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Czech Republic in the Unsecure World:
What Does the Foreign Policy Community Think?

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Introduction

The Czech Republic has entered a period when foreign policy matters. The fundamentals of the world's stability and Europe's security have been shaken over the last two years. Apart from annexing Crimea, Russia has initiated and kept supporting the separatist movement in eastern Ukraine, which resulted in the reciprocal imposition of sanctions between the West and Russia. In 2015, the Eurozone underwent another crisis which nearly ended up with a Greek exit from the single currency union. Last but not least, the bloodshed in Syria and the rise of ISIS further destabilized the Middle East and forced hundreds of thousands of refugees to migrate to Europe.

It has been also almost two years since the center-left government was formed in the Czech Republic, introducing new goals into the foreign policy agenda. Primarily, it aimed to improve relations within the EU and conduct a more pro-European foreign policy. It has also commenced several less visible or robust projects. It set to boost underdeveloped relations with Austria and de-freeze ties with China. The government also declared to increase spending on defense and security policy matters.

Thus, the Czech foreign policy has been in gradual process of re-thinking and re-shaping, caused by both an unprecedented change of the international environment and internal deliberations. The Association for International Affairs (AMO) conducted two online surveys among important foreign policy stakeholders – the first one in 2011 and the recent one in 2015.¹ This paper assesses what, according to the views of the foreign policy community, the fundamentals of the Czech foreign policy are and how these have changed since 2011.

Methodology and stakeholders

In the 2011 survey, 313 stakeholders were approached. The questionnaire was answered in part or fully by 114 of them, giving a response rate of 36%. In 2015, a larger sample was selected. Out of 440 foreign policy trend-setters, 149 (i.e. 33.9%) responded. In both cases, the majority of respondents was formed by civil servants. Additionally, politicians, researches, experts and journalists were addressed.

¹ Full results of the both surveys can be accessed from the website trendy.amo.cz.



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One has to bear in mind that the extent to which the results are representative of the whole foreign policy community is limited by the fact that the questionnaire was filled out on a voluntary basis. There is also a substantial difference in the shares of various occupations when comparing the lists of approached stakeholders and those who actually responded. Nevertheless, those who make, influence or implement foreign policy were contacted in the survey.

Respondents of the Surveys

Question in 2011: Which of the following options best corresponds to your profession?

Question in 2015: Which of the following best describes your current occupation?

Category	Share in 2011	Share in 2015
businessman	-	1.3%
civil servant	61.1% ²	42.3%
journalist	-	12.8%
politician	20.4%	16.1%
researcher / expert	9.3% ³	21.5%
non-profit sector worker	1.9%	-
other	7.4%	6%

² The category was titled “public sector worker” in 2011.

³ The category was titled “academic” in 2011.



Czech Foreign Policy until 2020 – Security First

As already mentioned in the introduction, the international environment has gone through a number of turbulences in the last years. In order to find out more about the stakeholders' expectations for the future, we asked them to assess the importance of several issues for the Czech foreign policy in the next five years. The same question with slightly different preselected topics was also posed in 2011.

Energy security, ticked as prospectively important or somewhat important by 99.3% of stakeholders, is believed to top the agenda up to the year 2020. Interestingly, the same topic was expected to be dominant also in 2011, a view expressed by 98.9% of foreign policy opinion formers. Energy security is undoubtedly important. The results, nevertheless, show how deeply rooted in the Czech strategic thinking the matter is despite the fact that the state of the Czech Republic's energy security has actually improved since 2011 – new gas interconnections were built, gas and oil prices stay low and the Czech Republic has not undergone any harsh crisis since 2009.

Another issue which has retained its place among top priorities for the next half-decade is immigration. Already in 2011 when refugees were not yet posing an immediate challenge, 77.7% respondents opinioned that uncontrollable migration would constitute an important or somewhat important foreign policy issue in the coming five years, i.e. until 2016. Regardless of how unlikely it might have sounded in 2011, the anticipation proved to be correct. Wholly predictably, reflecting the contemporary state of affairs, the number rose to 97.3% in 2015.

International terrorism, cyber security and armed conflicts are other security-related issues expected to preoccupy Czech foreign policy decision makers in the nearest future. The level of significance attached to terrorism has increased over the past years. In 2011, it was classified as prospectively important or somewhat important by 63.4% of respondents. In 2015, the statement was already supported by 90.7% of interviewees. Stakeholders also anticipate that the Czech Republic will be dealing with instability in the EU's neighborhood, regarded as important or somewhat important by 95.4% of respondents. The situation in the EU's close proximity directly influences also other issues on the list such as the threat of international terrorism, armed conflicts or migration. Even though the option of instability in the EU's neighborhood was not a subject of inquiry in 2011, the survey showed that two-thirds of respondents were of the opinion that the revolution in the Arab world, which was at its peak at that time, would probably ultimately lead to a deterioration of Europe's security.



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Back in 2011, quite different items were expected to be on the top of the future foreign policy agenda, such as the control of the financial markets (important or somewhat important according to 90.4% of respondents) and EU enlargement (70.2%). These issues do not seem to be that relevant in 2015, since it is security what matters in today's world. Nevertheless, a dash of proactive course can be spotted in the thinking of the Czech foreign policy elite. Compared to 2011, the belief in the prominence of the promotion of human rights – a traditional Czech foreign policy niche – substantially grew. Four years ago, only 70.2% predicted it would be an important or somewhat important concern in the future, whereas according to the last survey, 79.8% held such an opinion.

The Importance of the Foreign Policy Issues for the Czech Republic

Question in 2011: How important will the following themes be for the Czech Republic in the next 5 years?

Question in 2015: How important will the following issues be for the Czech foreign policy in the next 5 years?

Category	Share of respondents for whom the issues will be important and somewhat important in 2011	Share of respondents for whom the issues will be important and somewhat important in 2015
energy security	98.9% ⁴	99.3%
illegal immigration	77.7% ⁵	97.3%
instability in the EU's neighborhood	-	95.3%
international terrorism	63.4%	90.7%
cyber security	-	87.3%
armed conflicts	-	87.3%
promotion of human rights and democracy	70.2%	79.8%

⁴ The category was titled “safeguarding of energy supplies” in 2011.

⁵ The category was titled “uncontrollable migration” in 2015.



Friends and Foes

In another set of questions, evaluation of bilateral as well as multilateral ties of the Czech Republic was conducted. To examine relations on the bilateral level, we first asked to identify five most important partners of the Czech Republic. Secondly, we requested respondents to assess the quality of relations with several pre-selected countries.

The list of top foreign policy partners has remained the same as in 2011. It comprises Germany, Poland, the United States of America and Slovakia. Germany, the leading European power and the biggest neighbor of the Czech Republic, has confirmed its position on the very top, as it was named by almost all stakeholders. Poland noticeably improved its rating and moved from the fourth position occupied in 2011, when it was mentioned by 74.7% of respondents, to the second place in 2015. This time, 87.8% stakeholders did not omit to include Poland among the top foreign policy partners. It well reflects the rise of Poland's position in European affairs and the intensification of Czech-Polish relations which we have witnessed in the last five years. The United States placed third, yet it has kept the same frequency of occurrence (86.7% in 2011 and 87.7% in 2015). Slovakia dropped to the fourth position and it was also less mentioned than in 2011. The relations with priority partners also turned out to be very good in qualitative terms. On the scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning the best score and 5 the worst one, all four countries got excellent (Slovakia 1.1 and Germany 1.3.) or very good (Poland 1.8. and the USA 1.9.) average marks. These numbers were very similar to the ones obtained in 2011 (Slovakia 1.2, Germany 1.6, Poland 1.6 and the USA 2.0).

Two other European powers – the United Kingdom (frequency of occurrence 25.9% in 2015 and 24% in 2011) and France (19.7% in 2015 and 17.3% in 2011) have remained more or less on the same level of importance. Also Israel has kept a constant position (11.6% in 2015 and 8.0% in 2011).

A slight shift in relations with Austria, traditionally a little bit neglected neighbor of the Czech Republic, has been noticed. The average mark improved from 2.6 in 2011 to 2.1 in 2015. Austria also rose in the chart of important foreign policy partners, as 34% of stakeholders perceived it as belonging to the top five. Only 26.7% shared this opinion in 2011. Even more significant improvement can be observed in evaluation of ties with Ukraine. The Czech Republic enjoys much better relations with the new elites in Kiev (average mark of 2.4) than with their predecessors (3.5 in 2011). Intensification of relations with China has been also reflected. The quality of mutual ties improved from 3.4 in 2011 to 2.6 in 2015. According to 12.9% of respondents, the Asian power is also believed



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to be an important foreign policy partner, which represents nearly double the score it achieved in 2011 (6.7%). On the other hand, the results indicate worsening of relations with Russia. From the average mark of 3.1 in 2011, the rating went down to 3.6 in 2015. Also the share of stakeholders who regard the partnership with Moscow as valuable has declined. In 2011, the importance of ties with Russia was underlined by 38.7% stakeholders, but only 19.7% were of such an opinion in 2015.

Important Foreign Partners of the Czech Republic

Question in 2011: Which states do you consider the Czech Republic's most important partners?

Question in 2015: Which countries are the 5 most important partners for your country's foreign policy? (Please write down five countries. The order does not matter.)

Country	Frequency of occurrence in 2011	Frequency of occurrence in 2015
Germany	100%	99.3%
Poland	74.7%	87.8%
USA	86.7%	87.1%
Slovakia	82.7%	76.9%
Austria	26.7%	34%
United Kingdom	24%	25.9%
France	17.3%	21.1%
Russia	38.7%	19.7%
China	6.7%	12.9%
Israel	8%	11.6%
Ukraine	-	6.1%

Quality of Relation with Selected Countries

Question in 2011: Rate the Czech Republic's relations with the following states on the traditional Czech marking scale (1 - excellent, 5 - poor)

Question in 2015: Evaluate the quality of your country's relations with the following countries on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 for very good and 5 for very bad).



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Country	Mean value in 2011	Mean value in 2015
Slovakia	1.2	1.1
Germany	1.6	1.3
Israel	-	1.6
Poland	1.6	1.8
USA	2	1.9
Austria	2.6	2.1
Ukraine	3.5	2.4
China	3.4	2.6
Russia	3.1	3.6

Another turn to traditional allies is visible in the case of the Visegrad Group (V4). In 2011, more than three-quarters (77.2%) of respondents evaluated the grouping as important or somewhat important. Four years later, no fewer than 91.7% of stakeholders agreed or somewhat agreed with the notion that the participation in the V4 is important for the Czech Republic. An overwhelming majority also holds the opinion that the membership in the V4 is beneficial for advancing Czech national interests (84.3%), and that the group plays a constructive role in the EU (74.4%). Moreover, respondents also unequivocally believe that the V4 should more often strive for a joint approach, as 94.5% of them were in favor of this proposition. And according to 81.1% of stakeholders, the other countries composing the V4 should be the first partners for coalition building. Furthermore, more than two-thirds of respondents would support broadening of the cooperation into new sectors. On the other hand, only one-fifth would recommend enlargement of the V4.

When asked to identify three areas the Visegrad cooperation should foremost focus on, respondents mainly named issues which are already being dealt with within the V4 format. They underlined energy policy (34.6% of them), security (25%), eastern policy (23.5%), coordination in the EU (22.1%) and energy security (16.9%). Migration was the only relatively new issue to be coordinated on the V4 level, a suggestion put forward by 27.2% of stakeholders. This particular result is linked to the fact that the survey took place in summer 2015 when the V4 was trying to form a common position on the European Commission's proposal on the binding refugee quotas.

Despite this optimism, the V4's performance in these priority areas is not painted in very rosy colors by the members of the Czech foreign policy community. The cooperation in energy policy was viewed as successful or somewhat successful only by 50.7% of stakeholders, eastern policy was seen as relatively productive by 42.4%, and defense



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cooperation was evaluated as such by up to 37.9%. Only the cooperation on the EU level is perceived more positively, as 62.5% of stakeholders deem it successful or somewhat successful.

It brings us to a quite paradoxical conclusion. The V4 is on the one hand more trusted than in 2011, but its performance in priority areas is not perceived as very successful.

The Visegrad Group

Question in 2015: To what extent do you agree with the following propositions about the future development of the Visegrad Group? / To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the role of the Visegrad Group in the European Union?

Statement	Share of respondents who agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement in 2015
The V4 should more often strive for a joint approach.	94.5%
The V4 members should be the first partners for coalition building when pursuing your country's foreign policy interests.	81.8%
The V4 should incorporate more areas of cooperation.	69.3%
The V4 should enlarge.	21%
The Visegrad Group is an influential actor in the EU.	44.2%
The Visegrad Group plays a constructive role in the EU.	74.4%
The participation in the Visegrad Group is important for your country.	91.7%
The participation in the Visegrad Group is beneficial for pursuing your country's national interests.	84.3%

The transatlantic cooperation has formed a traditional pillar of the Czech foreign and security policy since 1989. Therefore, several questions were also examining this particular area. Three major conclusions can be drawn from the collected data. Firstly, as it was already mentioned, the United States remains among the most important partners and the quality of relations between Prague and Washington is evaluated as very good. Secondly, in spite



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of a bleak prediction from 2011 when 62.8% of respondents believed that the transatlantic partnership would unravel, nowadays they suggest that its intensity will rise both in security & defense matters (79.3% respondents supported the notion) as well as in economic & trade issues (82.1% think so). Thirdly, the membership in NATO is perceived to be very beneficial for the Czech Republic. Almost all respondents (97.3%) expressed such an opinion. When asked about the prospective importance of the Alliance in the next decade, only around half of interviewees expected it to rise in 2011. Now, no fewer than 86.7% of stakeholders opined that NATO's significance would increase in the period up to the year 2020.

EU policy: Same Old Same Old

When asked about ten-year prospects for the EU in 2011, nearly 70% of stakeholders believed that gradual empowerment of joint institutions and a shift of competences to the supranational level would take place. In 2015, the share of those expecting the EU to move in this direction in the next decade decreased, yet it still formed a clear majority (63.4%). Thus, the Czech foreign policy elite does not expect any disintegration of the EU. Apart from the anticipated transfer of powers to Brussels, respondents also believe that the division between more integrated countries and member states less tied to the EU's center will be sharp. Again, the same results were obtained in 2011, only the number of those supporting this notion slightly dropped from 87.5% to 83.2%. Thirdly, we asked, whether the respondents think that the course of the integration would be increasingly determined by stronger large member states regardless of the view of smaller countries. In 2011, 73% of respondents agreed with such an option, whereas only 67.1% supported this view in 2015. Thus, despite we hear a lot about increasing German dominance in EU affairs, Czech foreign policy stakeholders believe that the EU will be less governed by large member states than they thought four years ago.

Four issues singled out as important for the EU in next five years are energy policy (important or somewhat important according to 97.3% of respondents), immigration (93.4%), the single market (92.6%) and development of the Eurozone (92.6%). The same policy areas also occupied the top positions in 2011. Energy policy was expected to be important by 98.9% of stakeholders and the single market by 95.3%. Immigration and development of the Eurozone were not included in the list of pre-selected policy areas in 2011. The two options, however, ranked first and second in a similar, yet open question.



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Respondents were asked to select three most pressing issues the EU was expected to be facing. The situation in the Eurozone was mentioned by 59% and immigration by 54% of stakeholders.

The Future of the EU

Question in 2011: The direction taken by the European Union in the next 10 years will be characterized by...

Question in 2015: What do you think will characterize the development of the EU in the next 10 years?

Option	Share of respondents who agreed or somewhat agreed in 2011	Share of respondents who agreed or somewhat agreed in 2015
Stronger supranational elements and a shift in powers to joint institutions.	69.9%	63.4%
More differentiated (“multi-speed”) integration.	87.5% ⁶	83.2%
Stronger large member states which will increasingly determine the course, regardless of the smaller countries.	73%	67.1%

⁶ The option was titled “breakdown in a multispeed Europe” in 2011.



Conclusion

Both, the changed international circumstances as well as the new foreign policy direction of the government can be accounted for the difference in the views of the Czech foreign policy community in 2011 and 2015. Three main conclusions might be drawn.

Firstly, the Czech foreign policy community feels endangered by the world's development and its predictions for the future are also bleak. Thus, it cares a lot about security.

Secondly, as a logical step, the Czech Republic seeks allies and underlines existing ties built on shared values. Therefore, the importance of relations with Germany, Poland, the United States and Slovakia and good quality of mutual ties were re-affirmed in the survey. The same applies to the V4 which is more trusted than in 2011. International organizations associating Euro-Atlantic democracies – the EU and NATO – keep their high position in the thinking of the Czech foreign policy elite. On the other hand, Russia has lost much of its reputation and so did international organizations which were supposed to facilitate the world governance as the United Nations and the OSCE. Moreover, perhaps as a result of the new initiatives of the center-left government, relations with China and Austria have been strengthened and bettered according to the Czech foreign policy stakeholders.

Thirdly, Czech foreign policy community's predictions about the EU development remain rather static. The EU is expected to move further competences to joint institutions, the integration is supposed to become differentiated and larger member states are anticipated to remain key players in the EU's decision-making – the foreign policy community thinks more or less in the same way it did in 2011.

Since we feel unsecure, we – quite predictably– tend to underline our partnerships and memberships in various clubs. Nevertheless, we have to think how much sustainable our policies are. Does the prediction of a sharpened division between the inner and the outer circle of the EU mean that we should hurry up into the Eurozone? Despite the fact that security issues are expected to prevail on the future foreign policy agenda, our defense spending remains considerably below the 2% threshold set by NATO. Shall we increase it in order to emphasize our commitments to shared security? Moreover, we value the Visegrad cooperation per se, but we are not satisfied with its performance in particular areas. The 25th anniversary of its foundation could be a good point for reflection and rethinking of its further existence.



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AMO is a preeminent independent think-tank in the Czech Republic in the field of foreign policy. Since 1997, the mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. Today, AMO represents a unique and transparent platform in which academics, business people, policy makers, diplomats, the media and NGOs can interact in an open and impartial environment.

In order to achieve its goals AMO strives to:

- formulate and publish briefings, research and policy papers;
- arrange international conferences, expert seminars, roundtables, public debates;
- organize educational projects;
- present critical assessment and comments on current events for local and international press;
- create vital conditions for growth of a new expert generation;
- support the interest in international relations among broad public;
- cooperate with like-minded local and international institutions.

RESEARCH CENTER

Founded in October 2003, the AMO Research Center has been dedicated to pursuing research and raising public awareness of international affairs, security and foreign policy. The Research Center strives to identify and analyze issues crucial to Czech foreign policy and the country's position in the world. To this end, the Research Center produces independent analyses; encourages expert and public debate on international affairs; and suggests solutions to tackle problems in today's world. The Center's activities can be divided into two main areas: first, it undertakes [research and analysis](#) of foreign policy issues and comments on [AMO blog](#); and second, it fosters dialogue with the policy-makers, expert community, and broad public.

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