

Hloušek, Vít et al.:

**PRESIDENTS ABOVE PARTIES?
PRESIDENTS IN CENTRAL AND
EASTERN EUROPE, THEIR FORMAL
COMPETENCES AND INFORMAL
POWER.**

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Given the intensive and lively public and scholarly discussions on Central and Eastern European heads of state, who frequently get into conflicts with cabinets and prime ministers, a political science volume on presidents in the region appears very useful and relevant, given current trends in political science research. The volume contains work from an international team of scholars led by Vít Hloušek, a professor of political science at Masaryk University in Brno in the Czech Republic.

The volume carries on a tradition of scholarly texts on presidents in Central and Eastern Europe (e.g. Taras 1997, Krouwel 2000, Krouwel 2003, Protsyk 2005, Mlejnek et al. 2011). Although one could hardly argue that the volume is innovative in terms of topic, the added value of the book resides mainly in its particular focus on the extent to which presidents overstep their formal powers and how their activism can be explained. In other words, the central aim of the book is, as its authors put it, “to discover whether a trend may be traced out tending towards increasing engagement by presidents in the everyday politics of selected Central and Eastern European countries.” (p. 26).

The book is generally well written and internally coherent, containing an introductory chapter which presents a basic research

framework for case studies focused on ten countries, along with a concluding chapter. The issue of intra-executive conflict has been a highly relevant topic since the early 1990s (cf. Baylis 1997; Protsyk 2006; Sedelius and Mashtaler 2013). The individual chapters in the volume together make up an engaging puzzle of Central European presidencies, taking into account historical precedents and traditions, the context of the transition to democracy, party systems, constitutional powers and current constitutional practice. They try to map, analyze and explain frequent conflicts between presidents and the cabinet and/or parliament. The authors move far beyond mere description of the formal competencies of presidents and avoid simple storytelling confined to a description of the political history of the countries under scrutiny.

The collective monograph comprises chapters on presidents of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, and Romania. The selection of cases was driven not by a priori definition of regime types, but rather by a more useful criterion: the countries selected are the Central and Eastern European members of the EU (p. 19) that have more or less similar constitutions and constitutional practice.

The volume thus devotes considerable attention to the heads of states not only in countries where presidents used to be (or still are) powerful such as Poland, Romania and Lithuania, but also heads of state in countries which have traditionally been considered parliamentary and which – it has often been assumed – have had weak presidents. This sort of selection of case studies is extremely important. First, the book challenges the conventional wisdom about weak, indirectly elected presidents, who have in turn largely been ignored by scholars. In 1997 Juan Linz lamented that “in analyzing...president-heads of state in parliamentary regimes..., we face the difficulty that there are few studies of

heads of state in parliamentary democracies” (Linz 1997: 5). What’s worse, almost two decades later, the situation does not seem to have improved. The assertion put forward by Linz is also shared by Daunis Auers, the author of the chapter on Latvia, who claims that “[c]ontemporary and interwar Latvian presidents have been largely ignored in both the Latvian and English language scholarly literature on domestic and international Latvian politics. (...) Presidents have generally been seen as little more than historical footnotes, marginal political players at best...” (p. 191). This finding might fit presidents in several other countries, as well. Hence, the book fills this gap in the scholarly literature.

Second, including both formally weak and strong presidents (directly or indirectly elected) in a comparative perspective has also important theoretical implications. Analyzing presidents in Central and Eastern Europe, their formal competencies and actual power, Hloušek and his colleagues inevitably waded into the intense, traditional discussion over regimes types and contribute to the already extremely voluminous literature in this particular area of research. As Cheibub and his colleagues argue: “no categorization is more influential than the tripartite distinction between presidentialism, parliamentarism and semi-presidentialism. The classification has so thoroughly dominated scholars’ understanding of executive-legislative relations that it has almost no conceptual competition” (Cheibub et al. 2014: 515). Whereas presidentialism and parliamentarism are to a large extent undisputed concepts, semi-presidentialism has been defined in a number of ways. An increasing number of Western scholars are adopting the definition suggested by R. Elgie.¹ Some, including Elgie himself, even consider this definition standard (Schleiter, Morgan-Jones 2009: 874, Elgie 2011: 23). On the other hand, many scholars from Central and Eastern Europe resist this definition. The problem is that it

lays exclusive stress on the mode of election. But the volume shows the mode of election doesn’t matter much to the way these regimes work in practice. This is in line with Tavits (2011), who argues that compared to indirect selection methods, direct elections do not lead to more activist, contentious presidents and says presidential activism is motivated by political opportunities created by the institutional setting and partisan composition of both parliament and government. It is no surprise that Hloušek et al. object to Elgie’s definition and point up some of its weaknesses. They suspect that the concept is an example of what Sartori called “conceptual stretching.” Hloušek rightly asks: “What do all these political systems with directly elected presidents and a cabinet dependent on parliament have in common?” (p. 23). Indeed, Elgie’s definition quite artificially cuts off very similar political regimes from each other. For example, the Czech and Slovak Republics adopted very similar constitutions in 1992 and previously had worked as (and were also classified as) parliamentary democracies with indirectly elected presidents. As soon as Slovakia introduced direct election of the president in 1999, under Elgie’s definition it was immediately classified as a different type of political regime, although otherwise, the Slovak institutional setting as well as the regime’s functioning remained the same. Instead of being compared to the very similar political regimes in the Czech Republic (until 2013), Hungary or Estonia, the Slovak regime was analyzed together not only with Poland and Bulgaria, but also with completely divergent regimes in Russia, Mali, Peru and Mongolia (Elgie 2005). The only thing Slovakia shares with the latter countries is a directly elected president. For most other institutional, historical and contextual variables, these countries are perhaps too dissimilar to each other.

The authors of the volume do not subscribe to any other definition of semi-presi-

dentialism. Still, most of them implicitly assume that semi-presidentialism requires a powerful president. Also Hloušek argues that “any workable definition of political regimes (and especially that of *mezzo* semi-presidential regimes) needs to add a dimension of informal power balance among the crucial political institutions to gain explanatory power.” (p. 25). Since the authors did not assume a common stance on the thorny issue of defining semi-presidentialism, a certain ambiguity emerges in the volume. For example, whereas the book’s editor, Vít Hloušek, considers Romania “the only clear example of semi-presidentialism in our sample of countries” (p. 24), the authors of chapters on Lithuania (p. 203) and Bulgaria (p. 234) call these regimes semi-presidential as well. The latter even subscribes to the Elgie’s definition.

As far as the volume’s findings are concerned, the authors clearly demonstrate that conflicts between presidents and cabinets or other institutions have been the rule rather than the exception. What matters is not so much the president’s formal powers “as the specific political configuration and the personal qualities, abilities, and ambitions of the individual holders of presidential office. The most common reason for the heightened or extraordinary activity of presidents arises in the political disputes between president and government, wherein each side is from an opposite political camp.” (p.290). Furthermore, studying indirectly elected presidents with few formal competencies (e.g. Latvia, Hungary or Estonia) is relevant. For some readers, it might be surprising to realize that – borrowing a quote from the chapter on Latvia – “...activist presidents in strictly parliamentary democracies still have the opportunity to greatly influence the political process.” (p. 203). The team of authors also demonstrates that nonpartisan or politically neutral presidents have often been successful in their clashes with the cabinet, in contrast to

partisan presidents. Accordingly the authors argue that a formal or factual party connection might be detrimental to presidential authority, legitimacy or popularity with the public.

All in all, there are very few objections to raise against the collective effort this monograph represents. Aside from the above-noted lack of clarity regarding the definition of semi-presidentialism, there are only minor shortcomings. The individual chapters basically respect the general framework outlined in the introductory chapter and are of differing lengths. The chapter on the Czech case is extraordinarily long at more than forty pages, this might be justified simply by virtue of the fact that both editor and publisher are Czech. However, most chapters are much shorter, usually around twenty pages, and some are perhaps too short (those on Estonia, Latvia and Romania have only some fourteen pages apiece). The scholar L. K. Metcalf is referred to as male (p. 24, footnote 10). But in fact Lee Kendall Metcalf is a woman, assistant professor of Political Science at Florida State University. The author of the chapter on Slovakia does not distinguish between a no-confidence vote and the rejection of confidence in Slovakia (p. 137). But even though both procedures may lead to the same result (i.e., the resignation of the cabinet), they are different in terms of who initiates the procedure and the required majority for passage or defeating the initiative. Some references (Taras 2007, Morlino 2001) are missing from the bibliography at the end of the book.

In sum, the volume is worth reading and will definitely prove useful and an invaluable source of information on presidencies in ten Central and Eastern European countries. It also represents an important contribution to our understanding of presidential activism, as well as to intra-executive conflicts, their causes, nature and solutions

Notes:

1. Semi-presidentialism was defined as a regime, where “a popularly elected fixed term president exists alongside a prime-minister and cabinet, who are responsible to parliament” (Elgie 1999: 13).

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**Requejo, Ferran
and Nagel, Klaus-Jürgen, eds.:**

**FEDERALISM BEYOND FEDERATIONS:
ASYMMETRY AND PROCESSES OF
RESYMMETRIZATION IN EUROPE.**

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Following the Second World War and in some cases even before the conflict, many European countries embarked upon a path of decentralization which challenged the unitary character of the state. A redistribution of power resulted in various forms of political and territorial organization. Denmark, Finland and Portugal granted broad autonomy to their insular regions, preserving the centralised structure of the mainland. Italy and Spain regionalized their entire territories,

Presidents above Parties? Presidents in Central and Eastern Europe, Their Formal Competencies and Informal Power. Brno: Masaryk University Press/International Institute of Political Science. Google Scholar. Hloušek, V. (2013b). Heads of State in Parliamentary Democracies: The Temptation to Accrue Personal Power. In Hloušek, V. (Ed.). Presidents above Parties? Presidents in Central and Eastern Europe, Their Formal Competencies and Informal Power. Cite this chapter as: Křátek P. (2017) The Use of Presidential Vetoes in Central and Eastern Europe. In: Presidential Activism and Veto Power in Central and Eastern Europe. Palgrave Studies in Presidential Politics. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. 12 constitutions of central and eastern Europe, Council of Europe Publishing, Strasbourg, 1996, page 42 he chose not to take the office of the President, but he ran the country nevertheless, continuously confronted with the limitations imposed by the 1921 Constitution. In 1935 a new Constitution, which gives far more powers to the President, was set up. In practice though, the president acted alone. These competencies established a strong presidency with broad, but vague powers¹³. As a consequence, the office did not contribute constructively to the new democratic system. The President can also deliver formal addresses to the Sejm and the Senate that need not be subject to debate. The volume "Presidents above parties? Presidents in Central and Eastern Europe, Their Formal Competencies and Informal Power" takes the recent change of the mode of presidential election in the Czech Republic as an occasion and starting point to explore the activities of the presidents of Central and Eastern Europe – defined as the ten countries that joined the EU in 2004/2007.