appreciated the functioning of the common market and the benefits of European funds, and said the EU should even share a common economy one day (Zeman 2014f). Despite his pragmatism, he was also aware of the significance of European values since he stressed the importance of European identity, cultural identity and the "return of the Czech Republic to the family". To Zeman, membership in the European Union was unquestionable – in his words, the EU equals peace (Zeman 2014g; Zeman 2014h; Zeman 2014i).

It may seem like Miloš Zeman was in the heyday of his Euro-federalism, but simultaneously, he managed to contradict himself and present opinions that appeared somewhat schizophrenic. He evaluated the Lisbon Treaty as "trash" (*paskvil*; Zeman 2014c), criticised a profound democratic deficit in the European Parliament, and blamed the EU for failing to efficiently inform the public about European affairs (Zeman 2014i). Zeman did not spare any opportunity to criticise various European regulations (mostly about consumer goods and foods), Brussels officeholders, bureaucrats, and the weak leadership, who "should rather discuss something important" (Zeman 2013d; Zeman 2014d; Zeman 2014j). During his mandate, there was also an observable change in his perception of the common currency, for it shifted from undeniable support to questioning its adoption by default, mainly as a reaction to the Eurozone crisis and Greece's insolvency (Zeman 2013d; Zeman 2014k; Zeman 2015b). On top of that, he strongly opposed green, energy and social policies (Zeman 2014c; Zeman 2017a), even though he used to support harmonisation in these areas (Zeman 2014d).

Over time, Zeman's support for the EU gradually weakened while his Euroscepticism strengthened. There also arose populist leitmotifs appearing in his discourse, turning his narrative towards the (soft) Eurosceptic populist mainstream. He openly addressed the European Commission staff as "bureaucrats, who, in case they rebel, should be expelled"

(Zeman 2017b) and spoke of the Brussels “dictate” (Zeman 2017c). Zeman expressed the need to guard national sovereignty, for example, by introducing the unanimity vote in the Council (Zeman 2017a). As president, he argued that the EU should only care about high politics and step back from cultural, economic and national issues, which was also clearly demonstrated in his stated disbelief as to why the European Union was prosecuting Poland over democratisation issues (Zeman 2016b; Zeman 2016c).

The most vigorous populist discourse came to light analogically with the migration crisis. He began to speak of power-sharing between the EU and member states and the need to guard the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity (Zeman 2015c; Zeman 2015d). Zeman believed that the European Union was interfering in intra-state relations by introducing mandatory refugee quotas, underlined by the power of the EU to blackmail member states (Zeman 2016b; Zeman 2016d). According to Zeman, “the EU proved incapable of fulfilling its basic duty – guarding its external borders” (Zeman 2016e) by not having any prepared plans and being unable to facilitate effective negotiation within the EU or with Turkey (Zeman 2016f). In his eyes, the EU’s alleged incapacity for diplomatic bargaining also showed during Brexit, a policy failure for which the EU was partially to blame (Zeman 2017c).

What he could not find in the European Union, he found as compensation elsewhere. From 2014, Zeman’s adoration of the Russian Federation and China grew, which prevailed throughout his entire mandate. He openly adored both superpowers for their strong leadership, economic superiority and development. Because of mutual economic and technological co-dependency, Zeman wished for the Czech Republic to become a bridge between the East and the West (Zeman 2014d; Zeman 2016g; Zeman 2017d). Even though Zeman used to call himself a Euro-federalist, who should, in essence, honour European values, he did not care about the apparent limitations in human rights and the state of democracy present in both superpowers, for they did not represent any setback to mutual economic, investment and even cultural activities and plans. When directly asked about human rights, the state of democracy, or possible security threats coming from the East, Zeman tried to nonchalantly change the topic or make light of the issues (Zeman 2014j; Zeman 2014m). He openly aspired to make the Czech Republic a gate for China to enter the European Union market and became infamous for saying that “we have a lot to learn about societal stabilisation from China” (Zeman 2014m; Zeman 2014l; Zeman 2016g).

Until the outbreak of the migration crisis, the unorthodox Euro-federalist narrative from Zeman’s pre-presidential period remained more or less untouched. Increasing criticism of particular EU economic policies or the democratic deficit remained framed in a narrative of further deepening and widening as the story of the path the EU must take and Czechia must follow. Towards the end of Zeman’s first term, however, the Euro-federalist narrative vanished (as its very label did). The migration crisis and stronger Eastern focus have created a new soft Eurosceptic narrative much closer to conventional Central Eastern European populists. As we will see, Zeman completed and cemented his soft Eurosceptic narrative during his second term.

The Second Term (2018-2023)

Looking for a positive appraisal of European affairs during Zeman’s second term is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Zeman limited his approval to only the most fundamental benefits of European Union membership. Apart from his vision for the future, which took

the form of tax harmonisation, deeper integration, higher participation in European Parliament elections and also enlargement of the Western Balkans, according to Zeman, the benefits of his country's membership in the EU were access to European funds and secured peace (Zeman 2018a; Zeman 2019a; Zeman 2019b; Zeman 2019c; Zeman 2020a). These views were somewhat extended by a careful positive appraisal of the European Commission in fostering the acquisition and distribution of the Covid-19 vaccines (Zeman 2021a). Later, Zeman redirected towards a strengthened pro-European discourse, which took a turn in 2022 after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and also coinciding with the Czech Presidency in the Council of the European Union (Zeman 2022b; Zeman 2022a).

However, let us not fall into a slumber and hope for Zeman's redemption as a Euro-federalist. During his second term, he criticised almost every step the European Union took, starting with sharp words and calling the High Representative for Foreign Policy, Frederica Mogherini, "a communist" and evaluating the EU approach as "impudent" because of its position on US-Israeli relations, and laying the blame entirely on the EU for Brexit (Zeman 2018b; Zeman 2019a). He further criticised the Community for its handling of the migration crisis and the Eurozone, not forgetting to oppose the democratic deficit (Zeman 2018c; Zeman 2018d; Zeman 2019d). Zeman's critique continued along similar contours as in his first term. However, this time, the primary attitude towards the EU could be wrapped around two leitmotifs – sovereignty and the European Commission.

To Miloš Zeman, the European Union threatened the sovereignty of nation-states in the context of the migration crisis, and he blamed it for incompetency. In his eyes, the European Union suffered from weak leadership, an inability to guard its borders and fight migration, and an ineffective Dublin system (Zeman 2018c; Zeman 2018d; Zeman 2019a). He stressed the importance of protecting national interests from EU interference and called for resilience against blackmail by European elites. Zeman feared that member states were slowly becoming only provinces, which needed to be prevented by strengthening their independence and not "selling their freedom for money" (Zeman 2018e). This alleged conflict between elites and the nation-states can be nicely illustrated by the fact that Zeman could hardly comprehend why the EU, by default, discussed the state of democracy in Hungary since he did not view the Hungarian system as problematic at all (Zeman 2018f).

Brussels bureaucrats became a thorn in the side of Zeman, who showed deep dissatisfaction with the state of the Union and called for profound changes because, in his words, the current system was intolerable (Zeman 2019c). Even though he previously supported an extension of the European Parliament's competencies, now he could be heard saying, "MEPs have gone wild (*zvlčeli*), and they should be more critical towards the EU" (Zeman 2019e). Zeman used quite undiplomatic vocabulary, especially towards the European Commission, which, he said, had crossed the line of subsidiarity, and whose officials were no real government, merely un-elected bureaucrats (Zeman 2019d; Zeman 2019e). Zeman also changed his views on the distribution of power in the EU, for he believed more competencies should be laid on the European Council, which, in his words, was the proper government of the European Union (Zeman 2019d; Zeman 2019e). Formerly a self-labelled Euro-federalist, Zeman expressed pity that the EU was not criticised enough in the past (Zeman 2019a).

As the migration crisis waned, Miloš Zeman selected new topics to be critical about. First and foremost, he opposed the Green Deal, energy policy and social policy (Zeman 2021b; Zeman 2022c). Zeman also blamed the EU for failed leadership during the Covid-19 crisis because he found the EU unprepared and lacking any crisis plan (Zeman 2020b).

Coming close to the end of his second term, Zeman showed a trace of remorse. The Russian aggression against Ukraine led to a shocking turning point in his discourse, which had hitherto, for a long time, been strongly favourable towards Moscow. The invasion also shattered Zeman's hopes for Czech-Russian friendship and the Russian democratisation process. Now we could see him as a politician disappointed in his long-term ally, standing alongside the rest of Europe favouring tough sanctions on Russia, which he had rejected for his entire presidential career (Zeman 2022b), including after Moscow's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. This remorse found in Zeman's narrative might have been strengthened because he saw all his ambitions and visions for Czech-Russian and Czech-Chinese cooperation fade away. Nevertheless, he continued to promote positive mutual partnership in all spheres. He tended to excuse controversial issues connected to the state of democracy in both superpowers, which, in the case of Russia, he did not view as obstacles to cooperation until February 2022.

Towards the end, Miloš Zeman started asking rhetorical questions: "We are the European Union – what can the Czech Republic do for it? The European Union is more than mere funds" (Zeman 2022a). Furthermore, he hoped the Community would someday become a superpower and return to its roots (Zeman 2022c). What kind of roots Zeman had in mind remains a mystery.

Overall, his second-term narrative on the EU remained within the Central European populist soft Eurosceptic "mainstream", which offers a story interpreting the current EU as incapable of facing the growing challenges and a bleak perspective for national sovereignty. Zeman never changed the part of the story that put Czechia into the family of the member countries. Yet, he turned his back entirely on the EU institutions and current policies, denying any progress from the current EU leaders.

Summary and Comparison

Miloš Zeman's narrative during his first term as president was somewhat ambivalent; he was showing off his pro-European side, yet at the same time, he was capable of criticising the structure of the EU, an act of so-called "self-criticism". This attitude was topped with looking elsewhere for role models, fostered by Zeman's schizophrenic precision in communication style on the one hand and cherry-picked and deliberate distractions from controversial issues on the other.

During his first term, Zeman gradually shifted from an unorthodox yet Euro-federalist narrative to a more "classical" populist Eurosceptic narrative. He proved to be very flexible in his position on the European Union, which can be observed in his support for deeper integration in all spheres of European policies, even enlarged competencies of the European Parliament. At the same time, he did not shy away from using the populist vocabulary found in the discourse of textbook examples of populist and Eurosceptic parties. It is fundamentally contradictory to call oneself a Euro-federalist yet openly stir up fear by calling the European elite "incompetent in fulfilling its basic duty – guarding its external borders", depicting them as causing a confrontation with nation-states by using the term "Brussels' dictate" and stressing the importance of guarding national sovereignty, which, according to Zeman, is by default endangered by the European elites. On top of that, he offered a somewhat paradoxical alternative by showing respect for the authoritarian systems in Russia and China, of which he frequently spoke highly throughout the entire first

term. Zeman followed the same track as the new anti-system parties in the Czech political environment, which arose as the 2015 migration crisis escalated.

All these factors made Zeman a populist politician trying to impress both pro-European voters and critics. Even though he tried to show himself to be a firm politician, he essentially was not because he took sides based on his own interest, which was to stay in power and remain in the limelight, to criticise his opponents from the top. Since this character trait was observable throughout his political career, the only way to retain this role was to get re-elected. Zeman held back from announcing his candidacy for a second term until spring 2017. However, before this announcement, nothing indicated he might withdraw from defending his mandate. He presented himself as a confident politician, who felt comfortable in such a role, and his plans and visions overlapped with just a single term. Therefore, it was logical for him to announce his candidacy. An observable change appeared in his overall narrative between 2016 and 2017, shifting from mild criticism to a sharper Euroscepticism and populism, which might be explained as a purposeful reorientation to appeal to Eurosceptic voters.

In his second presidential term, the populist Eurosceptic narrative remained, but Zeman restricted its content substantially, as he reduced the number of public appearances and utterances on EU-related topics. Nevertheless, he was able to integrate new issues according to changing prominence of items in the EU and Czech political agendas. Zeman achieved what he had hoped for: to sustain his power and influence. Now he had nothing to lose and to stop him from impertinent critique. Therefore, we observe a narrowing appraisal of the benefits of EU membership to the base fundamentals, to maintaining peace and receiving support from the European funds. Again, he proved to be a populist politician, now from the very beginning, putting the European elites and nation-states on opposing barricades by depicting the European Union as a threat to national sovereignty. Zeman also portrayed European officials as useless, harming both member states and their citizens. For most of his term, he still saw an alternative in strong superpowers, putting values aside. At this moment, he could not hope for support from pro-EU voters, and he did not even seek it. Later, Zeman fell into disillusion. His ambitious international projects came to an end, whether due to inter-Chinese problems, Covid-19 or the war in Ukraine. By the end of the term, he tried to prove that he genuinely was a Euro-optimist, as he always had been, but at this moment, it was hard to believe so.

In summary, Zeman started with his earlier unorthodox Euro-federalist narrative during the first presidential term. Towards the end of his first term, during the second campaign and his second term in general, Zeman switched to the “orthodox” populist Eurosceptic narrative. There is no sharp edge between unorthodox Euro-federalist and populist Eurosceptic narratives, although the migration crisis served as a springboard for radicalising Zeman’s criticism of the EU. In the 2014–2015 period, we can see increasing critical discourses related to the current EU politics and policies. Simultaneously, self-declared Euro-federalism declined in importance. With the migrant crisis, Zeman abandoned Euro-federalist discourse altogether and reframed his criticism into a mode resembling what we have observed among Central European “mainstream” populist politicians such as Orbán, Kaczyński, Babiš or Janša. His new narrative has become full of criticism and pessimism and points to alternatives to be followed (Visegrád, Eastern orientation of Czech foreign economic policy). It was a narrative of the decay of the EU, lacking competitiveness, facing danger caused by migration and being overridden by emerging Eastern powers such as

China and Russia. In the later years, Zeman used a pessimistic narrative of a blurry European future instead of at least a potentially optimistic vision of deepening and widening the EU. His new populist Eurosceptic narrative was even thinner, reducing the integration story to its real or alleged troubles and challenges, not suggesting any Czexit but critically doubtful about integration merits.

Discussion and Conclusion

As we have demonstrated, Miloš Zeman changed his narrative of the European Union over the course of his two presidential terms rather gradually. European integration never belonged to his most prominent discourse topics (Vérteši, Kopeček 2021) and his “European” narrative never reached robustness of Havel’s return to Europe claim nor complexity of Klaus’s criticism.

The comparison of how Zeman treated the topic in early 2013 and around the campaign for re-election in 2017–2018 demonstrates the difference in the nature of the narratives, not only the differences in nuances or frequency but also the intensity of referring to these topics. Newly elected President Zeman remained an unorthodox Euro-federalist mixing general support for deeper integration with elements of a critique of some contemporary EU policies and long-term features of the *sui generis* EU system of governance. Before his re-election, Zeman’s narrative turned into the Central European mainstream of populist soft Euroscepticism, far harsher in its critique of the economic policies and capacities of the EU and, especially, focusing on the nationalist and populist rejection of EU migration policy, connecting it with a rude and vigorous critique of Islam as an antipode of European culture. Zeman replaced the narrative of the EU as a tool of solidarity and socio-economic progress with a bleak vision of a stagnating and incapable EU challenging Czech sovereignty.

Our findings confirm the literature on presidential activism (Baylis 1996; Duverger 1980; Linz 1994; Metcalf 2000) in general and on Zeman’s political activism (Kopeček, Mlejnek 2013) in particular. Zeman capitalised on his legitimacy, increased through the direct elections, and focused intently on “high policies”, including European policy, to demarcate himself from other actors in Czech foreign and European policy (Borčány 2016). His Eurosceptic turn was associated with an increase in populist discursive elements (Naxera, Krčál 2018, 2019, 2021), presented many times in a cynical and grumpy manner. We can see correlation of the above-presented turn with his re-election campaign; however, we cannot claim that this was the decisive moment. Zeman’s position on the European integration turned softly Eurosceptic already during the migration crisis, turning Zeman from unorthodox Euro-federalist to one of many regional soft Eurosceptic populists. His narrative lost its former original touch but worked very well as a tool attracting enough voters to secure him the second presidential turn.

Of course, other factors might have played a role. First, we must consider changing European and international contexts and new problems and challenges posed by the EU polycrisis. Second, the deteriorating health of Miloš Zeman might have impacted his viewpoints and visions. Repercussions of the crisis in the Eurozone, the migration crisis, and other temporal and long-term issues and problems were reflected in the changing topical focus of the Czech president. The changing context can, however, hardly explain the persistence of populist topics and rhetorical devices, such as the critique of the EU for its migration policy after the migrant crisis ended (2017–2018). Zeman’s health issues have

been discussed since almost immediately after his election in 2013. However, they caused a serious decline in his activities only after 2020, almost two years following his re-election. The system of direct elections and his desire to get re-elected contributed to the twist in Zeman's European narrative because soft Euroscepticism not only mirrored better the pessimism of his voters but corresponded well with the populist strategy he utilised in the campaign. Yet, it is not the only factor we must consider while explaining the shift from unorthodox Euro-federalist to mainstream Central European Eurosceptic populist.

Here we have to address the main caveats of our research approach and the nature of the sources we analysed. The official documents, speeches and interviews allowed us to fully reconstruct Zeman's European narrative and its changes over time, suggesting a causal link with the direct election factor. To elaborate on alternative explanations, future research should provide broader and interdisciplinary perspectives on how Zeman's health issues impacted his cognitive abilities and capacity to express certain types of narrative and specific discourses. Another approach is to include interviews with Zeman or his political intimates and advisors to gain a more complete picture of his motivations.

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Appendix: List of primary sources for 2013-2023 analysis (in chronological order)

Note: Access to all primary sources is confirmed as of 22 March 2023.

1. MZ 2013a <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/projev-prezidenta-republiky-na-humboldtove-univerzite-v-berline.htm>
2. MZ 2013b <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/vanocni-poselstvi-prezidenta-republiky-milose-zemana.htm>
3. MZ 2013c <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/projev-prezidenta-republiky-milose-zemana-v-poslanecke-snemovne.htm>
4. MZ 2013d <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-denik-pravo.htm>
5. MZ 2014a <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/hovory-z-lan216309.htm>
6. MZ 2014b <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-u-pri-lezitosti-desateho-v%C3%Bdroci-vstupu-cr-do-eu-645507.htm>
7. MZ 2014c <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/recko-by-při-opustit-euro-jsem-priznivcem-kreativni-destrukce-785756.htm>
8. MZ 2014d <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/projev-prezidenta-republiky-při-navstevy-evropskeho-parlamentu-ve-strasburku.htm>
9. MZ 2014e <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/exkluzivni-rozhovor-s-prezidentem-při-republiky-milosem-zemanem-k-desatemu-v%C3%Bdroci-evropsk%C3%BDch-novin-148457.htm>
10. MZ 2014f <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/projev-prezidenta-republiky-na-tiskove-konferenci-se-spolkov%C3%BDm-prezidentem-srn-909959.htm>
11. MZ 2014g <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-u-pri-lezitosti-desateho-v%C3%Bdroci-vstupu-cr-do-eu-645507.htm>
12. MZ 2014h <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/exkluzivni-rozhovor-s-prezidentem-při-republiky-milosem-zemanem-k-desatemu-v%C3%Bdroci-evropsk%C3%BDch-novin-148457.htm>
13. MZ 2014i <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/hovory-z-lan-312783.htm>
14. MZ 2014j <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/prezident-zeman—jak-zalozit-evropskou-federaci-a-dostat-do-ni-rusko-210742.htm>
15. MZ 2014k <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-denik-bild-949815.htm>
16. MZ 2014l <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/hovory-z-lan-884693.htm>
17. MZ 2014m <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/-rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-frekvenci-1.htm>
18. MZ 2015a <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-idnescz-444404.htm>
19. MZ 2015b <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro>

- press-klub-frekvence-1-995541.htm
20. MZ 2015c <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-casopis-reflex.htm>
 21. MZ 2015d <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-prezidentsky-pressklub-radia-frekvence-1.htm>
 22. MZ 2016a <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/projev-prezidenta-republiky-pri-setkani-s-tiskem-u-prilezitosti-navstevy-srbskeho-prezidenta-v-cr-294431.htm>
 23. MZ 2016b <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-rossijskaju-gazetu-851398.htm>
 24. MZ 2016c <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-denik-pravo-111038.htm>
 25. MZ 2016d <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/rozhovor-prezidenta-republiky-pro-parlamentni-listy-878036.htm>
 26. MZ 2016e <http://www.zemanmilos.cz/cz/clanky/vanocni-poselstvi-prezidenta-republiky-milose-zemana441618.htm>
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