

**Title:** Book review: Hloušek, Vít (ed.) *Presidents above parties? Presidents in Central and Eastern Europe, Their Formal Competencies and Informal Power* (Brno: Muni Press, 2013)

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The presidencies of Central and Eastern Europe and their incumbents have attracted the attention of a number of political scientists since the region's transition to democracy over twenty years ago. Although over time Prime Ministers and their governments have established themselves as the dominant executive actors, presidents still play an important role in the functioning of these political systems and possess the power to exert significant influence over political decision-making. 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. In particular, it focusses on instances in which presidents attempted to overstep their constitutionally defined powers or managed to influence political decisions informally. Hereby, the contributors also aim to shed light on the role played by presidents' personal characteristics and ambitions, and argue that they are key to explaining attempts to “accrue more power” (p. 25) and “strengthen the role of the president” (p. 291).

The book is organised as a collection of ten case studies framed by an introduction and a concluding chapter that set the topic into a comparative perspective and sum up individual findings. The individual chapters, written by country experts, each give an overview of the historical predecessors of the current presidential institutions and their incumbents to date and discuss the way in which presidents have tried to influence political decisions formally and informally, and attempted to extend their powers. The broad historical overviews given in each chapter, often going back to the creation of the first presidencies after WW I and discussing the practice of presidential politics in the inter-war years, provide a very useful contribution to the existing literature. In particular, they illustrate the connotations associated with the institution of the presidency by the drafters of the new constitutions after 1989 well as by the first office-holders during the early years of democratisation. After comparable volumes had previously almost exclusively focussed on popularly elected presidents, the case studies in this book also explicitly include chapters on indirectly elected presidents, thus

allowing for comparisons across regime types. Particularly the presidencies of Latvia and Estonia have not yet been featured in this form in other English language publications. Even though Elgie and Moestrup's *Semi-presidentialism in Central and Eastern Europe*<sup>1</sup> was only published six years ago, the book thus presents a welcome expansion of the literature and also provides updates on the developments of presidencies covered in previous publications.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, all chapters include at least some data on how often presidents used their formal powers (vetoes, legislative initiatives, judicial review requests etc.) to date and use this information to assess the influence of different factors on presidential activity. Although this data is not always presented in a form that would make it suitable for cross-country comparisons (e.g. by reporting the number of vetoes also as a percentage of all legislation passed), it still presents an improvement over previous publications on Central and East European presidents where such numbers have only rarely been included systematically.

Irrespective of these unquestionably valuable contributions and overall usefulness of this volume, there are also a number of weaknesses, both with regard to overall form and in terms of content. First and perhaps least important, the individual country chapters differ with regards to overall length and internal structure. While all chapters address the main points mentioned above (historical overview, incumbents, attempts to influence political decisions and extend presidential power), the emphasis placed on each varies between chapters and the chosen focus is not always justified by its relative significance for the eventual conclusions. Hereby, it should be noted that the chapter on Bulgaria does generally not address the topic of informal presidential power. Rather, it consists of an analysis of presidential veto use and presidents' public approval between 2002 and 2012 which – albeit insightful – does not fit in with the rest of the volume. Another point of critique is the fact that apart from the chapter on Hungary, all other chapters lack an overview table of governments (and/or Prime Ministers) and their respective tenure, making it difficult for readers less acquainted with a particular political system to follow the discussion. The odd number of spelling errors and awkward grammatical constructions (likely resulting from too literal translations from the authors' native languages) do not generally inhibit the understanding of arguments but unnecessarily slow down the flow of reading. Unfortunately, there are also about half a dozen sources referenced in the text which do not appear in the bibliography.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Elgie and Sophia Moestrup. eds. *Semi-presidentialism in Central and Eastern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the chapters on Lithuania and Slovenia are at least partly based on those in *Semi-presidentialism in Central and Eastern Europe* written by the same authors.

The greatest limitation of the volume at hand concerns how it addresses the issue of presidential personality. The editor is clear to point out in the introduction that the aim of the book is not to provide a “comprehensive explanation of the role played by a strong political personality” (p. 27) and that it therefore refrains from adopting a unified theoretical approach, focussing on the explanation of individual cases rather than “stimulating a shift [...] towards a more general explanation” (p. 27). However, the lack of such a general framework means that the author(s) of each chapter follow a different understanding of what ‘personality’ means and how its influence on presidential action can be demonstrated (in fact, a similar divergence exists with regard to the term ‘informal’). Only few authors refer to concepts from the established literature on political psychology or political leadership and evidence of presidents’ individual character traits/ their importance often remains anecdotal or extremely vague (sometimes even bordering the tautological, e.g. the description of Hungarian president László Sólyom as a “more active personality” than pre-predecessor Árpád Göncz; p. 90). Thus, the conclusion that – in addition to conflicts caused by cohabitation between president and government – “attempts to strengthen the role of the president are also dependent upon his/her personality and charisma” (p. 291) should be seen as a hypothesis in need of further systematic investigation, rather than as a definite conclusion.

In sum, the book at hand presents a useful resource for students and scholars interested in presidential politics in Central and Eastern Europe as well as a welcome update to and expansion of the existing literature. It provides a wealth of examples in which presidents have overstepped their constitutionally defined role, many of which have not yet been described in the English language literature. Despite the weaknesses mentioned above, the volume still lays the basis for a potentially fruitful avenue for future research on the role of factors related to presidents as individuals, situated at the intersection of comparative politics and political psychology.