

Agenda

for Czech Foreign
Policy **2020**

— Eds. —

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AMO.CZ

AGENDA FOR CZECH FOREIGN POLICY 2020

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| | |
|------------|--|
| 6 | Preface |
| 8 | The world at the time of COVID-19 |
| 18 | European Union |
| 30 | Central Europe |
| 40 | Eastern Europe |
| 51 | Transatlantic Relations and Foreign Security |
| 60 | Middle East |
| 70 | Africa |
| 80 | East Asia |
| 92 | EU Enlargement Policy |
| 102 | Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU |
| 110 | Climate Policies of the Czech Republic |
| 120 | List of abbreviations |
| 122 | Authors |
| 124 | About AMO |


Pavčina Janebová

Preface

You are about to read the fourteenth edition of the Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy. The annual publication of the Association for International Affairs (AMO) traditionally aims to analyse and evaluate the Czech Republic's foreign policy in the past twelve months from an expert and normative point of view and to provide its creators and actors with feedback and recommendations for its future direction. However, the publication is not only intended for them - as a comprehensive overview of foreign policy events in the past year; it can also be a valuable resource for members of the expert community, journalists, students of international relations and interested members of the general public.

It is evident that the near-term future of international relations will be fundamentally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which naturally frames many chapters in this year's edition of the Agenda. Structure of the publication has undergone several changes compared to last year. It still contains chapters dedicated to specific regions of the world and the Czech foreign policy actions in them. This year, we decided to include a chapter on Czech policy in Africa. In addition, this time the Agenda also includes thematically focused parts. In them, we want to draw attention to issues that we consider important for Czech foreign policy: the upcoming Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, EU enlargement and the Czech Republic's climate policy. The introductory chapter provides a general overview of the current situation in international politics and the role of the Czech Republic within it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a great deal of uncertainty to the international environment. Czech political leaders should recast the crisis situation into an opportunity to formulate and implement such a foreign policy that will present the Czech Republic as an active, responsible and confident actor with the ambition to influence events at both the European and global level.



*Vít Dostál
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The world at the time of COVID-19:
A moment for Czech foreign policy



The COVID-19 pandemic is reshaping the world around us, and it naturally permeates all chapters of this year's Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy. It is necessary to analyse responsibly and calmly the changes that are taking place and to consider how Czech foreign policy should react to them. We do not think the pandemic will completely transform the international order from top to bottom within a few months. It is not an event that makes dystopian visions a reality. However, for two reasons, it is necessary to monitor its effects. First, it has accelerated some important trends and exposed processes that have so far been progressing only slowly, or without much attention. Secondly, the economic downturn brings uncertainty and pessimism to human lives, the economy and politics.

In this chapter, we first set out to analyse several pivotal trends. Subsequently, we follow the reaction of Czech foreign policy in order to then make recommendations that are expanded on in individual chapters of the book.



International relations are going through a turbulent period, in which we are following several significant processes with high relevance for Czech foreign policy. Their brief description is necessary before inferring the consequences for Czech foreign policy. The most important of them include an emphasis on the value dimension of international politics, competition for competence and trust, reflections on economic sovereignty, efforts to maintain European cohesion, the growing abyss between both sides of the Atlantic and erosion of the „West“ as a whole, and pessimism concerning the continuation of multilateralism in its current form. These six trends do not represent a complete list of developments that have taken place in international relations in recent months. However, they are essential for the Czech Republic, as a democratic state governed by the rule of law, whose well-being and security depend on international cooperation.

The onset of the pandemic brought huge expectations from citizens towards their governments. They wanted to hear guarantees from political leaders and expected solutions from their institutions. Given that health care lies within the responsibility of governments, these calls were understandable. The pandemic reminded us that nation states are still the basic building blocks of the international system. Federal units (in the United States or Germany) or international organizations (especially the European Union) also wanted to be heard. Developments on a country-by-country basis have shown that in the face of a crisis of this magnitude, the country's overall resources or wealth are not enough; the capacity of institutions, the credibility of political leaders and social consensus also

play a major part. In addition to the concentration of critical competencies, which states were able to do during the crisis, the ability to ensure their credible discharge is also an important factor.

The issue of authorities is closely related to new technologies and the question of values. International politics is also changing as a result of the easy dissemination of information. Traditional hierarchies fall apart, communication platforms facilitate democratization but also social polarization, and value-based or emotional issues are gaining more prominence in international relations. This is not a new trend, but the heated atmosphere over the lack of medical supplies or the concealment of important information by some countries, coupled with general uncertainty, has brought the issue of values and trust to the forefront. More than ever, foreign policy is ubiquitous in an increasingly globalized world.

The consequences of the economic downturn on international politics and the changes in the world economy are a fundamental question that we, as yet, cannot answer. It is difficult to predict which countries or regions will emerge from the crisis stronger and what impact this will have on their position in the world. However, the pandemic has reminded us of our dependence on international trade and thus also revealed a vulnerability in the event of a crisis. It gave more weight to the idea of transferring strategic production to Europe, but the trend was already gaining traction pre-crisis due to technological development and rising production costs in developing countries. It will be essential for Europe to maintain the maximum of its openness, from which it benefits, while strengthening its resilience. Finding a balance between these two priorities will be a test – one of the biggest challenges for the future.

The way to secure international cooperation leads through the strengthening of multilateralism. Of course, the international cooperation does not come to an end. On the contrary, in many respects – for example in science and research – its importance and benefits can be clearly seen. However, multilateralism built since 1945 was dealt further blows in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Confidence in the World Health Organization has been severely shaken and the rivalry between the United States and China has deepened. Europe is becoming increasingly aware that it is no longer just a model to follow, as it still saw itself ten or fifteen years ago but is increasingly engaging in global competition. However, Europe can defend its principles – relations with Russia are still frozen due to the illegal occupation of Crimea and the support of so-called separatists in eastern Ukraine, and the EU is now calling China its „systemic rival“.

The relationship with the United States presents another challenge for Europe. Confidence in the US ebbed further during the pandemic. Donald Trump built his presidency on

fighting domestic institutions whose competent approach he needed during the pandemic, and on economic development, which is now uncertain. Instead of calling for cohesion, even in difficult times he kept dividing society. Trump's America is not the ally Europeans want. However, it remains an ally that European countries need due to economic interdependence and security guarantees. Whatever the outcome of the presidential race, transatlantic relations will need heavy investments in trust-building.

Of course, the pandemic also affected the European Union, which, even before the crisis, suffered from fragmentation between North and South, or West and East. The fragmentation is the result of differing expectations about the future of the joint project, decline in confidence in the responsible behaviour on the part of other states and a reluctance to show solidarity with them. France and Germany have not been able to lead Europe with the same vehemence as before. However, a multilateral political consensus seems to be achievable, as the example of Europe shows. The EU recovery plan envisages that the effects of the pandemic will be different for everyone and that it is necessary to avoid economic and, consequently, political divergence. In particular, the approach of Germany underwent a significant change, when in the light of the new crisis the country decided to compromise on its previous postulates and subscribed to a massive program of economic recovery. Germany is now willing to make compromises that it would not have allowed before, because it can imagine the consequences of a failure to agree.



Until the onset of the pandemic, Czech foreign policy approached changes in the global and European policy rather indifferently, without a significant ambition to influence new trends. This lack of interest was caused by an insufficient strategic thinking and absent political leadership in foreign policy and security issues. Instead of a real debate on foreign policy issues, the foreign agenda was used to settle domestic feuds and identity issues and promote particular interests.

Looking at the various actors within Czech foreign policy, we can see the potential for conflict not only between Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček, but also in differences with the communists on whose vote the government relies. Foreign policy differences are also evident between the government on the one hand and President Miloš Zeman on the other. Despite more intensive schedule of coordination meetings of the highest constitutional officials, these differences have not been overcome, although there has at least been partial success in blunting some edges. Due to this discord

and inconsistency in Czech foreign policy, the fragmentation of the Czech approach to some foreign policy issues persisted and the new actors emerged. Among them, it is necessary to mention not only the presidents of both chambers of the Czech parliament, but also local and regional politicians, who are trying to take advantage of this new opportunity and compensate for the lack of national consensus with their own initiatives. This applies both to the Czech approach to Russia and China, and also to the EU and Central European policy and other areas. At the same time, foreign policy has become a widely discussed topic in the Czech society, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified this trend. On the other hand, the public foreign policy discourse is often superficial, displaying only a limited awareness of the key issues and foundations of Czech foreign policy. There is also a lack of a constructive discussion on national interests in the field of international relations.

This fragmentation is best visible in the traditionally divisive relations with Russia and China, for which Czech diplomacy does not have a clearly defined vision and cannot coherently approach them. Czech diplomacy often finds itself in a tight spot with these two states in particular and fails to resolve periodically recurring conflicts, also due to the particular interests of some domestic players, including the circle of people around the president. The activities of some domestic actors are all the more prominent in this context, including the current Senate President Miloš Vystrčil, Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib and some other local politicians in Prague. In the last year, their personal foreign policy initiatives have been largely successful, to a large extent against the will of the government, which is unable to coordinate them or communicate and explain them to partners in diplomatic terms.

The Czech EU policy, the main pillar of our external relations, fails to demonstrate a clear vision and ambition with which the government of Andrej Babiš would argue in Brussels in favour of the Czech and common European interest. The Czech Republic often behaves in a conflicting and ambiguous manner towards Europe, with applying one rhetoric in the national debate and another one vis-à-vis the country's European partners. The Czech Republic's actions are dominated by the will of the Czech Prime Minister. He, nonetheless, continues to apply his transactional approach and assert sovereignist positions with a noticeable distrust of the European Commission's activities, or a common European approach and search for solutions to key issues. The Czech Republic's often meaninglessly formulated positions on topics discussed at the EU level, coupled with the unresolved issue of the prime minister's conflict of interest, do not inspire credibility on the part of our European partners. This unnecessarily weakens the Czech position. At the same time, the

Czech Republic is unable to take advantage of all possibilities and opportunities that open up to it in Brussels, and it often unnecessarily marginalizes itself instead of looking for meaningful coalitions with other like-minded Member States. The limited level of Czech ambition can be clearly seen regarding the upcoming Czech Presidency of the EU, which will take place in the second half of 2022 and around which a number of controversial statements have already been made. The same is true of issues of the common European security and cooperation on defence projects with the other Member States, where we are not making use of our potential either.

The Czech government has failed to take advantage of the momentum associated with the arrival of the new European Commission and move from previous positions to new compromises. This is paradoxical because the new European Commission under the leadership of Ursula von der Leyen holds many positions that line up with the interests of the Czech Republic. Firstly, the pressure on the functioning of the EU single market and common European rules, which is a constant of the Czech EU policy, especially in the digital sphere or external trade policy. Secondly, it is a geopolitical vision and a higher ambition to influence events on a global scale, in particular in our immediate neighbourhood. It is here that European and Czech interests intersect very closely, and the Czech government should take advantage of the new geopolitical thinking and hitch it to its own agenda.

There are several areas where Czech diplomacy has a lot to offer to Europe and the world, but it must start to think strategically and invest enough political, diplomatic and financial resources in its activities. Good examples of recent Czech solutions for Europe have been its influencing the future approach of the EU towards the Eastern Partnership and its placing the concept of resilience at the heart of EU policy towards Eastern Europe or the emphasis on solidarity with the EaP countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. That was strongly appreciated also by partners in the EU. In addition, the Czech contribution to a new enlargement methodology for the Western Balkans and increasing European ambitions in this sphere can also be considered a success. In both respects, the Czech Presidency of the V4 worked pragmatically and constructively, both in coordinating common positions and in defining Czech and Visegrad interests and priorities and consequently presenting them further to Europe.



Secure mooring of the Czech Republic in the EU and its active participation in the realization of its geopolitical ambitions are crucial for the country's position in the world.

Insisting on the status quo of the international environment would be foolish in the current situation. Instead, the EU – and the Czech Republic as its Member State – should try to instil its preferences in the new global order as much as possible. These clearly include maintaining the greatest possible degree of international cooperation and elements of multilateral diplomacy. For such efforts to be successful, they need to be backed by the individual Member States in addition to the European Commission. At the same time, it is clear that, despite the transformation of transatlantic relations, the US remains an indispensable partner for the EU. Regardless of the results of the forthcoming US presidential election, the EU and Czech foreign policy should continue looking for common themes and touch-points to build the relationship. The Czech Republic can make a significant contribution to the development of transatlantic relations, for example in the field of defence against cyber threats or risks associated with 5G networks. The Czech Republic should continue to engage in discussions on resilience as one of the guiding principles of the EU's external policy, and contribute to specific forms of its attainment in various areas.

The internal dynamics of the EU's functioning are logically related to its ambitions to play a more significant role vis-à-vis its external environment. The Union can only become a sufficiently strong player in international relations if it is internally coherent. Through its EU policy, the Czech Republic can actively contribute to the easing of divisions between the EU Member States, both through its activities in Central Europe and by seeking intersections with partners outside the traditional regional scope. Germany remains a key partner for the Czech Republic – the Czech Republic can broker to Germany the perspective of the Visegrad countries and their interest, for example, in the development of EU relations with the Western Balkans or the Eastern Partnership. After a phase of uncertainty, it now seems that – with the Czech contribution – the EU has managed to stabilize its position and formulate a credible prospect of future relations with the countries of the Western Balkans and partly also the Eastern Neighbourhood. At the same time, the Czech Republic should strive to actively influence its V4 partners towards more consensual positions. The forthcoming Czech presidency of the Council of the EU and preparation for it gives an opportunity for the development of relations and partnerships with other member states – including, for example, France, in whose case bilateral relations have not fulfilled their potential for a long time.

It is high time to replace the defensive approach to EU issues with an effort to constructively promote our national interests. This does not mean adapting to the Union mainstream under all circumstances and at all costs but it means having the ability to present the national positions in a clear and reasonable way, to negotiate the national priorities and

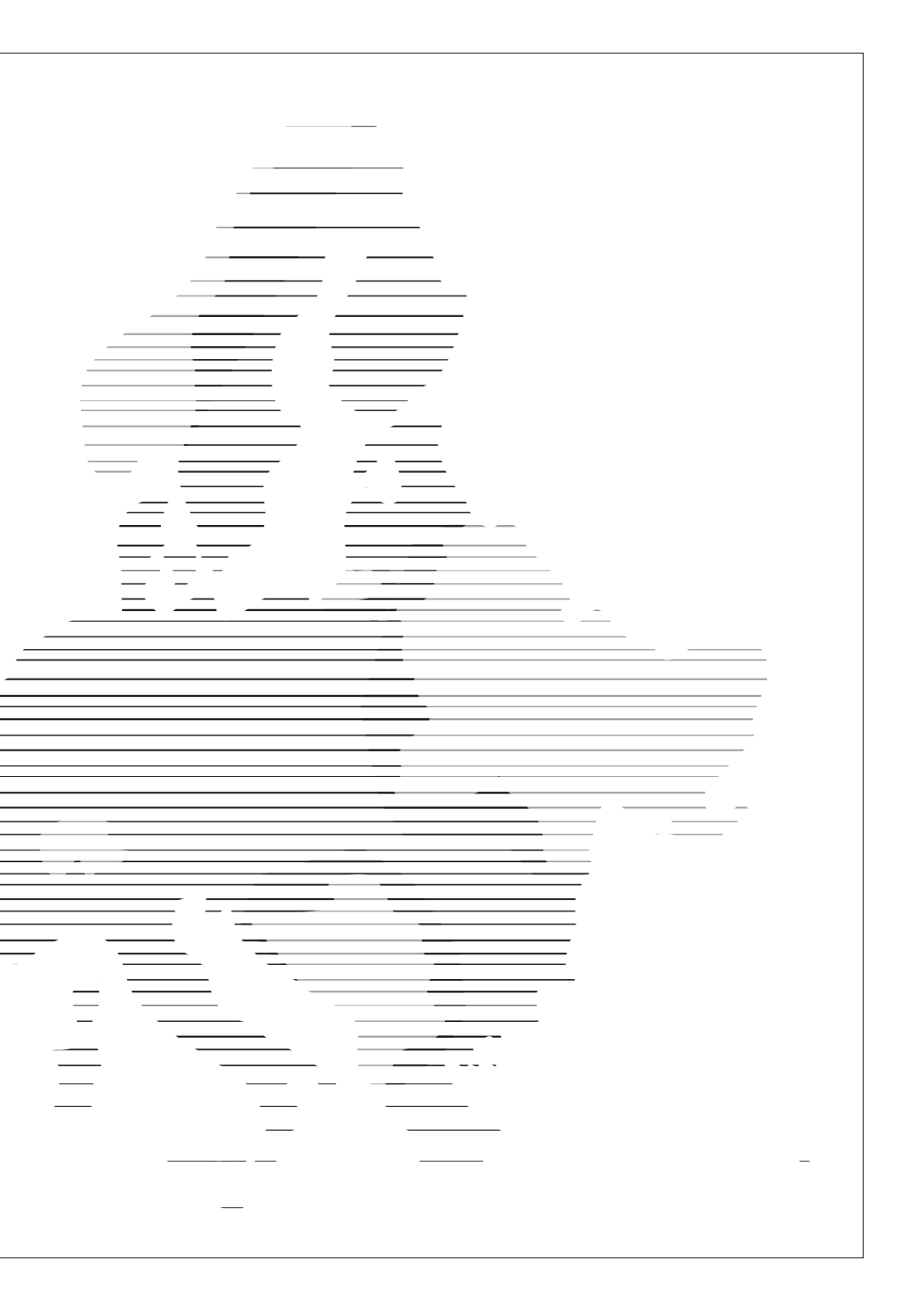
to seize opportunities. A good example of such an approach was the Czech engagement in negotiations on the new Mobility Package, where the Czech Republic was one of the facilitators of the compromise. While, for example, fulfilling the obligations under the European Green Deal will not be easy for the Czech Republic, it also brings a number of opportunities for investment in industrial restructuring. However, the same applies to topics that are traditionally a priority for the Czech Republic – the development of the internal market or digitization. It is these areas where the Czech Republic can create a clear and legible image for itself at the European level.

The coronavirus pandemic and its consequences should also become an opportunity for the Czech Republic to reflect more deeply on its position within the international environment and its preferences for future development. It is obvious that on a rapidly evolving global scene, it is not in the Czech Republic's interest to continue to be a passive observer. A necessary precondition for change for the better – which we emphasize on the pages of this publication every year – is a clear, consistent and long-term political vision for the role of the Czech Republic in the world. In 2020, we can no longer make do with general proclamations about the Czech Republic's affiliation with the geopolitical West, even disregarding the fact that this affiliation is not generally shared on the Czech political spectrum. It is necessary to define specific challenges, identify their solutions and the means to achieve them. We hope that the chapters of this publication can offer some inspiration.

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European Union





“In 2019, the Czech Republic received CZK 68.5 billion more from the EU budget than it sent to the EU. And for the entire period of membership, we are a total of CZK 809.2 billion up. EU membership is still paying off!”

ALENA SCHILLEROVÁ

—28 January 2020

“We secured the second largest “gift” of 42 billion crowns, and the Czech Republic is also the only one to negotiate that flexibility can be up to 25%.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—22 July 2020

“The Czech Republic will also place emphasis on maintaining the institutional balance in the EU, the cornerstones of which are the European Council which sets out the general political direction of the EU, and the impartial European Commission.”

ALEŠ CHMELÁŘ

—23 December 2019

In the autumn of 2019, the new institutional cycle of the EU, marked by the inauguration of the new European Parliament, the European Commission and the formulation of the new strategic agenda of the European Council, began in full swing. The selection and approval of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen followed after difficult discussions within the European Council and after complicated debates with the political groups in the European Parliament. The difficult agreement on the new Commission also significantly affected its priorities. The Commission wants to place particular emphasis on climate policy, as well as on social issues and the digital agenda. In these areas, the Commission's efforts to further deepen European integration are evident. A review of the migration policy is also on the table; at the same time, ambitions in this area are marked by the continuing inability to find consensus, which has persisted from the previous institutional cycle. Last but not least, the European Commission has adopted the label „geopolitical“ for itself, and wants the EU to play a greater role on the international stage.

After hesitation and objections, in December 2019 the Czech Republic subscribed to the European Commission's climate goals within the framework of the European Green Deal, including the ambition to achieve carbon neutrality at the EU level by 2050. At the same time, the government has not abandoned its focus on the costs that the European Green Deal will cause to Member States whose economies are largely based on energy-intensive industries. Consequently, the Czech Republic's support is conditional on a number of requirements, such as the inclusion of nuclear power among emission-free, clean resources, which are eligible for EU funding. Prime Minister Babiš also introduced a general mention of nuclear energy in the conclusions of the December European Council. The process of approval of the European Climate Law, which is to enshrine the above-mentioned political agreement, has been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic also prompted statements by Prime Minister Babiš and Minister of Industry and Trade Havlíček that the funds originally intended to finance the Green Deal should be allocated to measures to strengthen the pandemic-stricken economy. These proposals have shown a lack of understanding of the nature of the Green Deal as a doctrine that should permeate all EU policies and legislation in the future and which can - and should - be applied also to the mitigation of the consequences of coronavirus. Later, however, the Czech Republic supported the conclusions of the April European Council, which contained a note in a similar sense.

In February 2020, the European Commission presented a summary of the basic arguments, values and goals for the EU's transformation into a digital economy and society. These included mainly the White Paper on Artificial Intelligence and the European Strategy for Data. However, despite the initial promises made by the Commission President,

a full legislative proposal has not yet been presented. The focus of the new Commission on digital transformation is in line with the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy of the Czech Republic, which aims to cultivate an ecosystem for research and implementation of technologies using elements of artificial intelligence and foster cooperation between academia, public and private spheres. These efforts include a common goal to build a European centre of excellence for artificial intelligence in the Czech Republic.

Also in 2019, the Member States were unable to agree on the future shape of asylum and migration policy. Its reform will be addressed by the Commission in the new legislative cycle, and from the diction of the plans presented, it can be assumed that it will not push for the mandatory relocation quotas for asylum seekers. Member States are now resorting to ad hoc solutions, whether it is the voluntary redistribution of migrants rescued in the Mediterranean, on which Germany, France, Italy and Malta agreed in September 2019, or a more recent proposal for the voluntary redistribution of children and minors. The Czech Republic does not participate in these solidarity activities. Following the opening of the Turkish border and the breach of previous EU-Turkey agreements in early 2020, Member States agreed to assist Greece in its efforts to prevent migrants from entering the EU. In this context, the Czech Republic sent police officers to Greece and provided financial and humanitarian assistance.

At the beginning of April 2020, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that the Czech Republic (together with Poland and Hungary) had failed to fulfil obligations under the EU law regarding the refusal of compulsory reception of asylum seekers. The court did not accept the arguments of protection of internal security and overall flaws in the system. Given that the redistribution of refugees according to mandatory quotas is no longer happening, the Court's decision is rather symbolic.

After more than two years, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period 2021-2027 was approved at the European Council meeting in July 2020. According to the Commission's proposal, the MFF envisaged, in addition to the traditional emphasis on the common agricultural policy and cohesion, also support of new priorities such as environmental protection, innovation, security and migration. From the outset, the original proposal was rejected by the European Parliament as unambitious, and the Council struggled to find an acceptable compromise. Following the failure of the extraordinary European Council in February, negotiations on the MFF ceased with the coronavirus pandemic; the European Commission responded in May by presenting a new proposal accompanied by an unprecedented recovery plan - Next Generation EU. According to the agreement of the Member States, the crucial role of traditional policies is to be maintained

as opposed to the new priority areas originally proposed by the Commission. The Recovery Fund then brings an extensive program financed by loans guaranteed by contributions to the EU budget. Crucial in this context is the fact that it will be up to the Member States to decide on the definitive allocation of funds for each country.

In the negotiations, the Czech Republic strived to achieve in particular greater flexibility in the use of funds and a larger volume of the budget dedicated to cohesion policy. As part of these efforts, Prague also hosted a summit of the Friends of Cohesion group in November 2019. While it was one of the strong critics of the European Commission's proposal from May 2020, the Czech Republic succeeded in enforcing its main priorities in the final form of the MFF and the Recovery Fund - reassessing the criteria for allocating funds after a certain period of operation and additional funds for the cohesion policy.

Despite general criticism, including from the Czech Republic, EU institutions also responded to the coronavirus pandemic. However, they have been able to act only to a limited extent in the field of health, where the Commission has only minimal powers. Already in January, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control warned Member States against the global spread of the disease. Following the closure of the borders, the European Commission issued guidelines on so-called Green Lanes to ensure the continuous movement of goods throughout the EU and, after approval by the Member States, unprecedentedly reduced travel to the EU. It also focused on mitigating the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, mobilizing a total of around EUR 3.4 trillion. In particular, the Commission proposed, for example, a new instrument for mitigating the risks of unemployment (SURE), relaxed state aid rules, approved an initiative for more flexible use of Structural Funds and activated the so-called general escape clause under the Stability and Growth Pact.

After an initial defeat in a dispute over the illegal prorogation of parliament, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson managed to negotiate a new solution to the Northern Ireland border with the EU and overcame discord on the domestic political scene with a clear victory in the December elections. It was these steps that enabled the withdrawal agreement to be adopted. The United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020 with a transitional period until the end of 2020. The Czech Republic maintained a unified position with the rest of the 27 and had generous legislation in place for the event of a no-deal Brexit, which guarantees the rights of British citizens on its territory on a reciprocal basis. The government's approach to Brexit also had broad support from opposition political parties. The Office of the Government releases comprehensive information on Brexit, related measures and negotiations on a new agreement with Britain on a special website.



The coronavirus pandemic will have a major impact on the future working of the European Union. In addition to better readiness for another similar crisis, which may lead to further integration efforts in the area of health, the focus will be on economic recovery. It will be important for the EU to ensure that the economic recession does not put some countries with weaker economies in a debt trap. In this context, discussions between the northern and southern wings of the eurozone on further debt burden sharing will continue. The political mood in Italy, heavily affected by the coronavirus, where secession tendencies are on the rise, will be viewed with particular concern. The focus will also be on the German elections in autumn 2021 and the French presidential race in spring 2022. As a result, interest in Central and Eastern Europe may decline, as will its real weight in EU debates, given that the region's largest states will not participate in the eurozone debates.

While the European Commission declares that the recovery of the European economy is now a clear priority, it also plans to present delayed legislation to the original extent. The European Green Deal, as well as initiatives in the field of the digital economy, the EU's social pillar or the reform of the EU's asylum and migration policy, will continue.

In the coming months, it will be crucial for the EU to complete the negotiations on the MFF and the Recovery Fund, which should help restart the European economy. The German presidency must now also reach an agreement with the European Parliament on their form, which was agreed by the leaders of the states in July; the problem is that the European Parliament's idea differs significantly from the compromise negotiated in the European Council.

It will be a necessary, but at the same time difficult task for the Czech Republic to make its voice sufficiently heard in the upcoming EU debates. In this context, it is not possible to rely solely on partners within the Visegrad Group, as it will be more tactical in view of the political goals of some V4 representatives for them to be on the fringes of certain EU political debates. On the contrary, the Czech Republic should be open to debates about the state of democracy and other values in the EU, which may give it a comparative advantage over other members of the V4 in influencing the European agenda. In this context, it is also important to develop partnerships with Western European countries - either alone or through the V4+ format, Friends of Cohesion, or the Like-minded Group on the internal market. The Czech Republic should contribute to the success of the German Presidency of the Council of the EU. The Czech homework for the coming months will be to prepare a national plan, which will be a condition for drawing funds from the Recovery Fund and

which will be approved by the European Commission and the Council. Accelerated depletion of the current MFF remains an immediate priority. At the same time, the administration must pay attention to the preparation of the Partnership Agreement with the European Commission and the launch of new operational programs, so that the investment flow disruption caused by the late negotiation of the European long-term budget had the least effect as possible.

The Commission wants to present a large part of the legislative initiatives from the Green Deal package by the end of 2020. In addition to the European Climate Law one of the most anticipated initiatives is a plan for more ambitious emission reduction targets: from 40% to 50-55% by 2030 compared to the 1990 baseline. The Czech Republic announced that it did not support this plan. Due to the dependence of the Czech economy on industrial production, the Czech position vis-à-vis other climate proposals of the Commission is ambiguous, and rather problematic. Reducing emissions in energy-intensive sectors will be crucial, as will planned support for building renovation, biodiversity strategy, sustainable mobility strategy or the From Farm to Fork strategy. Therefore, in addition to emphasizing the negative effects of these planned changes on the industry, the Czech debate should also focus on opportunities for its overall restructuring. These include, for example, the possibility of financing, from the Just Transition Fund, the transformation of the coal regions most affected by the restructuring of the local industries.

In the digital field, the search for an EU standard for artificial intelligence can be expected to be embarked on, and the issue of data use will come up for discussion. At the end of 2020, the European Commission is expected to present the Digital Services Act, which should replace the two-decade-old e-commerce directive and focus on the openness of large online platforms. As a medium-sized export-oriented economy with a strong IT and e-commerce sector, the Czech Republic should continue to push for openness of the EU internal market. In addition to opportunities in the area of the digital single market, the Czech Republic should also be interested in the related debate on disinformation, foreign interference in democratic processes in the EU and stronger future regulation of social platforms, which will be addressed in the Democracy Action Plan.

The European Commission will present the New Pact on Migration, which seeks to revive efforts to reform the EU's asylum and migration policy. Although the system is unlikely to include mandatory relocation of asylum seekers, some sharing of responsibilities can be envisaged. It is in the interest of the Czech Republic that the debate on the reform of the EU asylum policy is completed. Some clinging to the rejection of any relocation mechanisms on the part of the Czech Republic can only be expected. At the

same time, however, the Czech Republic is interested in streamlining its return policy, strengthening the EU's external border, combating smuggling networks and deepening cooperation with countries of origin and transit in order to prevent migration. A strong national political consensus based almost exclusively on refugee rejection must also be extended to the need for the continuity, stability and integrity of the Schengen system, for which a successful reform of the Union's asylum and migration policy will be key.

Negotiations on a new trade agreement between the EU and the United Kingdom will culminate in autumn 2020. It is in the Czech Republic's main interest to maintain wide access to the island market for its exporters. Given the unpredictability of the result, it is essential to keep exporters well informed about the possible shape of the new relationship between the EU and Britain and to keep the information website of the Ministry of Industry and Trade going.

The Conference on the Future of Europe is planned to start in autumn 2020. The aim of the two-year process is to find a consensus on EU reform so that the Union is better able to respond to current challenges and the demands of its citizens. It should focus on both selected policies and institutional distribution and powers. While we should not have exaggerated expectations from the given format, it will be good to use it to involve Czech citizens in the debate on the EU. This intention can be suitably coupled with an information campaign about the Czech Presidency in 2022 and emphasizing Czech interests in the Union. With regard to the priority of the integration of the countries of the Western Balkans into the EU, the Czech Republic should champion that candidate countries were also invited to some form of participation in the Conference, similarly to the Convention on the Future of the European Union or the earlier discussions on the future of the European integration project.

Context

Presentation of the European Commission's priorities in the autumn of 2019, which focus mainly on climate, social and digital policy, and the interest to deepen European integration, especially in these areas

Czech support for climate policy ambitions after much hesitation and with a continuing emphasis on the costs that such a decision can bring

The “geopolitical” Commission's efforts to strengthen the EU's role in the world despite the United Kingdom's departure from the EU

Heavy losses for the European economy due to the coronavirus pandemic and the creation of an unprecedented recovery fund

Present

Instilling economic recovery efforts into all EU activities while maintaining the Commission's fundamental objectives, such as climate change, social and digital policies

Completion of negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery Fund; searching for a compromise with the European Parliament

Finding a new framework for EU-UK relations

Recommendations

The key interests of the Czech Republic include the adoption of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery Fund, EU cohesion and the preservation of current internal market rules.

It is necessary to take into account the Commission's priorities and seek, for example, in the context of climate policy or migration, to promote Czech national interests through long-term and general objectives, not in opposition to them.

The Czech Republic should not resign on the debate on the future of the European Union. Despite the probably hyperbolic ambitions on the part of the European Commission and the European Parliament in view of the current sentiment in the EU, this opportunity can be used to communicate European affairs or to emphasize Czech national policy priorities in the EU.

Vít Dostál
Pavčina Janebová



Central Europe



“Firstly, we have abolished quotas on migrants, secondly, the V4 countries defeated the *spitzenkandidaten*. Visegrad has a major influence, we all have the same voice in the European Council. V4 speaks with one voice and cohesion concerns mainly our region.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—5 November 2019

“It will take some time before we can close the ditches we have dug in recent years.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—20 January 2020 (on the Visegrad Group)

“The [Free Cities] Pact also has a symbolic level. It sends the message that we share the same values and that there are voices in our countries that do not identify with populist and nationalist politics. Together we want to give these voices strength!”

ZDENĚK HŘIB

—16 December 2019

“Seeing where Poland and Hungary are now heading, I am not a big fan of Visegrad cooperation. I would rather see us in closer cooperation with countries such as Slovakia, Austria and Germany.”

MARKÉTA PEKAROVÁ ADAMOVÁ

—24 November 2019

In the second half of 2019, the Czech Republic took over the presidency of the Visegrad Group. From the beginning, the Czech approach to the presidency was rather restrained in an effort to follow up on the pragmatically oriented Slovak presidency, which was in contrast to the previous very proactive Hungarian presidency. Under the motto “V₄ Reasonable Europe”, the Czech Republic has set as its main goal the contribution of the Visegrad Group to EU cohesion and its cooperation with EU countries, with special emphasis on Germany and Austria as key partners of the Czech Republic in the Central European region.

During the presidency, the Czech Republic notched up considerable success at the working level. A meeting took place between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V₄ countries and the Benelux, during which, despite differing views on the rule of law, a discussion was held on current issues of European integration and shared priorities. The summit of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad and Western Balkan countries, with the participation of Croatia, Slovenia and Austria, and the Commissioner for Enlargement, can be described as successful. The efforts of the Czech Presidency in this area are to be commended, especially in view of the tense discussion at the EU level on the perspective of the membership of the Western Balkan states in the EU. The planned meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad and Eastern Partnership countries, Croatia, Germany and Sweden, together with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the European Commissioner for Enlargement, was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic and took place only in a limited Visegrad minister format. Nevertheless, the establishment of the V₄EastSolidarity program under the International Visegrad Fund to help the Eastern Partnership countries fight the consequences of the pandemic and the adoption of a common position on the future of the Eastern Partnership after 2020 have been approved. The meeting between the foreign ministers of the V₄ countries and Germany confirmed the shared priorities in relation to both the Western Balkans and the EU's eastern neighbourhood.

While the tasks of the Visegrad Presidency can be considered fulfilled in terms of diplomatic work, there is a parallel debate in the Czech Republic about the meaning and value of Czech involvement in the V₄. The deepening crisis of the rule of law in Poland and Hungary is the driving force behind this controversy. The nature of the Polish judicial reform has been challenged by both the European Commission and the Court of Justice of the European Union, and efforts for a dialogue between the European institutions and the Polish authorities have failed. In Hungary, the situation escalated,

in particular with the declaration of a state of emergency, which enabled Viktor Orbán's government to further solidify its power. The Czech debate on the Visegrad Group takes place on a professional, media and political level. Opponents of the Czech involvement in the V₄ operate mainly with the argument that the Czech Republic is losing its reputation through alliances with Poland and Hungary and is being overpowered by Polish and Hungarian influences.

In this context, it is unfortunate that the successful initiatives of the Czech Visegrad Presidency, especially regarding cooperation with the countries of Western Europe, the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans, did not penetrate into the ongoing Czech discussion on V₄ and thus did not give it substance. Its subject, therefore, remained the Visegrad cooperation as it is conceived by Prime Minister Babiš. As a result, the smooth running of the presidency confirmed the status quo for that part of the political representation and the public that perceives the V₄ as an instrumental group suitable for promoting a common position against the European institutions or Western European countries. Given the results achieved, the Czech Presidency could have proffered a different narrative to the ongoing debate and public diplomacy, namely the V₄ as a pragmatic tool for promoting EU-wide priorities.

The mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, who concluded the Free Cities Pact, at least tried to view the V₄ from a different angle. The Pact aimed, among other things, to define itself against the negative image of the Visegrad Group created by the governments of its countries. Despite the relatively strong media response, the initiative is yet to receive a more of content substance.

Austerlitz cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria, after five years of its existence, has not seen any significant dynamics or visibility. However, it is a format that can be used and is being used to discuss selected policy topics, such as issues of international law, transport or development cooperation in third countries. As a platform for the discussion of selected EU issues, Austerlitz suitably complements Czech Central European policy and, among other things, provides an opportunity to develop relations with Slovenia and Croatia; this vector has strengthened in recent years. In addition to the working level, the parliamentary dimension of the cooperation can also be rated positively: for example, there was a discussion on the rapprochement of the Western Balkan states towards the EU.

The Czech Republic is similarly pragmatic in its approach to the Three Seas Initiative. The Czech Republic has not yet released the pledged funds to the emerging Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund and also rejects further institutionalization of the for-

mat through the creation of a joint secretariat. This view is shared by other countries. However, the only identified Czech priority project remains the Danube-Oder-Elbe canal, which considerably degrades the meaningfulness of the Czech involvement in the entire project.

The Czech-German strategic dialogue continues to prove to be a platform for dialogue between the Czech Republic and Germany on current issues and the identification of mutual positions. Although these positions are certainly not the same in all cases (as in climate policy, for example), an open debate on these issues contributes to maintaining a stable relationship. The Czech Republic is taking on the role of a neighbour who brings Germany closer to the Central European perspective on a number of topics and involves it in priority policy issues – as was the case, for example, with the Eastern Partnership and Russia during the Czech presidency of the V4. Such a role is suitable not only with regard to the Czech Republic's relations with Germany, but also for introducing the viewpoints mediated by it into the discussions within the Visegrad Group and, consequently, for the formulation of a coherent Czech Central European policy.

Relations with Poland were complicated by the decision to continue mining at the Turów opencast lignite mine, which was made regardless of the negative attitudes expressed in the Czech Republic. Unfortunately, this dispute was the only event of note in the bilateral relations of these two countries. Neighbour relations with Austria and Slovakia were peaceful, which, however, also meant the absence of new impulses and initiatives. Relations with all neighbours have since focused on coordinating and releasing restrictive measures at borders since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.



Central and Eastern Europe will be directly affected by the fact that the Union's economic recovery efforts will be directed mainly at the hard-hit and previously deeply indebted countries of the South. Likewise, political attention to political developments will be focused on the largest EU countries. First and foremost, on Germany – in view of the forthcoming Bundestag elections, fears of the strengthening AfD and uncertainty about Angela Merkel's succession. Secondly, on Italy due to the country's instability and growing eccentric tendencies to break away from the EU among the public. Last but not least, on France, where President Macron's current mandate will end. Calls for common values and for solidarity between Member States are also becoming increasingly vocal in the EU. Central Europe, as the current recipient of solidarity, should now provide

solidarity. It has already missed several opportunities for such action in the context of the so-called refugee crisis; all the more so it should do its part in the economic crisis.

The Visegrad Group's priority will be the rapid approval of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery Fund. The agreement reached at the July European Council met the requirements of all V₄ countries. At the same time, it revealed the limits of Visegrad cooperation in this area, as the overlap of negotiating positions was relatively shallow. However, Central Europe can be satisfied with the result for three reasons: firstly, there has been no different treatment for countries inside and outside the eurozone when it comes to recovery instruments; secondly, the allocation for cohesion policy has not been reduced; and thirdly, the allocation method will be revised according to the actual GDP decline. The V₄ should enter other EU debates – on the reform of asylum and migration policy or on the European Green Deal – with a consistent, credible and rational position that will be able to find allies outside our region. However, as the current negotiations and signals from other V₄ countries suggest, the Czech Republic cannot bet on a deep Visegrad consensus on these issues; relying on it might bring disappointment in the next stages of the negotiations.

In the coming period, Germany can be expected to face a number of challenges at both European (EU Council Presidency and search for an agreement on the Recovery Fund and Multiannual Financial Framework with the European Parliament, the new EU-UK relationship) and domestic level (forthcoming elections and search for Angela Merkel's successor as Federal Chancellor). In this situation, it will be important for the Czech Republic to continue the dialogue with Germany, to present comprehensible and rational positions and to cooperate with it on those topics where possible. Intensive relations with neighbouring federal states are also a way to further strengthen Czech-German relations.

Relations with Germany can also be further bolstered through the V₄. It is necessary to work with the Polish Presidency to continue to develop the V₄ + Germany format in certain sub-areas, such as the integration of the Western Balkans into the EU or the eastern dimension of EU policy. The results of this dialogue should then be reflected in joint initiatives at EU level. The active and positive Central European action discussed in advance with Germany will undoubtedly be welcomed, especially during Germany's presidency of the EU Council, when Berlin's capacity will be engaged with other major issues.

The Czech controversy over the value of participation in the V₄ will continue. Given that a change in political direction in Poland and Hungary cannot be expected, staunch

supporters and opponents of the Czech participation in the V₄ will gain further arguments. In this respect, it is important to point out the pragmatic contribution of the V₄ at the working level and to remind that the common positions of the V₄ are created only with the consent of the Czech Republic. Leaving the V₄ would, on the one hand, rid the Czech Republic of this battered brand, but on the other it would not change anything in the positions it holds, which are the subject of criticism from V₄ opponents. A more viable strategy for the Czech representation would be to actively correct the direction of the V₄, i. a. through the involvement of Germany. At the same time, we cannot stop reminding that the threat to the rule of law in any country in the region is unacceptable and casts a negative image on the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover, it jeopardizes the hitherto broad Czech political consensus on the meaningfulness of the V₄, because it was the disintegration of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland that labelled Visegrad in the Czech discourse as a „problem“, not as a „solution“.

It is also necessary to look with reasonable expectations at the Austerlitz format and the Three Seas Initiative, which complement Czech Central European policy. The Three Seas Initiative would also deserve a more serious treatment from the Czech side, given the nonsuperficial U.S. interest it brings to the region, for example by presenting real infrastructure projects instead the plan for the Danube-Oder-Elbe canal. The relatively promising development of the Austerlitz cooperation, including in connection with the solution of some aspects of the crisis around COVID-19, shows that support for its further consolidation may pay off in the future. To this end, the Czech Republic should try to involve the newly formed Slovak government in it.

Context

Further decline of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland

German Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2020, accompanied by high expectations

Relative success of Central Europe in the negotiations on the MFF and the Recovery Fund, despite differing priorities and limited coordination within the V₄

Present

Good results of the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group at the working level and the ongoing debate on the value of the Czech Republic's involvement in the V₄ at the political level

Successful effort of the Czech Republic to involve Germany in the discussion on political issues which the V₄ countries see as priorities

Stabilization of cooperation within the Austerlitz format

Recommendations

The Czech Republic needs to actively control the common positions within the Visegrad Group and engage in a critical dialogue with Polish and Hungarian officials on the rule of law in Central Europe.

The Czech Republic should support EU cohesion in both economic and political issues.

The Czech Republic should further pursue the involvement of Germany in political issues which the V₄ countries see as priority.

*Michal Lebduška, Roksolana Dryndak,
Pavel Havlíček, Anna Jordanová,
Tereza Soušková*

Eastern Europe





“On this day: Russia has been illegally occupying Crimea for six years. Furthermore, the separatists recently violated again the peace and the Minsk Agreement near the village of Zolote. We do not recognize the annexation of Crimea, not only because we also have a bad experience of occupation.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—20 February 2020

“Foreign ministers of some countries, including Petříček, issued a statement to mark the 75th anniversary of the end of World War II. The anti-Hitler coalition of the USSR, the USA and Great Britain won the war – not armies of the pro-Hitler European countries that are preaching to us today.”

VOJTĚCH FILIP

—11 May 2020

“It’s a restart. A new beginning for our relations with Ukraine. I met president Zelensky for the third time and we continued in a friendly atmosphere. I invited him to Prague, told him that I had high expectations of the Normandy meeting and I believe that this would bring a peaceful solution for eastern Ukraine.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—19 November 2019

“Under the pretext of the removal of Konev’s statue, the Russian Federation brazenly interferes in the affairs of the Czech Republic and indiscriminately attacks politicians. Some are even under police protection. The government should not put up with this! We should, for example, send home some of the legions of Russian embassy staff in Prague. We are not vassals of Russia!”

PAVEL FISCHER

—27 April 2020

In the region of Eastern Europe, negotiations in the Normandy Format to find a settlement in eastern Ukraine have revived in the past year and there was pressure for closer Russian-Belarusian integration. In Ukraine, a new political representation led by President Volodymyr Zelensky gradually established itself, while in Russia, a path to power until 2036 opened up for Vladimir Putin, while in Belarus, people took to streets en masse in protest of rigged presidential elections „won“ – again – by Alexander Lukashenko. In the first half of 2020, Eastern Europe was hit hard by the global COVID-19 pandemic. In this situation, the Eastern Partnership policy is undergoing a major overhaul at the EU level, which should produce a new roadmap for this initiative. In terms of relations between the Czech Republic and the countries of Eastern Europe, the most important changes in the past period include significant deterioration in Czech-Russian relations and the start of closer cooperation with Ukraine, especially in trade cooperation. Czech foreign policy remains active in the region of Eastern Europe and builds on the long-term positive trends. There has been no major shift in relations with the countries of the South Caucasus. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant outflow of Ukrainian workers from the Czech Republic and both countries suffered economic consequences. In addition, the pandemic also affected the implementation of projects from the programs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, including the transformation assistance program, which is visible and highly recognised in Eastern Europe.

From a long-term perspective, the situation in Eastern Europe continues to be affected by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, in which there has been no breakthrough despite partial positive changes. It is still true that there is a lack of will to end the war, especially on the Russian side. In this respect, the Czech Republic has largely limited itself to mostly verbal support for Ukraine, but at the same time continued to pursue a consistent approach to resolving the conflict. There were no significant negative incidents, such as questioning the anti-Russian sanctions, at the official level.

At the EU level, the Eastern Partnership policy has recently undergone dynamic development, following a strategic reflection on the tenth anniversary of the initiative and the related public consultation on its future after 2020. The Czech Republic, as well as partner countries and representatives of civil society and other stakeholders, took part in the Eastern Partnership review, and their initiatives influenced the future of this policy and contributed to finding consensus on some controversial issues. The first results of this strategic reflection were presented by the European Commission in March 2020. While some of the Czech Republic's priorities have been met, the Czech side was not fully satisfied with the results. The main problem turned out to be the lack of political narrative

and vision of future development, as well as the unconvincing approach to the fundamental values of mutual cooperation. Disputes arose among the Member States mainly over the reference to the European aspirations of the Eastern partners, in which, in the end, the more optimistic approach advocated also by the Czech Republic prevailed. The European Parliament came up with some concrete proposals to strengthen relations with the associated countries and proposed their involvement in the working bodies of the Council and the Commission. The Czech V₄ Presidency also played an active role in the Eastern Partnership: it presented a common Visegrad vision for the future of the EaP and established a special V₄EastSolidarity program under the International Visegrad Fund to support Eastern European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the bilateral level, relations with Russia were the subject of a heated public debate characterized by relatively strong action on the part of national institutions, but a weak political will. Czech counterintelligence again alerted to the activities of the Russian secret services in our territory, including direct cyber attacks on Czech institutions. However, these warnings have long been challenged by some high-ranking politicians led by President Zeman. While the President's actions have been diminished in recent months, people with close ties to Russia, who are a potential security risk, still operate in his immediate circles.

Russia has long sought to deepen the polarization of Czech society and political representation with a wide range of tools, for which it also uses sympathetic Czech politicians and activists. On the one hand, Czech politicians, for example, Foreign Minister Petříček or MPs with an interest in human rights and security affairs, volubly denounced the Russian aggressive policies. But, on the other, the Prime Minister speaks only sporadically on these issues, while the President and representatives of some parliamentary parties openly support Russia and are apologetic of its actions. Therefore, the Czech reaction to Russia's current actions in the Czech Republic was relatively low-key. The decision to expel two employees of the Russian embassy in connection with the so-called ricin case was significant in terms of politics and publicity as a one-off event. However, it did not change anything in the overall approach to Russia.

On the contrary, there has been a significant revival of bilateral relations with Ukraine. The most significant event was Prime Minister Babiš's trip to Kyiv in November 2019, where the Czech Prime Minister met with both the then Prime Minister Honcharuk and President Zelensky. The mission, which included a sizeable trade delegation, has been met with a positive response in Ukraine. Its significance also lays in the fact that this was the first visit at such a high level after more than six years.

The visit to Kyiv was also attended by the Minister of Industry and Trade Karel Havlíček, which illustrates well the more active approach to Ukraine in terms of trade opportunities. The trend from previous years is gaining strength and the Czech economic diplomacy has reoriented from Russia on the Ukrainian market, which holds a long-term promise for the future and may turn out to be more viable as a result of other planned reforms.

In addition, the revival of mutual relations was reflected in the organization of the historically first Czech-Ukrainian discussion forum in the presence of both foreign ministers. This is a forum that has the potential to expand the cooperation in the future to other dimensions of mutual dialogue and to be a platform for discussion of repeatedly mistreated historical topics, from which research institutions in both countries can benefit. One of the most promising and at the same time the most media-visible initiatives was Project Ukraine, which aims to bring medical staff and workers from Ukraine to the Czech Republic.

As a result of massive demonstrations in Belarus, which have been shaking up the local regime and calling for democratic reforms since 9 August, space is opening up for Czech engagement. The EU will impose sanctions on those involved in rigging the results of the Belarusian presidential elections and suppressing protests, and it plans to work more closely with ordinary Belarusians. Prime Minister Babiš expressed his support for the protesting Belarusian citizens and called for a re-election.

In the South Caucasus, Czech diplomacy is praised for its good insight into the internal affairs of countries and the sharing of experiences with transformation after 1989, often through non-profit organizations with the support from the MFA TRANS program. Czech-Azerbaijan relations were tainted by a case of the sale of Czech weapons to Azerbaijan, despite the embargo on their export to countries participating in the war. In addition, the unofficial observer mission of Czech legislators Jaroslav Holík (SPD) and Květa Matušovská (KSČM) during the Azerbaijani parliamentary elections, on which they embarked privately, on an invitation of the Azerbaijani government, was also problematic. In Moldova, which is one of the priority countries for Czech development cooperation, the highly-rated long-term technical projects continue. However, Czech diplomacy has been unable to translate the results of this activity into more significant political benefits. Moldova is largely isolated in its European policy and has been significantly strengthening its pro-Russian orientation ahead of the forthcoming presidential elections.



The videoconference of EU and Eastern Partnership leaders, which summarized the process of revising the EU's eastern policy and praised the European efforts to mitigate the pandemic, helped keep Eastern policy high on the European agenda, despite the postponement of the summit until March 2021. It is important that the new long-term priorities, a new set of deliverables for the post-2020 period, and their implementation suitably allow for further development of mutual relations with the EaP countries. The Czech Republic's future effort should therefore be to negotiate appropriate financial conditions for the Eastern Partnership within the new EU multiannual financial framework as well as to continue to place a strong accent on the cornerstone values of the partnership and the deepening of the Euro-Atlantic orientation of on the part of interested partners. The challenge for Czech diplomacy will be not only to motivate partner countries to implement complex reforms and to tackle the security issues, but also to give this format a sufficiently ambitious content. This is especially true if the next Eastern Partnership summit takes place in Prague during the Czech Presidency of the EU in the second half of 2022. The Czech government should take advantage of this opportunity, make it a foreign policy success, and leave another Czech footprint with new elements on this long-term priority. However, this requires a certain amount of creativity, but also political capital and diplomatic capacity for long-term work and the negotiation of realistic proposals for further development. Therefore, the Czech government should start on this matter without undue delay.

In relation to Ukraine, the Czech government's priorities should include further strengthening of economic cooperation and supporting the continuation of internal reforms. A positive signal would be if the previously cancelled trip of Minister Havlíček to Ukraine or the conference on Ukrainian reforms in Prague next year took place. Regarding the ongoing war in Donbas, the Czech Republic should above all support the common European position and strongly speak out against any voices calling for the lifting of sanctions. Czech troops would benefit from exchanging experiences with their Ukrainian counterparts who have gone through fierce fighting in recent years. In addition, the Czech Republic could also be instrumental in supporting the reintegration of Ukrainian soldiers back into society or the training of army psychologists.

The current situation of quarantine measures has also affected a wide range of jobs in which Ukrainian workers have a significant share. Although their gradual return can be expected in the future, there is now an opportunity to significantly revise and simplify the process of recruiting workers, issuing visas and work permits, as well as ensuring the protection of worker rights. It is desirable to make the whole process more transparent on

the Ukrainian side and to limit the role of agents and intermediaries – this aspect could be added to the Project Ukraine. A welcome initiative would be to expand the MEDEVAC program, both in the field of training and the number of traineeships for civilian and military personnel, which can be extended to another range of medical disciplines. In the long run, however, the Czech Republic should facilitate the return of skilled Ukrainian workers back to Ukraine, which would help the local economy and its sustainability. At the same time, the Czech Republic should strive to deepen cooperation in the cultural field and promote the good name and reputation of the country in the region of Eastern Europe and of Ukraine in the EU. The upcoming Czech-Ukrainian forum in Kyiv next year is a good opportunity for that and further cultivation of mutual relations.

The Czech Republic should respond much more vigorously to the growing pressure from Russia. In this context, closer cooperation and exchange of information with our allies in the EU and NATO, as well as Ukraine, which has had extensive experience in fighting Russian disinformation and hybrid threats in recent years, would be beneficial. Directly in the Czech Republic, security aspects should be given more consideration when awarding sensitive public contracts, particularly the planned completion of the Dukovany nuclear power plant, responding to the high number of high-risk employees of the Russian embassy or paying more attention to pro-Kremlin fake news media, in which we could take a lesson from the Baltic states.

However, the Czech Republic lacks a clear concept and strategy of relations with Russia, which would reflect Russia's domestic political development, lend support to the mutual relations and at the same time be shared by Czech political actors. Such a strategy should be further developed through bilateral or multilateral initiatives and should replace the current sectoral and institutional fragmentation in relations with Russia. It is not yet clear what effect Rudolf Jindrák's recent appointment as Commissioner for Consultations with Russia will have on mutual relations.

In the South Caucasus, it will be of crucial importance for Czech diplomacy to continue with well-established projects. The Czech Republic should take advantage of the good reputation it has developed in the Caucasus, partly thanks to the support of the non-profit sector, which aims to develop the local civil society, share Czech transformation know-how and support independent media. In the future, government authorities should distance themselves more strongly from the activities of public officials whose private journeys, for example to observe illegal elections, may harm Czech foreign policy.

The strengthening of human rights activities and supporting civil society is also desirable in Russia and Belarus. In this regard, the Czech Republic could also be more active

vis-a-vis the Russian and Belarusian society and, for example, more widely support independent Russian-speaking media and non-profit organizations. This approach can be applied at various international levels, for example in the Council of Europe, which includes representatives from all levels of government – local to national. In this respect, the Czech Republic should strive for joint initiatives with other EU countries.

Belarus also offers considerable potential for the intensification of cultural diplomacy and people-to-people contacts following the recent visa facilitation for EU citizens travelling to Belarus and Belarusians travelling to the EU. In this context, it would be viable in the future to move to establish a Czech Centre in Minsk. In addition, Czech diplomacy should closely monitor Russia's campaign for further integration of the two states and, if necessary, support Belarus at the international level. In any case, however, any backtracking on the promotion of the human rights agenda, which is crucial, especially with regard to the protests against rigged presidential elections and the ensuing repressive actions. Czech diplomacy should competently replicate its know-how garnered in the course of supporting civil society in Russia and Ukraine, and move away from collaboration with the government to helping ordinary Belarusians. Such assistance should include humanitarian and legal aid; relocation where necessary; academic cooperation and scholarships; and support for other persecuted Belarusian citizens.

Context

Persistent fragmentation of Czech society in relation to Russia, which copies differences of opinion across the transatlantic community

Return to Russian-Ukrainian negotiations in the Normandy Format and exchange of prisoners

Active Czech presidency of the V4 in the issues of the Eastern Partnership and shaping its future

Russia's pressure for closer integration with Belarus and protests against rigged elections in Belarus

Present

Unprecedented escalation of conflicts in Czech-Russian relations

Economic downturn in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic and the outflow of labour from the Czech Republic

Revival of Czech-Ukrainian relations in connection with the new government initiatives and the organization of the first Czech-Ukrainian discussion forum

Discussion on the further direction and long-term goals of the Eastern Partnership at the European level

Recommendations

The Czech Republic needs to object more strongly against Russia's aggressive policy and start thinking strategically about mutual relations and look for more efficient and effective use of existing tools (e.g. the Strat-Com centre).

The Czech Republic should significantly support and put into practice specific projects under the V4EastSolidarity program, which aims to mitigate the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The disruption of worker migration flows in connection with the pandemic represents an opportunity to review the process of recruiting foreign workers, issuing visas and work permits and make it more transparent.

There is a demand for more support to civil society in the region and the continuation of technical assistance projects, with an added emphasis on political and democratization reforms, including education and the fight against disinformation, especially in connection with the events in Belarus.

*Michal Bokša, Vojtěch Bahenský,
Alžběta Bajerová, Petr Boháček,
Jakub Kufčák*



Transatlantic Relations and Foreign Security



“The army has suffered a lot in recent years. Years of neglect and budget cuts left only a torso of the army, a skeleton that we must now foster to strength again.”

ALEŠ OPATA

—25 February 2020

“As for the 2014 Wales commitment, which is two percent of GDP by 2024, it will be the responsibility of the next government.”

LUBOMÍR METNAR

—14 March 2020

“What about Europe? You did not mention it in your speech at the UN. We also need the great new trade agreement that you promise to conclude between the U.S. and Britain.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—25 September 2019

In the area of international security, the urgency of non-military threats such as climate change or global pandemic is growing. With increasing vigor, they impact conventional security domains. Key but long-term problematic areas, such as the deepening of security cooperation between the states of the European Union, the rearmament of the Czech Army, or cooperation between the North Atlantic Alliance and the EU, are therefore under greater pressure than before. Simultaneously with this trend, the security of the Czech Republic and its allies is negatively affected by the poor predictability of transatlantic relations, the growing number of cyber attacks and political discord within the EU and NATO.

For the North Atlantic Alliance, which provides the Czech Republic with the main military and security guarantees, the past year has been a period of continued turbulence. While there have been no new fundamental undermining statements aimed at NATO from the United States, comparable to President Donald Trump's questioning rhetoric about the United States leaving NATO at the beginning of his term, disputes within the Alliance have not ceased. Despite sharp criticism from alliance partners, Turkey has decided to purchase the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system and intervene against the Kurds in Syria. France, in turn, questioned the Alliance's credibility by stating that NATO was in a stage of „brain death“ and expressed doubts about the reliability of Article 5 on collective security. The internal discord has been exacerbated by the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the resulting fear of a potential escalation of tensions between the United States and Russia. On the other hand, both the united position taken by NATO on the INF issue and the political support given to the Alliance by the U.S. and other member states in response to the aforementioned statement by the French president were positive. The London Summit in December 2019 eventually resulted in the creation of a commission of experts to discuss the future direction of the Alliance. The question remains whether this is the beginning of an intra-Alliance debate on NATO's decade-old and currently obsolete strategic concept, or a mere political postponement of the problem. The final communiqué also mentioned China for the first time, and the space was recognized as the fifth operational domain.

While disputes over the Alliance's defence spending have shifted to the backstage in the past year, they still remain relevant. At the political level, the Czech Republic continued to express support to NATO, although the fulfilment of our commitments in terms of defence spending and the state of the army did not always correspond to this. The target of spending at least two percent of GDP annually on defence each year from

2024 remains unattended for the time being. At least at the military level, preparations for the establishment of an airborne rapid response regiment in Chrudim continued successfully. It will not be fully operational before 2025, but next year it should be deployable at the level of initial combat capabilities. Uncertainty continues to prevail with regard to the historically most expensive acquisition of the Czech Army – the infantry fighting vehicle for rearmament of the 7th Mechanized Brigade. The brigade itself is what the Czech Republic committed to NATO in terms of collective defence and this promise therefore forms the cornerstone of Czech allied commitments. The issue of rearmament of artillery to 155mm Alliance-standard guns also remains unresolved for the time being. Despite partial progress, the fulfilment of Czech allied commitments is still in jeopardy. On the other hand, the country manages to maintain a military presence in foreign missions. The Czech Republic is newly strengthening its role in the Sahel, where the Czech Army will now be in command of the EU training mission in Mali for half a year. However, the Czech engagement and ambitions to secure NATO's eastern flank still do not match the importance of this area for the Czech Republic's security.

There has been little improvement in transatlantic relations. Nevertheless, the deepening Czech-American cooperation in the fight against cyber threats and the continuing cooperation of the secret services are proving to be successful. Although many of the problems that have long weighed on transatlantic relations have ceased to be the subject of media interest, they have not been resolved. Tensions remain in both foreign policy and trade issues. While the former is a difference in values between the EU and the Trump administration, the latter is a pragmatic conflict of interest, where the EU seeks to reduce tariffs, especially on industrial goods, while the U.S. has long been striving to gain broad access to the EU agricultural market. However, this is a sensitive issue for the EU and many Member States. The situation remains uncertain even in key industries for the Czech Republic, such as the automotive industry, where the current U.S. administration has long considered the imposition of import duties, or in the area of taxation of American technology corporations. Tensions were further exacerbated by the October 2019 WTO ruling, which allows the U.S. to impose retaliatory tariffs on the EU because of subsidies granted to Airbus. While the Czech Republic appears on the list of these duties for agricultural and food items, the main agricultural products intended for export to the USA have not been significantly affected. The Czech Republic must continue to work closely with its European partners in this area.

European defence and security cooperation did not change significantly in 2019 and remains a politically weak project. For the time being, the ambitions of the new Pres-

ident of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to increase the geopolitical importance of the EU also remain unfulfilled. However, the inability to meet the EU's geopolitical ambitions has already proved to be a long-term trend. This was well illustrated last year, for example, by the EU's efforts to create INSTEX trade mechanism to save the nuclear program agreement with Iran, but it has generated only one transaction in a period of more than a year. Moreover, the Czech Republic, which has repeatedly expressed support for the agreement with Iran, has not itself acceded to this mechanism. At the same time, the Czech Republic, together with several other Member States, also spoke out against the EU majority on the issue of the U.S. rejecting the Middle East peace plan or cancelling the financial contribution to the WHO during coronavirus. Although the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) format brought further innovative projects in 2019, its contribution to the strengthening of the EU's strategic importance remains uncertain. As part of the third wave of these projects, the Czech Republic has been involved in only one project in the field of cyber cooperation. At the same time, the project focused on chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear defence, the area where the Czech Republic has a long-standing and proven expertise, has remained without Czech participation. For a change, the appointment of General František Ridzák to the position of Commander of the EU Mission in Mali can be seen as a success. In addition, the Czech diplomat Jiří Šedivý became Chief Executive of the European Defence Agency.

In the field of cybersecurity, the developments in the discussions on the security of 5th generation (5G) networks can be positively assessed. The Czech Republic has taken the lead in the deepening transatlantic dialogue, and in May 2020 signed a declaration with the United States on closer cooperation in the field of 5G. The Czech Republic also initiated a discussion on this topic at the European level. Together with France, it has developed a set of measures to mitigate the security risks associated with 5G, which was approved by the European Commission in January. However, in parallel with these successes, the Czech Republic has been the target of serious cyber attacks. In addition to attacks on hospitals in Benešov and Brno, the mining company OKD and the Vltava River Basin Authority, the Permanent Delegation of the Czech Republic to NATO has become the target of cyber espionage. The systems of medical facilities faced another wave of attacks in April 2020, which was largely averted thanks to an early warning from the National Cyber and Information Security Agency. Healthcare remains one of the most vulnerable sectors. Only the 16 largest Czech hospitals fall into the category of essential health service provider, to which the Cyber Security Act imposes stricter security rules.



The pandemic hit NATO at a difficult time. Its ramifications will likely be reflected in lower defence spending, especially in European countries. Yet, most members were not able to achieve the required two percent of GDP for defence, even in times of economic boom. Such developments may again lead to an escalation of the conflict within NATO over the long-term underfunding of European armies. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the U.S. will also increase its pressure on other NATO member states concerning matters of policy towards China and Iran. Nevertheless, significant differences in the approach of the USA and European allies toward these two countries can be expected, which may further negatively affect transatlantic relations. In addition, the current U.S. administration's efforts to bilateralize foreign relations may limit NATO-EU cooperation. However, some limitation of cooperation between the two may be caused by the Union itself. This is particularly the case if the next financial period (2021-2027) would significantly reduce the funding of projects such as building EU military mobility, which is key to this cooperation. Nonetheless, it is in the best interest of the Czech Republic that the ties between NATO and the EU be as close as possible.

Despite the likely reduction of defence spending in the coming period, the advantage remains that the Army of the Czech Republic is moving towards a structure based on specialized pillars. This will enable the Czech Republic to contribute to all forms of NATO forces. While the 7th Mechanized Brigade remains intended for collective defence, the 4th Rapid Deployment Brigade and the airborne regiment under development are destined for rapid response and stabilization operations due to their greater variability, speed and lighter armament. The sustainability of this strategy for a medium-sized country such as the Czech Republic is conditional on the balanced development of all three pillars, a sufficient increase in reserves and adequate financial resources. Without meeting these conditions, the Czech Republic risks creating a limited combat-ready army with a significantly underfunded capacity to provide territorial defence. The current domestic deployment of the army as a support and complement to civilian bodies may further enhance the prestige of the military in society; however, this may not necessarily be reflected in the political willingness to finance urgent but costly modernization programs. Additionally, the risk exists that plans to develop military capabilities will run into unfavourable economic and fiscal conditions, thereby possibly further increasing, instead of eliminating, the military's modernization "debt".

While NATO and the Czech Army face a difficult period, in the area of Czech-U.S. relations the Czech Republic should focus on the further development of key topics,

such as cyber security, through which it is possible to further deepen transatlantic ties. The current U.S. administration often prefers quick political victories over a long-term strategy. There is a need to better adapt to this, as such trend is likely to intensify with the forthcoming presidential election. It is the better position of the United States in trade relations and a strong economy that will undoubtedly be one of the main topics on which Donald Trump will want to defend his incumbency. This will almost certainly be reflected in the pressure that Washington will exert on the EU in trade negotiations. Czech diplomacy should, within its capabilities, actively strive to minimize the risks that would lead the U.S. to impose tariffs on imports of European cars and car parts. Such duties would significantly damage the Czech economy. Recent developments suggest that the current European Commission may be more disposed to grant access to the Union's agricultural market in some areas than the previous Commission. Such an approach may be effective in maintaining transatlantic trade cooperation but should not be applied at the cost of jeopardizing European unity or reducing food quality. Particularly as such actions would likely to draw a negative response from European consumers. Should the Democratic candidate Joe Biden succeed in the U.S. presidential election, the United States can be expected to make efforts to reinvigorate multilateral diplomacy and cooperation. However, there would be no major turnaround in U.S. policy towards European allies, whether at the security or economic level.

Despite the EU's efforts to strengthen its strategic autonomy, in particular through stronger foreign policy and defence cooperation, it is unlikely that European defence capabilities will be significantly increased in the foreseeable future. In addition, due to the economic impact of the pandemic, a reduction in political support for key projects such as the European Defence Fund can be expected. Large Member States, not the EU institutions, will remain the main drivers of European defence integration. The Czech Republic will therefore have to balance between the various currents of European defence and security integration on the basis of its interests, threats and capabilities. This should be particularly reflected in the setting of defence industrial policy and acquisitions toward major security partners such as Germany (Hungarian approach) or the USA (Polish approach). In this regard, the Czech Republic will also need to better define what concessions and compromises it is willing to accept in the future in order to strengthen the CFSP.

The Czech Republic should be similarly active in coordinating the European approach to 5G network security. From the Czech point of view, this is a significant diplomatic challenge and at the same time an opportunity to define a new strategic spe-

cialization among the Allies. The considerable potential of the Czech Republic in the field of cyber security is also evidenced by the successes that the National Cyber and Information Security Agency (NÚKIB) achieves every year at NATO cyber exercises. At the same time, however, many central government institutions remain insufficiently secure and their systems are repeatedly compromised, with serious security and reputational implications. Public administrations should therefore focus on strengthening the protection of their own networks, training their personnel and allocating adequate funding for these activities. In addition to cyber threats, it is necessary to respond to the threats of disinformation campaigns, which will continue to opportunistically use international political crises to strengthen anti-American and anti-European sentiments. In this respect, the Czech Republic should become more involved in the fight against disinformation at the EU and NATO level, with more personnel and material resources dedicated to the EU East StratCom Task Force and NATO StratCom.

Context

Member States remain the main drivers of European defence cooperation despite the European Commission's geopolitical ambitions

Persisting disputes over the defence spending of NATO members despite having receded into the background last year

A continuing increase in threats in cyberspace, with the Czech Republic becoming an increasingly frequent target of attacks and espionage

Present

The economic climate threatening the sustainability of the Army of the Czech Republic and the fulfilment of its NATO commitments, especially in the area of rearmament of the 7th Mechanized Brigade

The Czech Republic's ambitions to play a leading role in international cyber security issues, despite not being able to adequately secure its own institutions

Escalation of the trade conflict between the EU and the USA, which may increase with the upcoming elections in the United States, posing a threat for the economic situation of the Czech Republic

Recommendations

The Czech Republic must define and significantly increase its aspirations in the field of European defence and foreign policy integration.

The Czech Republic must continue to contribute to the development of NATO, be able to define its security interests within the Alliance and meet the obligations to its allies.

The Czech Republic must take advantage of the developing cooperation and the country's leadership potential in the field of cyber security to deepen relations with EU Member States and the U.S.

Middle East



Karolína Lahučká



“In my opinion, Turkey has committed war crimes and, in any case and in the least, it should not be a member of the European Union.”

MILOŠ ZEMAN

—17 October 2019

“If there really are forty Syrian children who are war orphans somewhere in Greece, then I think the Czech Republic could help them. Of course, we need to take into account that we have a prime minister who has promised not to accept a single refugee.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—9 November 2019

“I see the US air strikes in Iraq as an extraordinary step in a complicated situation. Culpability should be decided by the courts, but I am not a military tactician. (...) The situation in the Middle East is becoming more complicated instead of calming down. Among other things, the fragile successes in the fight against the Islamic State and international terrorism as such are at stake.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—3 January 2020 (statement on the killing of Qasem Soleimani)

“I admit that I have supported Americans all my life; it is a great democratic country that can be a role model for us in many ways. But these actions of President Trump are, in my honest opinion, criminal. No one is above international law, not even the President of the United States.”

KAREL SCHWARZENBERG

—6 January 2020 (statement on the killing of Qasem Soleimani)

Czech foreign policy towards the Middle East has been greatly influenced by the conflicts and instability of the region. The security situation in the region last year was affected by the ongoing rivalry between regional powers in resolving the conflict in Syria and the escalation of tensions between the United States and Iran. From a foreign policy point of view for the Czech Republic as a member of NATO, the change in the Alliance's role in the individual countries of the Middle East and the policy of another NATO member – Turkey, which is actively involved in events in the Middle East – were also crucial. Although this region is strategic for its location, the Czech Republic has long failed to pursue a coherent foreign policy with clear strategic goals. With a few exceptions, the Czech approach is unsystematic, lacking a comprehensive vision and clear priorities. In essence, Czech foreign policy is rather reactive to local events than actively seeking to influence the developments. A unified position is missing not only in time, but also in the coordination and declarations of the top echelons of the Czech political representation – the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister and the President. The absence of a coherent foreign policy towards the Middle East also deepens the inconsistency of the approach towards the region at the EU level.

Israel has long been the main and strategic partner for Czech foreign policy in the region. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Czech diplomacy continues its affection for Israel. Among Czech politicians, support for the relocation of the embassy to Jerusalem continues to grow, and for example at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, the Czech Republic has sided with Israel on the admissibility of resolving war crimes against Palestinians on their territory. On the other hand, it is necessary to mention the vote of the Czech representatives in the UN in November 2019 in favour of Palestinian refugees. However, this has attracted subsequent criticism from Czech politicians. The fragmentation of the Czech approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became apparent in May 2020 in response to the introduction of the American initiative, which significantly limits the chances of a viable Palestinian state and violates international law and existing UN resolutions. Foreign Minister Petříček, together with two former Czech foreign ministers, was critical of this initiative. On the contrary, Prime Minister Babiš and President Zeman are championing a purely pro-Israel policy that endorses US plans.

In the case of the conflict in Syria, the main focus was on President Assad's move to reconquer Syrian territory and Turkish operations in northern Syria to prevent Assad's army from advancing and creating a buffer zone near the Turkish border. The Czech Republic continues to engage in Syria mainly through humanitarian aid. The project of building a children's village for orphans in Syria initiated by Prime Minister Babiš, which

failed in November 2019, was widely discussed. This project was to be a Czech alternative to the admission of Syrian orphans to the Czech Republic, which the Czech government has refused to do. The purpose of the Czech Embassy in Damascus, which has been repeatedly criticized in the last year for issuing visas to President Assad's collaborators, has also been subject to much debate.

In September 2019, an official visit took place at the highest diplomatic level in Turkey; Prime Minister Babiš met with President Erdogan. The main topic of the visit was trade co-operation, especially in the field of defense industry, and the resolution of the unsuccessful Adularya power plant project from 2010. Despite statements by Prime Minister Babiš and Minister of Industry Havlíček about successful negotiations, no satisfactory solution has been agreed. Agreements on increasing trade in the defence industry have been held back by Turkish military operations in northern Syria since October, which the Czech Republic, like the EU as a whole, condemns. The Czech Republic has also joined the suspension of export licenses for military equipment to Turkey. The declarations made at the September talks in Turkey did not produce any concrete results. At the official level, the Czech Republic, as a member of the EU, is conducting accession talks with Turkey. However, Czech politicians agree that the current situation makes it impossible for Turkey to join the EU. On the other hand, the Czech Republic continues to perceive the strategic importance of Turkey as a partner of the EU and a member of NATO, which should be encouraged - through negotiation - to commit to replacing military solutions with diplomacy.

Against the background of escalating US-Iranian relations, Europe's inability to play any major mediation role in the conflict has become clear over the past year. After a series of minor incidents, there was an unprecedented American move in the form of a targeted attack on the important military commander Qasem Soleimani, which threatened to turn the situation into an open military conflict. The reaction of the Czech government officials was limited to pointing out the controversy surrounding Soleimani, without expressing any concern about the actions of our alliance partner, who resorted to the extrajudicial execution of a prominent representative of another state. From the reactions of Czech politicians, it cannot be said with any certainty that they had been informed about the operation in advance by the United States, even though any escalation of the conflict would directly threaten the Czech military contingent operating in Iraq.

Although the Czech Republic decided to tow the anti-Iranian line of its American ally, this policy was not thoughtfully implemented, as shown by Czech attitudes in the wider region. In the last months of 2019, a large civic protest movement took place in Iraq, criticizing the local political elite for social policy and servility towards Iran. Social tensions

culminated in the formal fall of the government of the pro-Iranian Prime Minister Abd al-Mahdi. However, during the protests, the Czech Republic did not side with the protesters, although their call for the abolition of confessional quotas, fighting of corruption and the transparency of state administration is fully in line with the fundamentals of Czech foreign policy in all parts of the world. Similarly, last year the Czech Republic did not voice support for the pro-democracy civic movements in Lebanon or Algeria.

Last year, after a two-decade period, the power elite completely transformed in Algeria. Algeria is one of the major players in the region, which, in addition to having a significant impact on the situation in Mali, where the Czech military contingent operates, also has an interesting economic potential. The departure of the power clique around President Bouteflika with ties to Russia represents a strategic opportunity for the Czech Republic to quickly establish and revive mutual contacts.

Prime Minister Babiš's trip to Morocco at the turn of last year and his attempt to focus the Czech interests in the Maghreb in this direction seemed like a promising start, but this visit has not yet been followed by any other specific form of cooperation. It is precisely the case of our relations with Morocco that clearly shows that, in addition to supporting the export industry, Czech foreign policy in the area seems clueless and without higher ambitions to influence the course of affairs. In the Libyan conflict, despite the official recognition of the government in Tripoli, the Czech Republic is still trying not keep a low profile, which can be perceived as a pragmatic decision, given that unity does not prevail even within the EU. So far, President Zeman's efforts to have Egyptian President Al-Sisi visit the Czech Republic have come to nothing.

The Czech policy towards the Persian Gulf region is the most chaotic and least conceptual. Although Qatar is becoming an increasingly important player in the region and in the world and forms a natural barrier against the Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, the project of opening a Czech embassy in the past year has been in vain. Likewise, the Czech-Oman relations have not been enhanced, although the Sultanate is a strategic country with a large mediation and diplomatic reach. Oman mediates talks between the various factions of the Yemeni civil war, to which the global community, including the Czech Republic, is turning its back and turning a blind eye to Saudi aggression.

Developments in the Middle East since spring 2020 have also been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the coming period, the shift in the policy of regional and

world powers against the conflict in Syria and other hotspots will be of paramount importance for the region. In addition to efforts to stabilize the region, either individually or as part of EU and NATO membership, the Czech Republic should continue humanitarian missions in the Middle East and North Africa, maintaining its traditional foreign policy line. From the Czech Republic's point of view, it is essential to better define our position, also within the framework of EU policy towards the region. Historically, the Czech Republic has a good reputation in many countries in the Middle East thanks to its industrial exports and active assistance, on which future relations with the countries of the region can be well built. It would therefore be a shame not to make full use of the Czech diplomatic potential.

Negotiations on the future organization of Syria will be important. If the EU wants to influence the situation in Syria, it should take a clear and proactive stance. The Czech Republic should make it clear what solution it wants to promote at the EU level and strive for a unified approach both in the EU and within NATO. In addition to the country's security and economic recovery, the EU should focus on ensuring the conditions for the return of Syrian refugees, who have largely fled not only from the conflict itself but also from the Assad regime. This year's actions by Turkey and developments in Syria show that mere financial aid is not sustainable in the long run and the EU should look for other aid instruments. For example, the Czech Republic should actively support the German initiative to create a buffer zone in Syria with the active participation of the EU or NATO. Also with regard to the April ruling of the Court of Justice of the EU on violation of European law in the fulfilment of quotas for redistribution of asylum seekers by V4 countries, Czech diplomacy should take a more solidarity-based position on refugees and a constructive approach to revising the EU asylum and migration system.

Although it is now evident that Turkey will not become a member of the EU in the foreseeable future, the Czech Republic should continue to deepen relations with the country. Modernization of the customs union could be one of the topics for common exploration. The EU should seek to negotiate with Turkey to become a stabilizing and constructive partner in the region. It is important to make clear what steps Turkey is taking are unacceptable from a European point of view. On the other hand, the EU should show its willingness to assist Turkey, for example, with the burden of migration and mutual keeping of agreements. Despite many of the recent actions, Turkey remains a strategic partner and the EU should push for positive changes in the country through partnership dialogue, not just critical pressure. The Czech interest should be to promote these principles both independently and in negotiations at the level of EU policy.

Despite its openly pro-Israel policy, Czech diplomacy should strive for a more balanced approach to the topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given current US-Israeli plans, addressing this issue is particularly topical. Symbolic steps, such as the transfer of the embassy to Jerusalem, would not help the Czech Republic at present, either in relation to the USA or in maintaining a unified EU position in the region, which the Czech Republic should advocate. Of course, it is desirable to maintain good relations with both the United States and Israel, but a solution to the conflict that is essentially one-sided is unlikely to bring stability and peace to the region. In domestic and European politics, the Czech Republic should actively promote the fight against growing anti-Semitism, which is increasingly becoming the subject of talks with Israeli diplomacy. However, it is necessary to distinguish between the fight against anti-Semitism and the absence of a critical approach to Israel's current policy; some Czech officials lack this distinction, especially in the context of Israel's policy towards the Arab population.

The Czech Republic should fundamentally reflect on and reconsider its position in the future vis-à-vis the United Arab Emirates, whose activities are effectively prolonging the military conflicts in Yemen and Libya. The United Arab Emirates, often viewed at home through the prism of the "liberal" Dubai, pursues an expansionary policy and, together with Saudi Arabia, supports a number of extremist groups that pose a risk to Europe and, with their help to southern separatists, fundamentally destabilize the situation in Yemen. The Czech Republic should refocus its interest in the region to the more liberal Qatar and Oman. The long-promised enhancement of mutual relations and the opening of embassies could bring the Czech Republic promising partners in the region and a clear program direction. In addition, both countries are trying to diversify their economies and thus free themselves from dependence on the petrochemical industry, which could mean a number of trade opportunities for Czech companies.

Good US relations with Qatar have proved to be crucial in the negotiation of a peace agreement with the Taliban, which is very significant for the Czech Republic with respect to the security of Alliance troops in Afghanistan. The peace treaty is only the first step towards stabilizing the country, so the Czech Republic should support the intra-Afghan peace agreement, which is still a long way away.

The Czech Republic should closely monitor the situation around the COVID-19 virus and its consequences for the region, which will obviously be far-reaching. Some countries, such as Lebanon, will find themselves completely without the means to help their citizens who fall into poverty. In addition to migration, this can also lead to the disintegration of these states, which would further undermine the stability of the region. The Czech Repub-

lic should, to boost its image in the region and promote ideals of humanity, provide more assistance in situ.

The Czech Republic should focus its effort on the democratization, stabilization and development of civil society in Iraq, as this is the only way to stabilize the country. With the weakening of the state in connection with the recent protests and the subsequent government crisis, the attacks and operations of the so-called Islamic State are beginning to intensify again. A strong and democratic Iraqi state will be much better able to face Iranian pressure. The Czech Republic should be actively interested in the form of a new framework agreement for the operation of Alliance troops in the country, which is presently being negotiated.

Last but not least, the Czech Republic should be take a greater interest in the countries of North Africa, which, thanks to their proximity to Europe and their geographical location on the route of migration and smuggling, represent a vital region. Czech foreign policy should go beyond the current model of opening up countries to Czech exporters and begin to support the development of democratic civil society, taking into account the specifics of the local environment. These efforts need to be closely coordinated with partners within the EU. The Czech side should also be more interested in the possibilities of cultural, academic and scientific cooperation and create ties that can strengthen mutual bilateral relations in the long run.

Context

Turkish interventions in Syria and growing pressure to address the issue of Syrian refugees, not only in Turkey

Escalation of the US-Iran conflict culminating in a targeted US attack on General Soleimani

A revolution in Algeria leading to a change in the country's power elites

Present

Inconsistent attitude in relation to Turkish political actions or the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian issue

Lack of support for democratization efforts in the region (Iraq, Algeria, Lebanon)

Unsystematic and inconsistent policy towards the countries of North Africa

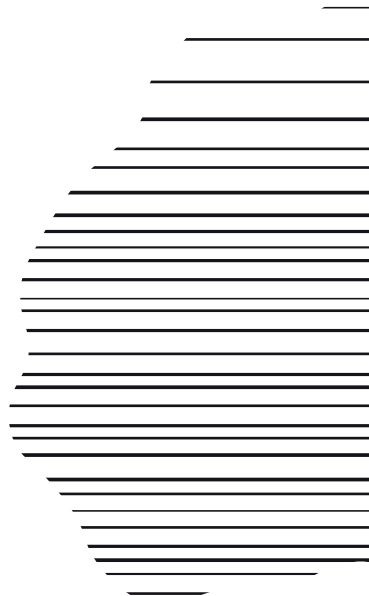
Recommendations

The Czech Republic should promote more balanced relations with Israelis and Palestinians and actively support the mutual settlement of the dispute through dialogue.

The Czech Republic must develop a concrete plan to support countries affected by the migration crisis and be actively involved in the EU-level debate on the conflict in Syria.

The Czech attitude towards the individual states of the Persian Gulf should be reconsidered, not only with regard to Czech interests in the area, but also in the context of the values that those countries represent in the region.

The line of humanitarian policy in the region must be maintained, not only in places of long-standing conflict, but now also with regard to the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Josef Kučera
Vilém Řehák

Africa



“As soldiers, we perceive Mali as a time bomb that can turn against the EU.”

ALEŠ OPATA

—5 February 2020

“We have an interest in establishing a direct line between Prague and Addis Ababa.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—20 November 2019

“If we were to vacate our bases in Africa, which at this moment we are not planning to do, we would be closing the office in Ethiopia last, because it is the greatest source of information for us.”

TOMÁŠ KRYL

—10 October 2019

In the reviewed period the following trends were observed: the economic growth of most African countries, growing interest of external actors in the continent, efforts of some African countries and the African Union to increase emancipation and the negative development of the security situation in the Sahel. The coronavirus pandemic also affected the political and economic development of the continent.

Economic growth continued to bring inflows of foreign investment, including public investment, into infrastructure development. However, investors, including China, increasingly pay attention to the economic viability of projects, not diplomacy or prestige. The long-term trend of growing interest in Africa by the emerging and medium-sized powers continues. Russia's interest in the continent was confirmed by the first Russia-Africa Summit in October. Recently, Turkey and Israel started playing active roles. While the US interest in the continent continues to decline, the new European Commission has declared strengthening of the partnership between the two continents a strategic priority.

The African Continental Free Trade Area, effective from May 2019, is a key project in the economic area. However, the economic shock associated with the coronavirus crisis has found most countries completely unprepared and a negative impact - not only on the underfunded health sector but on the public services in general - is expected. The last year also revealed other trends that have not yet been so apparent. First and foremost, African countries are trying to play a significantly more active role in continental and global debates and in the multipolar world in general. However, the crisis has also corroborated and strengthened undemocratic tendencies in several countries. Last but not least, the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel due to the growing activity of jihadist and separatist groups must be mentioned.

The policy of the Czech Republic in the region was characterized by broadly defined priorities and a lack of a hierarchy of goals. The still limited political significance of the territory results in only minimal attention that the highest constitutional officials pay to Africa. The visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Tomáš Petříček to Ethiopia in November 2019 could serve as an impetus for the further development of Czech-African relations. On this mission, he met with representatives of non-profit organizations implementing Czech humanitarian aid and development cooperation projects in the country. He also met with representatives of the Ethiopian government and the President of the country with whom he discussed the development of mutual trade relations, including the possibility of establishing a direct flight route. All in all, deputy foreign ministers and the Secretary of State of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have visited

seven African countries in the past period, which confirms the growing interest in the region. This trend is also evident in the activities of the Ministry of Defence. On the contrary, the activities of the Ministry of Agriculture are more limited under the current government compared to the previous period. The Ministry of Industry and Trade has been active in relations with African states for a long time, although in its case the reception of African delegations in Prague prevails. On the other hand, many of these visits take place at ministerial level.

The attention of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs concerning Africa in 2020 is focused on the implementation of the Czech Republic's priorities under the Post-Cotonou agreements, which are presently being negotiated. These include, in particular, strengthened ownership by the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, the development of trade and economic cooperation, support for the private sector and civil society, and the emphasis on inclusive institutions. All these areas are undoubtedly crucial for the future of Africa-Europe relations, and their importance is shared at EU level. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the second key task in Africa is to stabilize the Czech Republic's presence in the Sahel in connection with the Czech Republic's Strategy for Supporting the Stabilization and Development of the Sahel Countries for 2018-2021 and the Czech Republic's Territorial Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa which is presently being drafted.

The trend of a more focused attention of Czech foreign policy towards the Sahel region was more than obvious in the past year. From the point of view of Czech interests, this choice is relatively logical. The Sahel countries are source and / or transit regions of illegal migration to the EU. At the same time, the security situation in individual countries is deteriorating as a result of jihadist and separatist groups activities. The growing Russian interest in this region is not without significance either, as it may have wider geopolitical and security consequences for Czech foreign policy beyond the region itself. At the same time, the Sahel countries have the potential to offer Czech companies trade opportunities and development organizations a new field of activity in the event of long-term stabilization.

The importance of migration and the Sahel for the Czech foreign policy in Africa is also evidenced by the Program of Activities for Supporting Source and Transit Countries of Migration in Africa for the Period 2020 - 2022, approved by the government in March 2020. In addition to the Sahel region, the program will focus on North Africa, West Africa and the Horn of Africa. Morocco, Mali, and Ethiopia were chosen as key partner countries. Funds in the amount of 300 million crowns are to contribute

to ensuring peace, security and stability, economic development, good governance and social development. The Czech private sector and non-governmental organizations should also play a key role in the realization of the program. However, in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, the government decided to use a third of the funds for pandemic response activities across Africa. This weakens the link between the program and the Sahel region.

The strengthening of the Czech presence in the missions operating in the Sahel is also closely related to the security pillar. The Czech Republic participates in the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA and the European training mission EUTM, of which it took command for half a year in June 2020. These missions do not conduct active operations in the fight against terrorist groups, but help with the training of the Malian army, ensuring security and humanitarian and political support for the Malian government. At the beginning of 2020, the Czech government approved the involvement of Czech troops in the counter-terrorism operation Barkhane through the Takuba task force. The unit of up to 60 soldiers is expected to be deployed by the end of 2022.

The establishment of an embassy in Bamako was a key institutional precondition for the successful implementation of the Sahel strategy. The mission opened on 28 October 2019, with the senior diplomat Robert Kopecký in charge. The embassy in Kinshasa, DR Congo, was reopened, as mandated by the government in August 2019. However, it is only a temporary measure for 18 months and has the specific task of protecting the state's property rights to the embassy building and land, and the subsequent sale. Despite the strengthening of Czech diplomatic presence in Africa, however, there are still fewer embassies on the continent at present than at the turn of the century.



In connection with the current anti-crisis measures, it can be assumed that economic growth will slow down in the whole region. The absence of remittances will affect the economies of many countries and there will be a greater centralization of resources in the hands of governments. This will result in a strengthening of the authoritarian tendencies behind measures in response to the ongoing crisis. Diminished demand for raw materials will weaken most energy-dependent economies, such as Nigeria or Angola. Economic problems in these countries can jeopardize political stability; this may also apply to other countries in the region. The economic downturn may also slow down the political reforms that many countries embarked on in recent years. The crisis also

threatens to spur economic nationalism, especially among regional hegemons, which could fundamentally hamper the development of Africa's free trade. The countries of the continent will thus remain extremely vulnerable to global economic fluctuations. All the more so, negotiations on the future set-up of EU-Africa relations, based on the principles of partnership and equality, need to be finalized.

With regard to the apparent shift of attention of Czech Africa policy to the Sahel, the new embassy in Bamako will play an increasingly important role. It is therefore necessary for the Czech Republic to have a plenipotentiary ambassador in the country. Likewise, given the interconnectedness of the threats within the region, it is necessary for the embassy to cover not only Mali but all G5 Sahel countries (Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mauritania). This seems necessary, among other things, in view of the EU's cooperation with the G5 Sahel in the framework of the counter-terrorism operation Barkhane, in which the Czech Republic will participate.

Prioritizing the Sahel will require the involvement of top constitutional officials, including in the context of taking over command of the European Training Mission (EUTM). In this respect, the planned establishment of the post of Special Envoy for the Sahel Region, which should take place this year, can be viewed positively. The Special Envoy should coordinate the Sahel not only within the government, but also at EU level. The planned overall strengthening of the capacities of the Department of Sub-Saharan Africa towards a more active involvement of the Czech Republic in the area is also a positive signal. Taking into account supposed long-term presence in the Sahel with the thematic priorities of migration, it will be necessary to ensure adequate attention to the situation in the Gulf of Guinea. Consequently, it would be desirable in the coming years to expand diplomatic representation in one of the francophone states of the region. Suitable countries are either the Côte d'Ivoire, where the Czech embassy has been in the past, or Cameroon. Both of these countries were the destination of foreign delegations of Foreign Minister Deputies last year. Given the newly defined priorities, the possible shift of Czech foreign policy's attention from Central Africa to the Gulf of Guinea appears not only logical and strategic, but also necessary for any longer-term activities in the Sahel.

Development cooperation is one of the key tools for strengthening the resilience of the countries on the continent in the context of a globalized economy. At the same time, this is fully in line with the intention to address the issue of migration directly in the source countries. The Czech society has long been opposed to migration, which creates a unique space for the government to increase the budget for Czech development coop-

eration and bring its volume closer to an international commitment of 0.7% of GDP. At the level of trade, one of the possible ways is to create complex development platforms. These will facilitate a wider involvement of Czech companies, including small and medium-sized ones, in commercial development projects; moreover, it will support the long-term presence of Czech business on the African continent.

Last but not least, it is necessary to expand the range of available economic diplomacy tools for Czech companies. There has been a year-on-year increase in PROPED economic diplomacy projects in Africa. However, it is unfortunate that more than half of the projects relate to the defence industry, which is consequently becoming the flagship of Czech trade in Africa. However, the question is whether it will be possible to implement the planned projects – and if so, how many – due to the current crisis. It is viable to extend the new PROPEA instrument (projects to support economic activities abroad, based on the provision of business services to Czech companies by local experts) to some of the key countries in sub-Saharan Africa. At present, Morocco is the only African country among the ten pilot countries. In the new programming period, the Czech Republic should also strive for greater involvement in European development cooperation instruments.

The conclusion of negotiations of the Post-Cotonou agreement is expected in the course of 2020. In addition to promoting the above-mentioned priorities, the Czech Republic should support the strengthening of institutional cooperation between the EU and the African Union.

The signing of a double taxation treaty with Botswana and Senegal is also a positive step in the development of economic relations with Africa. However, the number of double taxation treaties and bilateral investment treaties remains in the order of single units, which does not bode well for the development of long-term economic relations. Priority should therefore be given to the completion tax and investment treaties which are in the process of negotiation and identifying other countries that are important for the Czech Republic from a commercial point of view.

Context

Slowdown in economic growth due to the coronavirus crisis

Growing interest of new actors in Africa

Intensification of activities of non-state groups, especially in the Sahel

Present

Too broadly defined priorities of Czech foreign policy in Africa; lack of hierarchization of goals; and minimal involvement of the highest constitutional actors

Limited capacities in place, inconsistent with the Sahel prioritization

EU efforts to strengthen the strategic partnership between the two continents

Unpredictable economic and political dynamics of the region in the upcoming period

Recommendations

The Czech Republic should prioritize and hierarchize objectives, to better manage its limited capacities.

Representatives of the Czech Republic should give due political weight to relations with Africa.

As part of the implementation of the Sahel strategy, the role of the embassy in Bamako should be strengthened.

Development cooperation and economic diplomacy instruments in Africa requires continuous strengthening.



*Filip Šebok
Alžběta Bajerová*

East Asia



“We traveled (to China) to settle relations with China for general reasons. You never know when a relationship with such a large and powerful country may come in handy.”

VRATISLAV MYNÁŘ

—19 March 2020

“I really appreciated China’s good work in preventing and controlling the COVID-19 epidemic. Because China simply got it under control.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—16 March 2020

“While other countries received medical supplies from them relatively on time and did not have to hold press conferences, China ordered us that we must throw a welcome party and express gratitude. This is because we accepted the game that is not dignified.”

PAVEL FISCHER

—22 March 2020

“My journey to Taiwan is a statement about the character of our country, our Senate, about how we regard freedom and democracy and how we want to help others so that they too can be free one day.”

MILOŠ VYSTRČIL

—30 April 2020

The Czech Republic's political relations with the countries of East Asia have traditionally been dominated by relations with China, which in the period under review reached the worst level since the „restart“ in 2013. Prague Mayor Zdeněk Hřib was one of the principal actors in the policy towards China. In October 2019, the Prague City Council voted to cancel Prague's partnership agreement with Beijing due to a controversial article concerning support for One-China policy. Hřib argued that Prague should not get dragged into issues of Czech foreign policy, but the decision to negotiate a partnership agreement with Taipei as a de facto substitute confirmed his foreign policy ambitions and an effort to profile himself on this topic towards the domestic audience. Already in January 2020, the mayor of Taipei, Ko Wen-je, visited Prague and a partnership agreement was signed between the two cities. Mayor Hřib presented the treaty as a „moral choice“ and touted the partnership with Taipei as based on democratic values, not as something apolitical.

Even outside the actions of the Prague City Hall, Taiwan became a major issue. Due to plans to visit Taiwan in the spring of 2020, Senate President Jaroslav Kubera faced domestic political pressure, mainly from the Prague Castle. President Miloš Zeman accused Kubera of jeopardizing the partnership with Beijing. Czech MFA was also critical of Kubera's planned visit, which, in terms of protocol, would be relatively unique on a global scale. Kubera's sudden death at the end of January thwarted the plans. However, the new President of the Senate, Miloš Vystrčil, confirmed over time the plan to travel to Taiwan instead of his predecessor. In addition, correspondence from the Chinese embassy was revealed after Kubera's death, in which the embassy threatened retaliation for the visit to Taiwan, including blacklisting specific Czech businesses that could face countermeasures. It was later revealed that the Prague Castle had requested a statement from the Chinese embassy, and then handed it over to Kubera with its own memo. This case thus confirmed the specific role of Beijing in Czech politics; China is not only the subject of a foreign policy debate, but also serves as an instrument to settle domestic political disputes.

The support for China on the Czech political scene continued to wither, to which Beijing was unable to respond adequately. The embassy chose a sharp style of communication that copied the general assertive trend of Chinese diplomacy as seen in other European countries. However, Chinese pressure was counterproductive. Dissatisfaction with Chinese Ambassador Zhang Jianmin caused the Senate President Vystrčil to request his replacement. Prime Minister Babiš also pledged his preliminary agreement with this step. At the meeting of the highest constitutional officials on 11 March 2020,

Vystrčil was finally outvoted on the issue. However, a joint statement by the constitutional representatives confirmed the new reality of Czech-Chinese relations: emphasized the need for „mutually beneficial“ relations, expressed dissatisfaction with economic performance, and rejected „any form of coercion“ and „threat of retaliation“ in the context of economic and cultural relations with Taiwan. Compared to previous periods, the Czech Republic has taken a more assertive stance towards China.

As regards the 5G issue, which is one of the main topics of China's presence in Europe, the Czech Republic continued to emphasize security risks and close cooperation with its allies as confirmed by Prime Minister Babiš's joint declaration with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo signed on 6 May 2020. The declaration will have an impact mainly on Chinese technology suppliers Huawei and ZTE.

The crisis set off by the COVID-19 pandemic also affected Czech-Chinese relations. Beijing has launched an intensive diplomatic and information campaign in an effort to absolve itself of responsibility for the spread of coronavirus and, conversely, to use the crisis to improve its global position. One of the Chinese tactics was the politicization of the distribution of medical supplies which were in short supply. The Czech politicians became willingly involved in China's scheme, when Prime Minister Babiš, Interior Minister Hamáček and other members of the Czech government, in the presence by the Chinese Ambassador, officially welcomed the arrival of the supplies from China at the airport. This approach is in direct contrast to the downplaying of EU aid by Prime Minister Babiš and members of his government. The actions of the government has been endorsed also by President Zeman.

The reaction to medical aid from Taiwan was ambiguous. Opposition leaders emphasized the assistance provided by Taiwan, which was also welcomed by the Senate President Vystrčil, in contrast to the material purchased from China, and Taiwan was again lauded as a democratic alternative to Beijing. Consequently, Taiwan's position on the Czech political scene became more prominent. The Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies thanked for the assistance provided and supported the involvement of Taiwan in the work of the WHO; a third of the senators signed a petition on the issue. However, at the beginning of June, the Chamber of Deputies as a whole did not approve an official expression of gratitude to Taiwan with the votes of ANO, KSČM (Communist Party), and the SPD.

Curiously, less than a month before the air bridge with China was opened, it was the Czech Republic that sent medical equipment to China in the form of free humanitarian aid. The decision to send aid to China was made by President Zeman after the

government spoke out against donations due to a lack of supplies in the country. In February, President's Chancellor Vratislav Mynář visited Beijing together with Martin Nejedlý, advisor to the President, and the President of the Czech-China Cooperation Chamber Jaroslav Tvrdík, to personally present a donation agreement on humanitarian aid for China. Beijing also confirmed the President's interest to participate at the 17 + 1 Summit, which was later postponed. While the "mission" was kept secret from the public, it was a significant step in terms of foreign policy. According to the President's Chancellor, the visit was to contribute to the overall „reconciliation“ of Czech-Chinese relations and the subsequent „prioritization“ of the Czech Republic in the supply of Chinese medical supplies. In April, the Chancellor met with the Chinese Ambassador to the Czech Republic to thank China for its assistance. In the period under review, Chancellor Mynář thus played the role of the main executor of the President's Office foreign policy, which, despite the President's minimal presence in public space, maintained a strong pro-China course.

The power challenge to Beijing has also been increasingly reflected in the EU and NATO. One of the main goals of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen is to achieve reciprocal relations with China, which the EU described in March 2019 as its „system rival“. The NATO summit in London in December of the same year mentioned China in its final declaration for the first time in history, as a new challenge for the Alliance. China's intensive diplomatic and information campaign during the coronavirus pandemic led to a further increase in international focus on Chinese influence in Europe. Growing prominence of the China challenge within NATO and the EU is also putting pressure on Czech foreign policy to consolidate and assert its own position towards China. Czech relations with our traditional partners in the region, Japan and South Korea, have long been overshadowed by relations with China (and now also Taiwan), which continued in this period as well as in previous years. The intention to strengthen the partnership with these two strategic partners has traditionally been on the agenda of the Czech presidency of the Visegrad Group. In bilateral relations with Japan, the most significant event was Prime Minister Babiš's visit to the coronation of Emperor Naruhito in October 2019. The Prime Minister invited his Japanese counterpart Shinzo Abe to visit the Czech Republic in 2020 to celebrate 100 years of diplomatic relations. The activities of the North Korean regime also attracted attention. According to media scoops, the BIS (Security Information Service) thwarted the efforts of local North Korean diplomats to buy military equipment through Czech companies.



In the coming years, China will continue to be a polarizing topic in the Czech Republic and also an instrument of domestic political competition. On the one hand, we can expect a temporary strengthening of the pro-Chinese actors, led by the Prague Castle, who will play up Chinese support in the fight against the epidemic. While President Zeman has indicated dissatisfaction with the economic results of Czech-Chinese relations in the past, he still considers relations with China an important part of his legacy, and he reiterated his pro-China stance by confirming his originally declined presence at the 17 + 1 Summit. In an effort to build up their Eurosceptic credentials, China can also be deliberately used by parties from the right end of the political spectrum as an alternative to the West, which would bolster the voice of traditionally pro-Chinese parties in the Czech parliament.

On the other hand, the tendency to delegitimize the development of any relations with China will also intensify. These efforts will be probably spearheaded mainly the Pirate Party, which took over this baton from the TOP09 in the Chamber of Deputies, as well as by the Senate and its President Vystrčil. It is possible that the subject of withdrawal from the format of cooperation between China and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (17 + 1) will be put on the table. So far, this initiative has only been presented by the Green Party, which is not in the parliament, but it may yet gain traction.

Any shift in the approach of Prime Minister Babiš, who has so far taken a pragmatic to sceptical position on the issue of relations with China, will be key. A positive assessment of practical cooperation with China during the coronavirus pandemic may lead to a change in the Prime Minister's position. Despite this, it cannot be expected that Babiš's government will initiate any fundamental changes in Czech policy towards Beijing. In case of an indiscriminate reaction to Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan, Babiš may again come into conflict with China, as was the case with regard to the security of 5G networks.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will be adversely affected by the further polarization of Czech domestic policy regarding China. Due to the involvement of domestic actors in the issue of relations with China and Beijing's sensitivity to criticism, the Ministry's ability to shape the Czech policy towards China will continue to be limited in the future. The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are becoming more active players – a Standing Committee on Hybrid Threats was established in the Chamber of Deputies in June 2020; it is expected that its focus will, in a large part, involve China.

Taiwan will continue to be an integral part of China's approach in the triangular matrix of relations. The Czech Republic is already one of Taiwan's most active partners

in the EU – for example in terms of the frequency of parliamentary missions – and this trend will continue due to the noticeable strengthening of pro-Taiwan voices on the Czech political scene. Since Taiwan has used the pandemic for its own diplomatic offensive and as partial way out from the forced diplomatic isolation imposed by China, Beijing will tend to respond to any strengthening of relations with Taiwan with escalated aggression. China's foreign policy in general will prefer a show of strength to consensus building. The main measure of the success of Chinese diplomacy in recent years has been the uncompromising defense of Chinese interests, regardless of the reactions of the countries concerned.

In the area of economic relations, no significant change in the status quo can be expected. Chinese investment has been declining across Europe since peaking in 2016. The Foreign Investment Screening legislation may be another barrier to Chinese investment, although its effectiveness will only be demonstrated through practice. The fate of one of the few positive examples of bilateral cooperation-direct flights between two countries- is also in jeopardy –s, as these do not have to be resumed after the epidemic. Although the cancellation of the Prague-Beijing route before the epidemic was presented as retaliation for the actions of Mayor Hřib, it seems to have been mainly the result of economic calculations.

Major changes are in store also for Sino-European relations. It may finally become clear what the term „systemic rivalry“, the new definition of the relationship by the Commission, means in practice. In the context of coronavirus propaganda, the gradual revelation of the extent of the suppression of the Uyghur minority and the fundamental curtailment of Hong Kong's autonomy through the National Security Act adopted in June 2020, there is growing pressure on the EU and Member States to rethink the very logic of their cooperation with Beijing. In response to China's growing diplomatic pressure, some European countries have taken an assertive stance, such as Lithuania and Sweden, while others have traditionally been reluctant to stand up to China. So far, the pivotal Germany is sending vague signals despite escalating pressure on Chancellor Merkel to rethink current policies. The fate of the planned 27 + 1 Summit during the German Presidency, which was to be an important step towards European unity, is also unclear. In creating a pan-European approach to China, the EU faces a difficult debate, in which the Czech Republic must be a vocal participant.

The first, and perennial item on the European agenda should be the negotiation of a wider access to the Chinese market and equal treatment of foreign companies. With the

coming economic crisis, this demand, which China has been unable to meet for a long time, will be even more urgent.

For Beijing, negotiating the role of Chinese companies in the rollout of 5G networks is a priority. In this respect, a diplomatic clash with the Czech Republic, which has put itself in the role of leader of the pan-European debate on the principles of 5G security, can be expected. Advancing in this debate will be an important diplomatic challenge for the Czech Republic, especially in the context of the upcoming economic crisis, which may affect or completely change the current positions of the EU Member States. However, the overall trend indicates that the door is closing for Chinese 5G vendors.

The dynamics of China's cooperation with Europe will continue to be affected by the widening gap in US-Chinese relations. The growing rivalry between Beijing and Washington threatens to deepen the global economic crisis and puts Europe in a delicate position of balancing between two strong partners in times of uncertainty. While EU countries do not share American ideas of „decoupling“ from China, a debate on rethinking economic dependence is already beginning in Europe. On the other hand, efforts to continue cooperation on global issues such as climate change remain topical.

In relations with Japan, the highlight of the year should be the visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to sign a strategic partnership. The Czech Republic has previously entered into a strategic partnership with South Korea and China. This step should help to redress the imbalance of political attention which, despite the unsatisfactory economic results of the relationship, is still directed to China at the expense of other partners. Recently concluded (Singapore, Vietnam) or prospective free trade agreements (ASEAN, India) in the region also represent an opportunity for the Czech Republic. Cooperation with Japan and South Korea in the V₄ + format will continue to play an important role. Czech policy will follow the EU's efforts to strengthen relations in the region and with other partners on the basis of not only interests but also value intersections.

The main task for the Czech diplomacy should be to conduct an audit of the current unbalanced development in relations with China and adjust its strategic approach accordingly. The Czech approach should be placed in the context of the current development of the debate on EU policy towards China, in which the Czech Republic's voice must be heard. The Czech strategy must be comprehensive and reflect not only the economic aspects of relations with China but also their security, normative and political ramifications. At the same time, a clearly defined policy towards China could help the Czech diplomacy to reclaim the reins of foreign policy, which it had previously lost, as far as the Czech-Chinese relations are concerned, to domestic political actors. It is

important that the Czech Republic does not perceive relations with Taiwan primarily as relations with „anti-China“ but as a full-fledged partnership, both with regard to common democratic ideals and the pragmatic potential of economic relations. The Czech Republic should support the meaningful involvement of Taiwan in relevant international organizations within the framework of the One-China policy. Finally, a full-fledged policy towards the East Asian region requires greater diplomatic but, above all, political capital in order to develop relations with other partners, notably South Korea, Japan but also the ASEAN countries.

Context

A more aggressive rebuke to Chinese diplomacy and information activities, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

A more prudent and assertive Czech, European and transatlantic approach to China and a gradual transformation of the debate on China in the EU

Strongly polarized relations with China and Taiwan and their use by Czech politicians as instruments of internal political competition

Present

Weakening of the role of Czech diplomacy in the formulation of the Czech Republic's foreign policy towards China as a result of involvement of domestic actors in Czech-Chinese relations

Relations with Taiwan used as a political counterweight to relations with China without systemic work on the substantive deepening of the partnership

Bilateral cooperation with traditional and economically important partners in the region overshadowed by relations with China

Recommendations

The Czech Republic should analyse the current unbalanced development in Czech-Chinese relations, and use the conclusions to formulate a comprehensive, unified and confident strategic policy towards China.

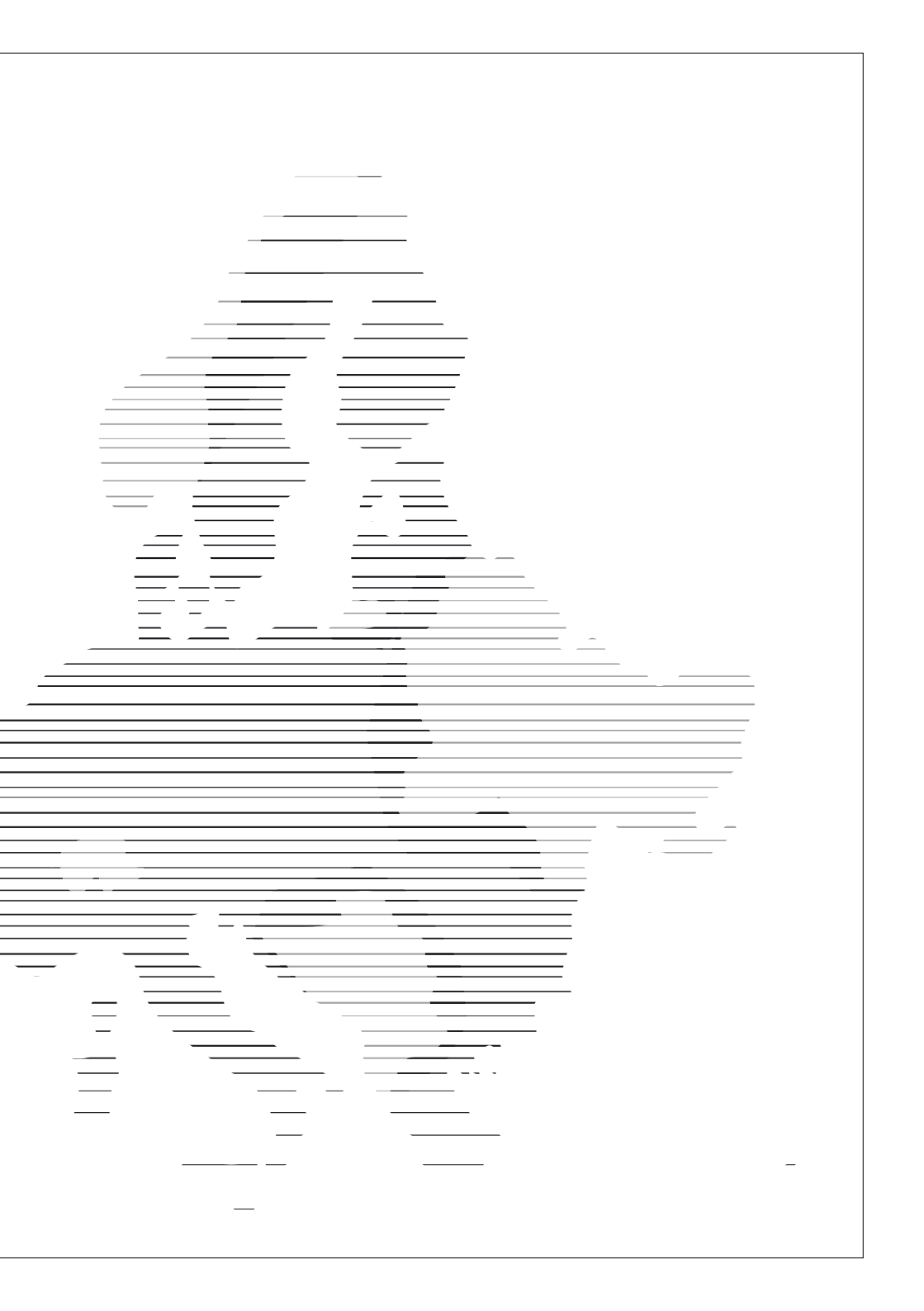
It is necessary that the Czech Republic actively engages in formative debates on China within the framework of EU and NATO and reflect the changing policies of our partners in our own approach.

The Czech Republic's political and diplomatic capital should concentrate beyond China's borders, in order to enable the emancipation of relations with Taiwan and the development of cooperation with Japan, South Korea and the ASEAN countries.

*Pavel Havlíček, Tomáš Jungwirth,
Iva Svobodová*

EU Enlargement Policy





“I am pleased that the Member States agreed to open accession talks with Northern Macedonia and Albania, which have been postponed several times. Even in difficult times, the EU remains united.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—24 March 2020

“I like Serbia and Serbs... and I do not like Kosovo.”

MILOŠ ZEMAN

—10 September 2019

“We are in danger that those countries of the [Western Balkans] will sit on two or three strategic chairs, and even if they take help from us, they will also be flirting with other partners. This is not in the interest of the EU or its members.”

JANINA HŘEBÍČKOVÁ

—21 April 2020

After years of stagnation and dithering, the European Union's relations with the six countries of the Western Balkans have undergone a relatively dynamic development over the past year. Led by France, several Member States initially refused to open accession talks with two of the countries, Albania and North Macedonia, in October 2019, while initiating a debate on the revision of the European accession process. As early as the second half of March 2020, Member States supported a new methodology for EU enlargement policy. However, the discord between some countries still caused damage and led to the downfall of the pro-Western Macedonian government, a strong EU ally in the Western Balkans. Disappointment at the fact that, following the resolution of the name issue with Greece, which lasted a full quarter of a century, was not followed up by the EU's much-awaited move, rallied opponents of North Macedonian cooperation with the Union.

Czech diplomacy has also been actively involved in negotiating a new form of enlargement policy, which should make the whole process more efficient, positively innovative and encourage candidate countries to step up the implementation of reforms. In a coalition with other Member States across the EU, the Czech Republic presented a non-paper on the subject in November last year. Although this document did not directly respond to the original French proposal, it served as an alternative and a more ambitious vision of the accession methodology and played a significant role at the European Commission. From the Czech point of view, the implementation of the new methodology is a success, thanks to which it was possible to restore the credibility of EU policy towards the Western Balkans, come up with a new dynamic approach to candidate countries and make this long-term strategic goal of Czech foreign policy a priority at European level. It is particularly significant that the enlargement process has been relaunched and built on the foundations of a common European approach and shared values. In addition, Czech diplomacy also acknowledged the election of former Slovak Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák as the EU's Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue and other Western Balkan regional issues; his appointment, nonetheless, attracted some disapproving comments from the region itself.

The February meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries and the Western Balkans in Prague marked another success for the Czech enlargement policy. The meeting organized on the occasion of the Czech Presidency of the V4 was also attended by the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Oliver Várhelyi and ministers from Croatia and Slovenia. In addition to the Commis-

sioner's explicit assurance of the Commission's readiness to meet its obligations to the region, a Memorandum of Cooperation between the Western Balkans Fund and the International Visegrad Fund was signed.

The COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to demonstrate an interest in rapprochement and solidarity in practice. EUR 374 million has been redeployed from the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance to the Western Balkans to cover immediate needs for the purchase of medical and protective equipment. An additional EUR 3.3 billion has been pledged to help cope with the effects of the crisis. Although the EU sent 750 tonnes of humanitarian aid and promised immediate financial assistance, according to local experts, its publicity was marginal compared to aid from China and Russia. The Czech Republic has acted responsibly. In April 2020, for example, it provided one million face masks to North Macedonia, a new member and ally in NATO, and included Bosnia and Herzegovina in its CZK 25 million foreign aid package.

The volume of EU assistance and the perception of the current crisis as an opportunity for rapprochement was the pivotal subject of the Zagreb summit under the Croatian Presidency in early May 2020, which finally had to be held online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Declaration signed at the summit was, according to EU's representatives, a 'confirmation of unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans'. In it, partnership with the EU was presented as financially viable in the long run and competitive against other alternatives. However, despite the promise of a European perspective and closer cooperation, the Declaration or in the statements of the participants on the EU side omitted any notions of enlargement or future accession to the EU, which caused disappointment for some actors. It is astonishing that, despite the declared efforts to bring the Western Balkans closer to the EU, Czech diplomacy has not issued an official statement about this event and has hardly communicated it to the Czech public.

In bilateral relations, President Zeman's efforts to de-recognise Kosovo as a sovereign independent state have recently caused a considerable stir, following his trip to Serbia in September 2019, where he spoke pejoratively about Kosovo. The result was, among other things, the non-participation of the Kosovo Prime Minister at the summit of the V4 and the Western Balkans, which took place in Prague in the same month as part of the Visegrad Presidency of the Czech Republic. Although in the end there was no change in the official government position, this incident again highlighted the disjointed approach, inconsistency and lack of clarity of Czech foreign policy.



In the coming months, especially during the German Presidency of the Council of the EU, European diplomacy and enlargement policy will face a major test in implementing the new approach to the Western Balkans. In addition to preparing for accession talks with Albania and North Macedonia, the European Commission also has on its table regular reports on the state of negotiations with Montenegro and Serbia. It will be important to translate the commitments from the Zagreb Declaration into practice, prioritize accession talks and the smooth flow of committed funds so that mutual relations continue to develop dynamically. A major challenge in this regard is not only the complexity of the local context and the nature of political regimes, but also the reluctance of some EU Member States, exacerbated by the current crisis in public health and European budgets. At the moment, the crisis is having a significant impact on the negotiations on future priorities and the multiannual financial framework.

However, as EU assistance in the first part of the crisis has shown, the COVID-19 pandemic may to some extent also provide an opportunity to bring the Western Balkan countries closer to the EU and weaken the influence of third players in the region. It is precisely the geopolitical – and, more broadly, geo-economic – European Commission whose activities may ideally catalyse a breakthrough in relations with the six countries. The enlargement commissioner's aim to prepare at least one country to join the EU by the end of his term is in line with this ambition. In this regard, the EU's Economic and Investment Plan will play a key role. The plan aims not only to rebuild the Western Balkan countries and relaunch their economies after the crisis, but also to provide concrete benefits that better connect citizens with the European reality and the enlargement process. In addition to scholarships and stronger expert cooperation, these may include investments in information exchange and cross-border infrastructure.

Another future platform for cooperation in the area of regional development cooperation may be the partnership of Western Balkans Fund and the International Visegrad Fund, which the Czech Republic supports. At the bilateral level, however, the Czech Republic is not fully consistent with this trend, as evidenced by the year-on-year reduction in the budget of the Czech Development Agency, which is the primary implementer of Czech development assistance in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for 2020, as well as the reduction of the total amount for foreign development cooperation by CZK 20 million compared with 2019.

It is in the Czech interest that the EU's Western Balkans policy places emphasis on the fundamental values of European cooperation beyond good bilateral relations. By

sharing its own good practice with the building of the civil society, the Czech Republic can demonstrate the non-financial benefits of EU membership like the protection of the rule of law. For example, Tomáš Szunyog, who was appointed EU Ambassador to Kosovo in May 2020, will get a chance to pass on this experience. This opens up new opportunities for Czech diplomacy to contribute to resolving tensions between Belgrade and Pristina. The new enlargement methodology, for example in the form of feedback on the fulfilment of criteria by individual states, adds space for the Czech Republic to get more involved in the enlargement policy coordinated by the European Commission. However, if Czech support for EU enlargement is to be credible, confidence in the European partnership must also be reflected in inward communication with the Czech public, to avoid the cooling of moods and increase in scepticism about this process as in the case of Western European countries.

A good example of strengthening relations and achieving concrete results in the region would be the abolition of the visa requirement for Kosovo citizens or ending the trade and customs wars between Kosovo and Serbia. Coordination and cooperation with the United States will be important in this regard; the EU should join forces with the United States to avoid two parallel diplomatic processes, which could undermine reconciliation between Kosovo and Serbia. The EU should make its financial assistance for the economic recovery of candidate countries conditional on the continuation of reforms and the building of good neighbourly relations.

In the future, the Czech policy for the Western Balkans must have one fundamental quality - consistency. Any support for regional separatism, the revision of the constitutional status quo or the intensifying authoritarian tendencies can be as toxic to the common European position as was the earlier refusal on the part of some European states to start accession talks. Therefore, within the framework of national political reality, the Czech government should try to maintain a consolidated official line of foreign policy and curb attacks by domestic actors towards it, like last year's criticism of Kosovo by Miloš Zeman.

Context

Newly agreed pan-European consensus on a committed and more dynamic approach to enlargement policy in the form of its new methodology

Extension of accession talks to four of the six Western Balkan countries

COVID-19 pandemic crippling internal and external processes in the EU and partner countries

Present

A more active approach of European and Czech diplomacy to the Western Balkans

Continuing discord between some Western Balkan countries and the instability of economic and social conditions weakening the Western Balkan democracies against the influence of external actors

Exacerbation of the conflict between the EU and third-party actors and increased importance of the region's strategic direction as a result of the coronavirus crisis

Recommendations

Member States, including the Czech Republic, should put the effort to keep the new and dynamic enlargement policy together with relations with the Western Balkan countries high on their European agenda.

From the EU's point of view, economic instruments need to be used more effectively – including through conditionality and pressure on common values – to pursue policy goals, foster good neighbourly relations and reduce the influence of third parties on national policy.

The representation of Czech and European diplomacy in the Western Balkans region should be strengthened.

Czech government should support the abolition of the visa requirement for Kosovo citizens and actively negotiate this step in the EU.



*Vít Dostál, Zuzana Čapková,
Pavlína Janebová, Vendula Karásková*

Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU



“My plan is for a climate-friendly presidency. We will not fly to Brussels, we can do it online from here, we do not even have to build a building in Brussels.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—10 October 2019

“[The Presidency’s budget plan] is under-budgeted financially and in terms of personnel, and we risk, among other things, the security of our presidency. I do not agree with the “we do not care what comes after us” tactic. Prime Minister Babiš will be accountable, even though there will be parliamentary elections in the meantime and the problem may fall on someone else’s shoulders.”

TOMÁŠ PETŘÍČEK

—14 October 2019

“It is a very prestigious thing. Having a presidency is a huge opportunity for the country to self-promote. The country has the opportunity to prove itself, and if we pass on this, we lose out. It’s really about building a country brand and showcasing what we have here.”

LUBOMÍR ZAORÁLEK

—14 October 2019

“It is not a matter of surviving the half-year unscathed, but of using this unique opportunity to do things that are important to the Czech Republic and that we, as a Member State, could not do on our own. It’s not enough at the end of the presidency to say we survived and we didn’t embarrass ourselves.”

ONDŘEJ BENEŠÍK

—25 March 2019

The presidency of the Council of the EU, which the Czech Republic will take over in the second half of 2022, undeniably represents an important opportunity to promote its priorities on the EU agenda, positively present and raise the profile of the Czech Republic and, last but not least, communicate EU issues to the Czech people. While the Lisbon Treaty established a permanent presidency of the European Council and in the EU's external relations, the six-month presidency is an opportunity to fundamentally influence the Union's agenda. It can even be argued that for the Czech Republic, as a medium-sized state, the currently more narrowly defined role of the presidency makes it possible to better concentrate its capacity on negotiations in the Council and with other institutions and thus achieve results more effectively. Despite the fact that the first Czech presidency in 2009 took place according to the pre-Lisbon rules and it left a somewhat embarrassing impression due to the unfortunate domestic political development and its impact on the image of the presidency in the media, the experience can still be used in some respects. As part of past experience, for example, the Czech Republic did well on the organisational aspect of the presidency and successfully led to conclusion negotiations on legislative acts.

Two years before the second Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, the political debate has so far focused mainly on its funding. While the preparatory phase has already begun, most prominent presidency-related news in the Czech media so far concerned Babiš's government's plan to cut spending significantly. In October 2019, despite the disagreement of the ministers nominated for the CSSD, the government passed, the Prime Minister's proposal for a budget of CZK 1.24 billion (compared with the double amount originally considered). Compared to the first presidency in 2009 (CZK 3.75 billion), the second presidency will be much more economical. Efforts to save on public funds are not necessarily a sign of lack of interest in future obligations arising from the role of an EU Member State. However, the simplified interpretation of the presidency as unnecessary and overpriced has helped to undermine the importance of this institute. The questioning of the meaning of the presidency also did not help the general public to understand Czech membership in the EU. However, allocating a lower amount from the national budget than would be expected, given the previous experience and expenditure of other Member States, does not automatically mean that the Czech Presidency is doomed to failure. In addition, the ministries will most likely find the funds in their budgets in the end.

With his emphasis on the financial side, Prime Minister Babiš set the course of the discussion, which was mainly about whether the presidency was important – and nec-

essary. The question of how the Czech Republic should approach the presidency and what priorities to set was not a part of the discourse. Although the opposition criticized the government for the absence of the presidency's concept and themes, this European task has not yet generally been an important topic in the Czech political debate. It can be assumed that this approach will change as the presidency looms closer.

Although the Czech discussion about the presidency has so far focused mainly on the budget and personnel resources, in the middle of the year it began to shift to content priorities. In addition to their formulation, it is necessary to prepare for the themes that we can expect during the presidency, and for the negotiations of which Czech representatives will be responsible. By autumn 2022, the vast majority of the European Commission's current legislative proposals will be on the table, in particular the initiatives contained in the European Green Deal. The Czech state administration should start focusing on which legislation will be key during our presidency and reserve sufficient personnel capacity.

The published list of basic starting points for the presidency's priorities arising from inter-ministerial debates and consultations with the social partners covers a total of thirty items in five areas. It spans almost all areas of EU activity without an order of importance for the Czech Presidency. With the publication of the starting points, the Office of the Government also conducted a short public consultation and a survey on the motto of the presidency.



The priority topics and the schedule of meetings will also be influenced by the so-called presidency trio, of which the Czech Republic will be a part. With the previous French and Swedish presidencies, the Czech Republic will draw up a joint 18-month program of the Council from January 2022 to June 2023. The trio states should start coordinating their priorities and working together already this year. The French Presidency and all preparations for it will be strongly influenced by the presidential elections to be held in April and May 2022.

To intensify cooperation, trio states usually send their experts to other countries' institutions in order to gain a better insight into the state's thinking on a common agenda. The Czech Republic should seize such opportunities like France and Sweden will do. In addition to an undeniable professional contribution, it would also prove to be a constructive and cooperative partner.

Although good handling of the organisation, management and negotiations will be the expected minimum for the Czech Presidency, the Czech Republic should not give up the opportunity to champion some of its own priorities and bring them to the forefront. Even while maintaining the position of an impartial negotiator, some areas can be prioritized over others by setting, structuring or abandoning the Council's agenda. Even the presidency in the post-Lisbon format is not entirely powerless in terms of pursuing national priorities. But it is important to know these priorities. They should reflect long-term Czech interests in the framework of European integration and be based on a deep discussion among experts, bureaucrats, and politicians. It is the interconnection of these three spheres that is the key precondition for finding a strong leitmotif for the presidency, lobbying it on the national level and making it the international legacy. At the same time, political leadership is an irreplaceable part of the presidency preparation and execution, including the identification and promotion of key themes.

Likewise, the presidency is an opportunity to bring the European Union closer to the citizens. Therefore, its communication must not be neglected. Recent sociological surveys have confirmed that Czechs view European integration more favourably if they see a Czech footprint. The presidency can do just that and show that the Czech Republic is making a positive contribution to European integration. It would be a suitable counter-narrative to the usual indignant self-presentation as a weak and marginalized member of the EU.

It will be crucial for the success of the Czech Presidency that the government learns from previous experience. Political developments in the Czech Republic, events in the

EU, but also the broader foreign policy context will all be important factors that will influence the presidency. Unexpected events can occur on all three levels, which will affect the already made program. Therefore, the government should not underestimate the presidency, both in terms of personnel and security.

The Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU is to take place just a few months after the regular parliamentary elections and at the time of the presidential election campaign. Due to the fragmentation and polarization of the Czech political scene, it is necessary to take into account the potentiality of many months of negotiations of a new cabinet and a tense political atmosphere. At the same time, political stability should be a higher common interest for this period. The government should discuss the basic issues of the presidency with the democratic opposition at the time of preparation. As in the case of the common priorities for the Brexit negotiations agreed by all parliamentary parties in 2017, a joint memorandum for the Czech Presidency of the Council should now be agreed. All political parties should then address the presidency in their program documents and emphasize its importance. They should then look for language proficient people with knowledge of EU issues for possible ministerial positions.

Context

The considerable importance of the institute of the presidency, despite the limited role of the presiding country in the post-Lisbon format

The presidency as honorary negotiator brokering compromise between Member States and between the Council and other institutions

An opportunity for the country holding the presidency to achieve its own goals through appropriate structuring of the Council's agenda

The timing of the Czech presidency approximately in the middle of the mandate of the current European Commission, when important acts will already be in the legislative process, and at the same time after the expected strong French presidency

Present

The discussion about the presidency focusing so far mainly on its financing and personnel resources, leading to discord in the government

Impairment of the importance of the presidency due to its simplified interpretation as unnecessary and overpriced


The government's outline of presidency priorities covering a wide range of topics without a clear hierarchy

Recommendations

The Czech Republic should formulate a narrower scope of presidency priorities. They should reflect long-term Czech interests in the framework of European integration and be based on a deep discussion among experts, bureaucrats and politicians.

The presidency's priorities should also be discussed with the opposition parties, and the common goal should be to achieve political stability in the second half of 2022.

The presidency is a unique opportunity to communicate European integration to citizens.



*Tomáš Jungwirth
Romana Březovská
Martin Madej*

Climate Policies of the Czech Republic



“We will be absolutely brutal and we will not give in to the European Commission. We cannot be thinking of the ambitions of a green Europe at a time when one company after another are folding.”

KAREL HAVLÍČEK

—16 March 2020

“We must appeal to reduce emissions on other continents through enforcing compliance with international agreements, but also to use climate diplomacy, for example, when concluding trade agreements with other parties.”

DITA CHARANZOVÁ

—28 November 2019

“Climate change is the biggest challenge in human history.”

RICHARD BRABEC

—4 December 2019

“We will not return to the caves.”

ANDREJ BABIŠ

—3 December 2019

Climate change, combined with other environmental problems, represents an unprecedented civilizational challenge of global proportions, the foreign policy implications of which can no longer be overlooked.

The outputs of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a platform that consolidates the latest scientific knowledge on climate change, reaffirmed the urgency of increasing the resilience of natural and socio-economic systems while ambitiously reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Its Special Report on Climate Change and Land and Special Report on the Oceans and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, both published in 2019, illustrate the growing far-reaching risks and the need for comprehensive global and coordinated (re)action.

The ground-breaking report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) also mentions climate change as one of the five direct drivers of the ongoing mass extinction. The current actions of the international community would warm up the planet by about 4°C; and if the present commitments are met by about 3°C by the end of the 21st century. In the face of this, there is a remarkable slowness with which national policies respond to the scientifically proven climate crisis and its effects. The Czech Republic is no exception.

The Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement (COP25) was held in the first two weeks of December last year. The finalization of the rules for the implementation of the Paris Agreement replacing the Kyoto Protocol is being postponed to the next climate conference (COP26), as cross-border carbon market mechanisms have not yet been agreed. Other urgent topics include compensating for loss and damage caused by the effects of climate change (mainly in developing countries), transparency of data reporting, long-term commitments on climate finance or the agreement on the Global Goal on Adaptation.

As a result of the growing voice of voters in the European elections and the climate movement in Europe, the new European Commission led by Ursula von der Leyen has made these issues one of its top priorities. Both the Council and Parliament have committed themselves to the goal of achieving EU climate neutrality by 2050. In the spring of this year, a draft European Climate Law was presented to confirm this commitment. The Commission has also begun to negotiate a carbon border adjustment tax, a key instrument that should help create a level playing field for European industry on world markets and prevent the so-called carbon leakage to other countries.

The flagship of the Union's efforts to protect the climate has been the European Green Deal, a strategy for achieving sustainability and reducing the emission intensity

of the European economy, which is linked, *inter alia*, to circular economy and efforts to reduce pollution and protect biodiversity. The policy includes efforts to mobilize up to one trillion euros over the next ten years for related investments; half of this amount should come from the EU budget. The European Green Deal includes financial instruments specifically available to poorer and fossil fuel-dependent Central and Eastern European countries. The Czech government was mostly negative about the plan, both for reasons of principle and for the allegedly insufficient financial allocation.

The Czech position vis-à-vis the European climate agenda is paradoxical given that the average temperature in the Czech Republic has increased by 2°C over the last 60 years. Closely related to this fact are the current episodes of drought, which are the worst in 500 years. This manifestation of climate change hit hard the already weakened trees and provided space for a bark beetle invasion. At the same time, it is increasingly felt by farmers, whose yields are directly threatened. The ubiquitous drought has thus become one of the reasons why, according to a survey by the STEM agency, 84% of the Czech public agree with the statement that human-induced climate change threatens our future. The government has prepared several initiatives to combat drought – either by better water retention in the landscape or via the construction of dams.

Climate change mitigation is addressed in the National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), which was approved by the government in January. The document sets out the outlook for the 2030's key targets and policies in the five dimensions of the Energy Union: decarbonisation, energy efficiency, energy security, internal energy market, and research, innovation and competitiveness. While, for example, in the area of the internal market, the Union can count on a suitably sized Czech electricity network, when it comes to renewable energy sources, the original Czech target of a 20.8% share in gross final energy consumption has drawn criticism from the European Commission. Even the revised target of 22% does not reach the proposed minimum of 23%, and the Commission is therefore expected to call for an explanation of why the Czech Republic is resisting the much-needed rapid transition to clean resources.

At the moment, the Czech energy sector is still highly dependent on coal, a key source of CO₂ emissions. There is no doubt that without the closure of mines and coal-fired power plants, there will be no significant drop in emissions. Therefore, in the summer of 2019, drawing on international inspiration, the government set up the so-called Coal Commission, which in September this year is to recommend a date and a form of withdrawal from coal energy, also taking into account the legal, social and economic impact of this action. However, given the Commission's composition, the likelihood

of reaching an agreement between the industry and the environmental movements is compromised. Recognized climatologists and other scientists are completely absent from the Commission.

In the context of the coronavirus crisis, most EU Member States, representatives of institutions and many major corporations have expressed support for the climate agenda. This shared view was also confirmed in July by the European Council when discussing the new budget and economic recovery after the pandemic. On the contrary, the representatives of the Czech government abused the recent situation to openly attack the increased climate ambitions of the European Union and the European Green Deal. In doing so, they have shown that they do not care about economic recovery towards sustainability and a low-emission economy as much as about returning to the current carbon-intensive industrial model. The Czech Republic remained alone in this position within the Visegrad Group and eventually abandoned it, or at least blunted its criticism. EU institutions' agreement with state-funded development of nuclear reactors became an important national priority for the negotiations.



The effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the climate agenda are diverse and ambiguous. On the one hand, this year will see an unprecedented global drop in GHG emissions, on the other hand, there has been a shift in political and social attention to the immediate health crisis.

In the pandemic's shadow, it was decided to move the COP26 global climate conference to the next year. It was at COP26, however, that the parties to the Paris Agreement were to present more ambitious Nationally determined contributions to climate change mitigation. The role of these contributions is crucial – on the basis of their regular updates, the emission targets are to be tightened and the rising average global temperature to be capped, by the end of the century, at a maximum of 2°C compared to the pre-industrial era.

The dynamics of climate action at the highest level will also be further influenced by the withdrawal of the UK from the EU and the planned withdrawal of the USA (the second largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world) from the Paris Agreement. In addition to China's position, the new shape of the post-2020 climate regime will thus depend significantly on the EU's assertiveness and climate diplomacy, and on the outcome of the US presidential election.

The Czech Republic, as an EU Member State, needs to be involved in the active promotion of EU interests and contribute to achieving the global temperature goal. Climate change should become one of its strategic priorities in international dialogues and negotiations, not only during the Czech Republic's forthcoming presidency of the EU Council in 2022. The Czech Republic should also support greater or systematic promotion of groups that are currently significantly underrepresented in its foreign policy decision-making, but which will be most affected by the impacts of a changing climate, starting with women.

Plans are one thing and responsibilities another. The purpose of the so-called European Climate Law proposed by the European Commission in March 2020 is to turn the goal of 2050 climate neutrality into a legal commitment. This will mean, for example, regular monitoring of Member States' implementation of climate policies by the European Commission. The Commission expects the European Climate Law to deliver, among other things, a stable environment for private sector investment in low-carbon technologies.

When the Ministry of Industry and Trade finalized the above-mentioned National Energy and Climate Plan last year, the European target of an overall reduction by 40%

in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared with the baseline of 1990 was still in force. However, the new European Commission has the ambition to increase it to 50-55%, while the European Parliament calls for a reduction of up to 65%. The key question in the coming months will be the extent to which the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) is intended to contribute to the new objective and the involvement of other sectors, such as agriculture, waste management and much of transport, which are regulated at a national level and often neglected.

At the EU level, the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027 is currently being finalized, which should mobilize the necessary investments in low-carbon transformation. The European Council in July decided to allocate 30% of all European funding in the coming years to climate action, which is even more than what was originally proposed by the Commission. In the context of the related debate on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the aim is to place greater emphasis on climate and environmental protection in general. However, this approach is in conflict with the reality of the Czech Republic, which, due to the structure of domestic agriculture, insists on maintaining area subsidies per hectare of cultivated area.

As part of the European Green Deal, the preparation of a new Adaptation Strategy has begun. Given the growing risks accompanying climate change, it should focus on strengthening the resilience of (eco)systems, for example by preventing damage to infrastructure, better data handling, involvement of the private sector (insurance, etc.) or municipalities. Whether the Czech government will seize this opportunity is hard to say. Currently, only two regions of the Czech Republic have their own adaptation strategies, only about 20 cities are involved in the Covenant of Mayors for sustainable energy and climate, and Czech private sector initiatives that would address climate issues with sufficient invention have not yet materialized. That is a shame. The government should therefore, as a minimum, respond to the impulses sent, raise awareness of the global issues and their local impacts, and encourage its citizens to become part of the solution, not the drivers of climate change.

Rising carbon prices, whether through the EU ETS or other instruments, is a major threat to European industry. The Czech Republic also flags the risk that production will be relocated to countries where similar rules do not exist and, as a result, so-called carbon leakage will occur. That is also why, as an industrially-oriented country, the Czech Republic should strive to create a functioning European carbon border adjustment mechanism. The coming months and years will show whether the EU is still able to lay

down the conditions for the functioning of world markets and motivate other global powers to increase the ambitions of their climate policies.

In the absence of a constructive approach on the part of the United States, the future of global climate ambitions remains largely in the hands of two superpowers: the EU and China. The postponement of their summit scheduled for September this year in Leipzig and its potential complete cancellation suggest that it will be very difficult to agree on a common increase of climate ambitions and on strengthening the international climate regime. The Czech Republic must also realize that in order for the European Union to be able to credibly ask China to increase its mitigation targets, it needs to first clean up its own backyard. Increasing and, above all, achieving the climate goals by 2030 is a necessary precondition.

The Czech Republic's half-hearted position on the European climate agenda in connection with the pandemic spells out mainly negatives for the country as a whole. The idea that the European Green Deal would fall under the table once and for all and the related funds would be given to the Member States for free use is naive. The earmarking of these funds means that unless the Czech Republic uses them to kickstart the transformation in line with climate goals, they will remain unavailable. In the area of external policies, it is highly desirable for the Czech Republic to increase the volume of climate finance directed to the Green Climate Fund or through mechanisms of bilateral development cooperation.

Context

Deepening climate crisis which, in the conditions of the Czech Republic, manifests as persistent drought

Advent of the climate movement and raising public awareness of climate issues and related matters

Climate agenda at the heart of the new European Commission's plans

Present

Contradictory effects of the coronavirus pandemic on the climate agenda: diversion of attention away from the subject while emissions, coal and oil production declined

Passive approach of the Czech Republic; resistance to the planned increase in European mitigation targets, rejection of the European Green Deal while aspiring for maximum allocation from EU funds

Recommendations

The government must use the resources available under the European Green Deal to transform the domestic economy with an emphasis on changing the resource base and energy savings.

The Czech Republic should constructively promote its interests within the European climate agenda with an emphasis on the use of the industrial and technological potential of the country in the field of savings and clean energy sources.

In the field of adaptation, private entities and municipalities should be more actively involved, and the government should support and coordinate this process.

The government should significantly increase the volume of funds committed to climate measures within the framework of international development cooperation

ACP

African, Caribbean and Pacific countries

AfD

Alternative for Germany

AMO

Association for International Affairs

ASEAN

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BIS

Security Information Service

CFSP

Common Foreign and Security Policy

CO₂

Carbon Dioxide

ČSSD

Czech Social Democratic Party

EaP

Eastern Partnership

EP

European Parliament

EU

European Union

EU ETS

EU Emissions Trading System

EUTM

European Union Training Mission

GDP

Gross Domestic Product

GHG

Greenhouse Gas

INF

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty

IPBES

Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform
on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

IPCC

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

KSČM

Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia

MFA

Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MFJ

Multiannual Financial Framework

NATO

North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NECP

National Energy and Climate Plan

NÚKIB

National Cyber and Information Security Agency

PESCO

Permanent Structured Cooperation

SPD

Freedom and Direct Democracy

SURE

European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate
Unemployment Risks in an Emergency

UN

United Nations

V₄

Visegrad Group

WHO

World Health Organization

WTO

World Trade Organization

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Association for International Affairs (AMO)

Association for International Affairs is a non-governmental non-profit organization founded in 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. We offer space for the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts and projects for the development of education, understanding and tolerance among people.

AMO is a unique transparent platform that brokers dialogue between the general public, academia, civil society, politics and business. It has a tradition of promoting the interest of Czech citizens in international affairs and provides information necessary for forming independent opinion on current events both at home and abroad.

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- formulates and publishes briefing, research and policy papers;
- arranges international conferences, expert seminars, roundtables, public debates;
- organizes educational projects;
- presents critical assessments and comments on current events for local and international press;
- creates vital conditions for growth of a new expert generation;
- promotes interest in international relations in the wider public domain;
- cooperates with like-minded local and international institutions.

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