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The Contrarian of Prague

By Brian M. Carney
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Being president of the Czech Republic is more like being England's monarch than the president of the United States. While the Czech president has veto power over certain types of legislation, his role is supposed to be mostly ceremonial.

But Vaclav Klaus -- who was re-elected last month after being chosen by the Czech Parliament as head of state in 2003 -- has not been content to confine himself to ribbon cuttings and state dinners.

[Vaclav Klaus]Mr. Klaus has become a globally prominent voice of skepticism about what he calls global-warming "alarmism." This week, while in New York to address a gathering of fellow "non-alarmists" at a conference in Times Square, he took some time to sit down with members of the Journal's editorial board to offer his dissenting views on Russia, Kosovo, America and of course, climate change.

"I am not a climatologist," Mr. Klaus cheerfully admits. "I am not disputing the measurement of the temperature." Even so, Mr. Klaus believes that his many years of experience in the fields of economics and econometrics give him some insight into the nature of the problems faced by climatologists and policy makers. In climatology as in economics, he says, "there are no controlled experiments. . . . You can't repeat the time series." So, just as you can't run a controlled experiment to determine the effect of, say, deficits on interest rates, we can't directly determine the effect of CO2 on climate. All we have are observations and inferences.

Mr. Klaus is also interested in the politics of global warming. He has written a book, tentatively titled "Blue, Not Green Planet," published in Czech last year and due out in English translation in the U.S. this May. The main question of the book is in its subtitle: "What is in danger: climate or freedom?"

He likens global-warming alarmism to communism, which he experienced first-hand in Cold War Czechoslovakia, then a Soviet satellite. While the communists argued that we must all sacrifice some freedom in pursuit of "equality," the "warmists," as

Mr. Klaus calls them, want us to sacrifice liberty -- especially economic liberty -- to prevent a change in climate. In both cases, in Mr. Klaus's view, the costs of achieving the goal, and the impossibility of truly doing so, argue strongly against paying a price of freedom.

Furthermore, the fact that there has been some warming over so many years does not, by itself, prove to him that this trend will continue indefinitely. "Undoubtedly there is some warming," Mr. Klaus allows. "But there has never been no change in climate, no change in global temperatures."

The world, he argues, is full of risks, and the risk of catastrophic climate change is just one of them. Therefore, we need a more measured approach to assessing the risks and the costs of mitigating them.

Cost-benefit analysis and the precautionary principle "are two different methodologies, two different approaches, two different ways of thinking," he says. The less desirable precautionary principle "as used by Al Gore and all his fellow travelers" says that "if you are afraid that there are risks to something, you may prohibit everything." He continues: "This is for me absolutely unacceptable to think about."

Mr. Klaus's contrarian streak is not confined to climate change. He has been one of the few politicians in the European Union to publicly express doubts about the wisdom of recognizing Kosovo's recently declared independence from Serbia.

He fears that Kosovo's independence "will be a very good example for other parts of countries that are not happy with what is going on around them. A domino effect -- let's put it that way. So this is for me a very, very serious issue." He declines to be drawn out on specific examples of regions in Europe that could be emboldened to follow Kosovo's lead -- but it does not take much imagination to guess.

The Czech Republic has a sizable Hungarian minority that has been a periodic source of tension with its neighbor to the south for decades. Czechoslovakia, of course, also had its own unhappy experience with its German minority in the Sudetenland in the 1930s.

Even so, Mr. Klaus, steadfastly keeping to the level of generalities and hypotheticals, says: "I am . . . afraid that there are some countries where it's just the opposite -- a bigger country has a minority somewhere and wants to create a bigger original 'mother country' as it's sometimes called. And that's for me a problem because that could destabilize the situation in Europe."

When it comes to hosting American missile-defense facilities, Mr. Klaus's position is contrary to the dominant view in Europe. Opposition to the radar facilities is, in his view, nothing more than old-fashioned anti-Americanism.

"Some 'Old European' countries," Mr. Klaus says, pointedly borrowing the Rumsfeldian formulation that caused so much angst on the continent earlier in the decade, "take [the installation of the facilities] as our way of saying we are not just locked in Europe. We want to stand on two legs. One of them is the European and the other is trans-Atlantic. And they feel that this is our motivation, not Iran, not North Korea. . . . It's just that simple." For his part, "I want to have close ties with [the U.S.]," which is why he supports the bases.

Perhaps the most surprising and counterintuitive position he took during our meeting concerned Russia. The former Soviet satellites in Central Europe are often thought of as reliable skeptics of Russian intentions. But Mr. Klaus expresses a more sanguine view, even arguing that Western fears about Russia and Vladimir Putin are misplaced.

"I was one who always rejected the high-brow approach, [which says], 'Well, it's not good that they're not doing as well as some other countries in Central Europe.' That's a cheap criticism that I don't accept." So, does he not think that, through its supply of arms to Syria and Iran, and its obstructionism over Iran at the U.N. Security Council, Russia is once again picking a fight with the U.S. -- or at least in danger of doing so?

His response is at turns heated and pleading: "No one is thinking about that in Russia. Why do you think that's the way [they think]? Simply, Russia was totally lost and pushed to the floor and simply wants to be a normal country again. Don't interpret all the attempts to be accepted as a normal country as an aggressive position vis-à-vis the United States. This is not that way. I'm afraid that this is the mantra in the American newspapers but please, please, think about it twice because this is a tragic mistake."

What about the danger that Russia could use its role in supplying oil and gas to the rest of Europe as a weapon against EU economies? Again, the response is passionate: "I don't see it. This is for me . . . cheap, cheap headlining to say that, really. I live in a country where we are totally dependent -- we used to be totally dependent on Russian oil and gas. In my life, and I will be 67 this June, it has never happened for one minute that there has been cutting of deliveries of oil and gas. Please don't -- don't -- exaggerate that point. It's such cheap writing. Don't do it."

It's a strange moment. Here is a man who built his political career on his reputation for leading post-communist Czechoslovakia out of its socialist past, and who by his own account was banished into a kind of internal exile for championing liberalization ahead of the Warsaw Pact invasion of his country in 1968. Now he is urging his listeners to give Moscow the benefit of the doubt.

And yet when pressed, he pleads sudden ignorance of the country whose intentions he has just been defending. "You know, I am not an expert on Russia. You know more about it."

That seemed to end the matter, so we tried to return to global warming. But he interrupts to add a final thought on Russia: "Russia is more free now than in any time in its 2,000 years of history. So to speak about dictatorship is misusing the

terminology, devaluing the terms that we use. This is something we should not say."

This is not to say everything is sunshine in Russia. "They are much less free than the Americans and the Czechs would accept. . . . Let's be clear about this. Is that clear?"

"For me it is unacceptable to have such a relatively closed political system. Personally unacceptable, and being in Russia I would fight against it. But that's a different story than speaking of a dictatorship or not putting it in a proper historical perspective."

He goes on. "To say 'dictatorship' or to speak about Putin as the 'KGB man,' I would be [embarrassed] to use such a term. That is maybe for some boulevard journalist, but this is definitely much more complicated. Putin is a much more complicated and structured personality than just the 'KGB man.' And I'm sure you know it."

But here his account took an inexplicable turn. Mr. Klaus, by his own description "no expert" on Russia, points to "a growing decentralization in the country. The role of the individual regions and those governors, they create a different style of thinking and I see an evolution in Russia."

These are the same governors that, formerly directly elected, are now appointed by Mr. Putin himself, which hardly seems a recipe either for decentralization or independence from Moscow. Even so, Mr. Klaus argues that "to be blind . . . to the real changes that have been going on there probably would be a mistake."

In Europe, Mr. Klaus has the reputation of a firebrand, if not a loose cannon. This is a president, after all, who calls global warming "alarmism" a "radical political project" based in a form of "Malthusianism" that is itself grounded on a "cynical approach [by] those who themselves are sufficiently well-off."

"It is not about climatology," he insists. "It is about freedom." Mr. Klaus left his hosts with a clear idea of why he so infuriates his opponents. There's no doubt, either, that he enjoys his self-assigned role as a contrarian.

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