



## **Klaus ends presidency accused of treason**

By Jan Cienski in Warsaw

Václav Klaus ends a decade as Czech head of state on Thursday facing charges of treason.

The senate ruled that Mr Klaus violated the constitution by declaring a [contentious amnesty](#) in the final weeks of his presidency.

The amnesty, which released almost 7,000 from prison and halted hundreds of corruption trials has stained the reputation of a man who has been one of the giants of post-communist Czech politics, along with dissident playwright Václav Havel, Mr Klaus's polar opposite and his leading ideological foe even after [Havel's death](#) in 2011.

Mr Klaus delighted in using his prominent office to skewer popular orthodoxies, from human-caused global warming, which he called "an irrational ideology", to gay rights. "I do not feel any pride in the event," he said of a Prague gay pride parade. Mr Klaus compared the EU to the USSR, which dominated Czechoslovakia for 41 years.

Until the velvet revolution of 1989 brought Mr Klaus to the fore, he had been a fairly obscure economist who steered clear of politics – as had the vast majority of Czechs with the exception of the brave band of dissidents gathered round Mr Havel.

A gifted natural politician, Mr Klaus became finance minister in the national unity government that took power after the collapse of communism and later served as premier from 1992 to 1997. He launched economic reforms that helped transform Czechoslovakia, and after 1993 the Czech Republic, into a market economy but

at the price of creating oligarchs who took advantage of loopholes in the privatisation programme to become rich.

The political battles of the 1990s continued to dominate Mr Klaus's thinking until the end of his presidency.

In an interview with a Czech newspaper, Mr Klaus put some of the blame for the controversy over his amnesty on his old arguments with Mr Havel. "These are still the same people, the same attacks, the same arguments as it has been since November 1989," he said.

His battle against Mr Havel's legacy continued into this year's presidential election. He backed eventual winner Milos Zeman, a socialist, over Karel Schwarzenberg, foreign minister in a government led by the Civic Democratic party that Mr Klaus founded in the early 1990s, in part because Mr Schwarzenberg had been a close Havel ally.

Mr Klaus struck more of a chord with the average Czech than the intellectual playwright. "He understood the soul of the Czech people and he understood that the Czech Republic was more than just Prague," said Jaroslav Plesl, deputy editor of Respekt, a Czech weekly.

As president, Mr Klaus often stretched the limited powers of his office to maximum effect, becoming the last EU leader to ratify the Lisbon treaty in 2009 after holding out for protection against possible claims filed by descendants of ethnic Germans expelled from the country after the war.

His attacks on the euro gained credibility as the common currency lurched from one crisis to another and was a factor in the minimal level of support in the Czech Republic for eventually joining the eurozone.

Mr Klaus's foreign policy showed a marked pro-Russian streak. The president said he was "ashamed" of the Czech government's 2008 recognition of Kosovo's independence from Serbia. In the same year Mr Klaus said it was a "gross oversimplification" to treat Georgia as the victim and Russia as the aggressor in a war between the former Soviet states.

The amnesty is likely to overshadow Mr Klaus's long record in politics. Opinion polls showed a steep drop in his public support and hundreds of government offices have removed his official portrait from their walls.

But Mr Klaus is unlikely to fade away. He will become a fellow at the Cato Institute, the US libertarian think-tank, where he is being welcomed for his iconoclastic views. He is also not ruling out a run for the European Parliament in 2014.

“I am convinced he is not finished with politics,” Mr Plesl said. “The amnesty hurt his reputation but he still has a hard core of supporters.”