

# Agenda

for Czech  
Foreign Policy

**Eds.**

Pavčina Janebová

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## **AGENDA FOR CZECH FOREIGN POLICY 2021**

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# Contents

**8**

Czech foreign policy on the road from pandemic to EU presidency

**14**

Presidency of the Council of the EU

**22**

EU reaction to covid-19

**30**

EU budget and the Recovery Fund

**38**

European and Czech digital policy

**46**

Climate policy

**54**

Germany

**60**

Poland

**66**

Central Europe

**74**

Western Balkans

**82**

Russia

**90**

Eastern Partnership

**98**

Ukraine

**104**

Belarus

**112**

Human rights  
in foreign policy

**120**

International migration

**128**

Czech arms exports

**136**

Czech approach to NATO

**142**

Transatlantic relations

**148**

United Kingdom

**156**

China

**164**

Middle East

**172**

Africa

**178**

List of abbreviations

**180**

Authors

**182**

About AMO

# Foreword

The background of the page is a solid dark blue. Overlaid on this are numerous thin, light blue wavy lines that flow diagonally from the top left towards the bottom right. These lines vary in frequency and amplitude, creating a textured, topographical effect. In the center of the page, there is a single, small white dot.

Pavĺína Janebová

This year the Association for International Affairs (AMO) publishes the 15th edition of its Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy. From the outset, its purpose has been to provide an expert and necessarily normative assessment of Czech foreign policy and to make recommendations to its relevant actors for the future. AMO's long-standing presence in the Czech foreign policy community provides us with the necessary insight into particular areas and processes. Our position as an independent think-tank also allows AMO to view key international issues with sufficient distance and to come up with views and solutions that are not tied by everyday institutional and political realities. We are convinced that including this kind of perspective in the debate is essential for the formulation of a quality foreign policy. The agenda should thus be beneficial not only for those directly concerned with foreign policy, but also for members of the expert community, journalists and the wider public who are interested in the Czech Republic's engagement in the international environment.

The structure of this year's Agenda is somewhat different from previous years. While some of the chapters remain focused on the Czech Republic's policy towards wider regions (Central Europe, the Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership countries, Africa, the Middle East), others focus on the Czech Republic's relations with selected bilateral partners (Germany, USA, UK, China, Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Belarus), as well as on topics that we consider important for Czech foreign policy (climate policy, human rights, migration, Czech arms exports, the covid-19 pandemic and, of course, the upcoming Czech presidency of the EU Council).

We hope that reading Agenda 2021 – whether or not you agree with its conclusions – will bring new impetus and perspectives to your deliberations on Czech foreign policy and current international issues.

# Czech foreign policy on the road from pandemic to EU presidency

•

Vít Dostál  
Pavína Janebová  
Pavel Havlíček



The covid-19 pandemic has remained the most urgent and visible issue globally over the past twelve months. From the initial shock and dealing with the direct health impacts of the spread of the disease, humanity is moving into the phase of taking stock of the damage, identifying lessons from this unforeseen development which has no equivalent in modern times, and setting up a post-covid future. When viewed retrospectively, 2021 and 2022 are likely to be seen as a critical turning point in social, political, economic and international developments.

Last year, we expressed our conviction here that the consequences of the pandemic would not dramatically transform the international environment, but rather accelerate and accentuate processes already underway – among others, the disintegration of the existing form of the international order and the declining coherence and relevance of the „West“, embodied above all by the transatlantic partnership. The results of the US presidential elections have, in this respect, raised hopes of a ‚return to (some form of) normality‘. The election of Joe Biden has seen most European political leaders visibly relieved that Donald Trump will no longer be destructively acting out of the office of the most powerful politician on the planet for the next four years. It is clear that the Biden administration's foreign policy will differ fundamentally in form from that of Trump's. However, less fundamental changes can be expected in its content, when it comes to the emphasis on responsible membership of European partners in NATO or the fact that US attention will predominantly be focused on regions other than Europe. The EU-US relationship will thus need to be redefined – requiring the EU to identify what it wants from the relationship and what it is willing and able to put into it.

China has managed to cope very well with the economic impacts of the pandemic and as the main challenger to the current international order is strengthening and spreading its economic and military influence. Russia also has continuing ambitions in this regard, albeit on a much smaller scale and with diminishing resources – but for Europe, Russian influence remains a relevant threat. As was shown by the humiliating reception in Moscow in February of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, the EU is not a full partner in Russia's eyes. It should be noted that the EU, with its inconsistency on some key internal issues as well as on external relations (including its relationship with Russia and China) and its hesitancy in consolidating its influence in its neighborhood, does not entirely dispel this impression. The ‚vaccine diplomacy‘ of China and Russia in the Western Balkans and, at least initially, the contrastingly confused EU approach illustrated this. The future of US-Russia relations remains an open question – but the June summit between Presidents Biden and Putin suggested the potential for at least some form of dialogue on some topics. However strongly the ‚West‘ may need to push back against the disruptive efforts of China, Russia and other authoritarian regimes, it is clear that a degree of cooperation is necessary on issues such as combating climate change or disarmament. But it must be approached with diplomatic precision and high expectations tempered.

The course of the urgent phase of the pandemic, the global distribution of vaccines and the post-pandemic economic recovery have all pointed to another long-term

phenomenon key to the survival of the democratic and liberal „West“, namely the huge degree of economic inequality, both between world regions and within individual societies. In addition to the not inconsiderable moral dimension, these persistent inequalities have potentially destructive effects on the cohesion of societies, on political polarization (e.g. on the issue of migration and integration), and thus on the state of democracy, which in the eyes of many people does not bring concrete benefits to their lives. The fragmentation of Western societies greatly increases the chances of success for influence operations of actors such as China and Russia. The task for Western policymakers going forward will thus be, among other things, to think carefully about the equitable distribution of post-covid renewal funds within individual states, and at the same time to put an emphasis on effective assistance to states in the global South.

Despite its tragic consequences, the pandemic is an opportunity to identify steps that will enable the world, Europe and the Czech Republic to emerge from the crisis stronger and more resilient. The EU is successfully seizing this opportunity in linking the post-covid economic recovery with the realization of its climate ambitions, and by advancing the debate on its strategic sovereignty and autonomy and an awareness of the need for its development in the security as well as the economic and technological spheres. At the same time, however, it has experienced thirteen years of essentially uninterrupted crises, internal disputes over its core values, populist politicians at the head of a number of Member States, its legitimacy being questioned and a low level of citizen identification with the integration project.



These changes in the European and the global environment have also impacted on Czech foreign policy. Over the past 12 months, the Czech Republic has been struggling with an unprecedented health crisis, which has resulted in the need to respond in a number of areas. Health, social, economic, information and education policies have all been in the spotlight, but the importance of foreign policy for society has not gone away.

On the contrary, the pandemic demonstrated the importance of international co-operation for the Czech Republic, which had to coordinate restrictions on movement between countries, consider appeals for foreign medical assistance or be able to provide it itself. Above all, though, through the joint action of EU countries, it was possible to obtain sufficient vaccines for Czech citizens. The search for an adequate EU response to the pandemic brought the Czech Republic new resources for post-pandemic economic revival through the Recovery Fund. Together with the agreement on the new multiannual European budget, this brought to a close many years of negotiations that had occupied a substantial part of the bureaucratic apparatus devoted to EU policy. It should be added that the negotiations themselves were very successful for the Czech Republic, as it pushed through almost all of its priorities. On the other hand, the case concerning the Prime Minister's conflict of interest has escalated, which increasingly complicates the implementation of Czech European interests.

The key foreign policy event of the last few months was the revelation of the involvement of the Russian secret services in the explosion of an ammunition depot in Vrbětice in 2014. The Czech response should have been better coordinated in advance and subsequently more precisely communicated, but it has nevertheless brought a clearly positive result – a reduction in the scope for Russian intelligence operations on Czech territory, the danger of which the secret services have been warning about for many years. With its denial of responsibility and further escalations, Moscow has pushed Czech-Russian relations to below freezing point. Considerations of possible purchases of Russian vaccines have stopped, and the possibility of Russian suppliers being involved in the development of Czech nuclear power has become unrealistic.

Czech-Chinese relations also deteriorated, although their course was not as dramatic as in the case of Russia. Relations became heated because of Miloš Vystrčil's trip to Taiwan at the turn of August and September last year and since then they have been in a state of hibernation, which can also be partially explained by the aforementioned European and global context. The reevaluation of mutual relations is occasionally accompanied by a (futile) search for any positives from the huge investment of political capital in this relationship on the part of some Czech political leaders in particular – with the President in first place.

The circumstances of the pandemic year did not provide room for a long-needed revival of relations with the Czech Republic's key partners. Like almost all of Europe, the Czech Republic places high hopes on cooperation with the administration of Joe Biden. However, many American expectations of our region remain unchanged, and on issues such as investment in its own defense or the Three Seas Initiative, the Czech Republic has little to offer. Nor are we better off in the fight against global climate change, which is the major political issue of the day for the new US administration. On the other hand, regulation and security of 5G networks, where the Czech Republic has built up its position in the past and should build on it, remains a possible positive agenda for the future.

Similarly, the Czech Republic has been treading water in its relations with other important partners. Communications with Germany did not go beyond dealing with the impact of the pandemic. The dispute over the expansion of the Turów mine was practically the only significant issue in relations with Poland, and even when it comes to Visegrad cooperation, apart from the promise of an increased budget for the International Visegrad Fund, we did not see any great success.

Traditional themes of Czech foreign policy, such as support for human rights or the rapprochement of the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans with the EU, have not lost any of their importance and the Czech Republic has remained active in them. It supported Belarusian civil society and independent media, developed relations with Ukraine and tried to contribute to a positive shift in enlargement policy. However, due to the limitations brought about by the pandemic, only partial progress has been made.

In recent months, the pre-election atmosphere has also had an impact on foreign policy. The power rivalry within the ČSSD first led to the replacement of the foreign

minister. This did not pass without a regrettable escapade, in which the first publicly nominated candidate, Lubomír Zaorálek, turned the position down and criticized the state of the office – it must be added, after eight years of almost continuous leadership by the party of which he is a member. In the months that followed, the outside world and the EU became a pretext for a part of the political spectrum to score political points by scaremongering, as evidenced by the return of the migration issue to Prime Minister Babiš's rhetoric or the framing of joint European climate initiatives as a path to the decline of the Czech economy. In this quarrelsome environment, it was possible to find only a few instances of efforts to strengthen dialogue, among which were the round tables with representatives of political parties organized by Minister Kulháněk on the future of relations with Russia and on the priorities of the Czech EU presidency. Parliamentary committees have also been active as always. Last but not least, it is important to remember that the Czech Foreign Service has unfortunately had to cope with a decline in credibility. It has been damaged by leaked communications showing that some diplomatic posts were obtained on the basis of personal favors and political pressure rather than professional expertise, or by the return of people with dubious backgrounds to Czernin Palace.



Next year, the Czech Republic will hold its second presidency of the Council of the EU, which will be the central political task for the government that will emerge from the autumn parliamentary elections. The success or failure of the presidency will affect the Czech Republic's position in the EU and should therefore be seen as a huge opportunity and a chance to raise the profile of foreign and European policy among the Czech political representatives and to wake them up from their current international political slumber.

In addition to the completion of diplomatic and bureaucratic preparations, the presidency will require a huge commitment from the politicians. Regretfully, this has not been the case so far, as almost all ministers have been completely indifferent to the EU agenda in recent months. Each member of the cabinet that emerges from the next elections must know exactly what topics are being discussed at the relevant sectoral Councils, must know the position of the Czech Republic and identify the priorities of the presidency. Although the central role of the presiding state is to seek compromises and act on behalf of the Council, the Czech Republic must be able to name the political ambitions with which it will enter on its mandate as Europe's leader. In addition to the natural desire to advance (or, on the contrary, slow down) the discussion of legislative acts or to highlight particular political issues, the next government also must not forget that the presidency is an excellent communication opportunity. It is a chance to show the Czech euro-sceptic public the benefits of EU membership and the successes we are achieving thanks to it.

Moreover, the preparations for the presidency, as well as its actual performance, are the moment when we become a little more interesting to the outside world. As the country setting the EU agenda, we have the chance to develop or establish existing and new contacts and to build our position on issues of long-term importance to us. The Czech Republic, as a medium-sized European state and a rather small country on a global comparison, will always face an asymmetry. However, as we recall in almost all chapters of this book, thanks to the presidency and the preparations for it, we can strengthen or build on our position on a number of issues. To approach it with the sole ambition of 'getting through these six months without disgrace' would be to squander a generational opportunity.

Any investment in relations with Russia is pointless in the current situation. The Kremlin's attitude towards the Czech Republic is openly hostile. The Vrbětice case is still under investigation and, given the demands for compensation and Russia's refusal to accept responsibility for the explosions, we cannot expect any movement in this relationship. The Czech stance towards Russia thus requires consistency and a full awareness of these axioms, which is still not happening and thus demands further political leadership. It will also be crucial for the Czech Republic to co-shape European policy towards Russia. Only a consistent position at European level and the ability to find credible partners for its own positions can lead the Kremlin to the necessary recognition of Czech demands. The efforts to deal with the Vrbětice case must serve as a spur for foreign policy activity, because the expulsion of the Russian spies is only the start of the story. It will only end with an admission of guilt and compensation.

Similarly, the current decline in relations with Beijing should lead to consistent foreign policy thought. Given the European and transatlantic context and China's aggressive rhetoric, it is hard to imagine that it would be desirable for the Czech Republic to revive this relationship in any way. On the contrary, it is necessary to prepare the Czech export-oriented economy for the next phase of the rivalry between the US and China and to join the debates on European autonomy and discussions on shortening supply chains.

Facing Czech foreign policy is a period of great challenges, which will require coordination on the domestic political scene. The winners and the losers of the parliamentary elections should strive for the success of the Czech EU Council presidency. The collapse of the government during the first Czech mandate at the head of Europe had a negative impact on the Czech reputation in Europe, on public opinion and on the relationship between the state administration and the political elite.

Czech foreign policy has been the subject of a number of conflicts in the last 8 years. For two electoral periods, it has been under the leadership of ANO and ČSSD, and the democratic opposition has strongly opposed their ideas, saying that it would not build on this period were it to come to power. However, this promised discontinuity should be based on well thought through considerations, elaborate strategies and consensus within voting blocs. Let us trust that we will see a quality foreign policy from whoever forms the government.

# Presidency of the Council of the EU



Vít Dostál  
Zuzana Čapková  
Pavlína Janebová  
Vendula Kazlauskas

“We do not underestimate our presidency of the EU Council. On the contrary, my government and I are aware that we have a unique opportunity to repair the Czech Republic’s reputation after the 2009 presidency, which was tarnished in particular by the fall of the then government.”

— **Andrej Babiš**  
30 June 2021

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“For example, compared to Portugal, which just held the presidency, the Czech plans for some ministries are half the size. Know-how and manpower are absolutely fundamental. The main wealth is in the people who know and who are devoted to these topics.”

— **Ivan Bartoš**  
5 July 2021

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“I am aware that the next government will have the final say on the priorities of the Czech presidency, but I am also convinced that we need to have a discussion on this topic across the political spectrum now. Our presidency can be successful if we have the broadest possible consensus not only politically but also on the basis of what the people want.”

— **Jakub Kulháněk**  
15 July 2021

In the second half of 2022, the Czech Republic will assume the presidency of the Council of the EU. As the deadline approaches, the debate on its significance and benefits has continued to grow, as have the professional and administrative preparations. The importance of the presidency is increasingly being underlined, especially by the civil servants working to ensure its success. Government representatives hardly talk about its importance and the possible benefits for the Czech Republic. However, the fact that it is no longer being downplayed and ridiculed by the Prime Minister is a positive development. A part of the opposition, as well as the concerned public, stresses that it is an important task that should be given more attention and funding. In this context, in June 2021, public figures addressed an open letter to the Prime Minister expressing their concerns about the underfunding of the presidency and missing the opportunities that it brings. Subsequently, at the end of August, in a report on the state of preparations for the presidency, the government decided to increase the budget by around 14%.

The debate on the preparations for the presidency is gradually shifting from the question of securing sufficient funding for its implementation to the content and possible benefits for the Czech Republic, which is a move in the right direction. The presidency creates an important opportunity to raise the profile of the Czech Republic and its priority issues in the EU, as well as a chance to explain the benefits of Czech membership of the EU to its citizens. However, the current lack of political leadership means that the Czech Republic's goal is mainly to manage the organizational and procedural aspects of the presidency without any significant further ambition.

Preparations for the presidency have been intensified by the state administration, although the process has been hampered by the covid-19 pandemic. The presidency agenda falls under the responsibility of the Office of the Government, which became the central coordinator for its preparation and execution on the basis of a government resolution of October 2019. In January 2021, the Department for the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU was established. Training and preparation of staff and strengthening of the Permanent Representation of the Czech Republic to the EU has continued.

There are three main dimensions under which the priorities of the Czech presidency can be discussed. The first comprises more or less predetermined areas, policies and legislative proposals that the Czech Republic intends to focus on and actively promote during its presidency. The priorities of the Czech Republic have not yet been defined, that is to say, the documents produced so far cover a wide range of topics without clearly setting out their relative importance. Setting the political priorities of the presidency is a task requiring political legitimacy and should be reflective of an inclusive professional and political debate. It cannot just be delegated to the bureaucratic apparatus however capable it is.

However, given the limited interest of Czech political representatives in the presidency – and the current pre-election or immediate post-election situation – it is expected that the Czech presidency will be more „agenda-driven“, i.e. it will focus



mainly on dealing with the debate around current issues, so, the second dimension. Here, too, there is room for the presidency to influence the topics in its preferred direction – to move them forward or, on the contrary, to push them on to the margins. Such an approach is legitimate, but at the same time it could be seen as a missed opportunity to actively set the EU agenda. Given the delay in the legislative process due to the covid-19 pandemic, the Council will probably have a large amount of legislation on its table during the Czech presidency. The Czech Republic intends to concentrate, among other things, on the Digital Services Act and the Digital Markets Act. It is also certain that the Czech presidency will not avoid the topic of climate policies and the green transition. The Czech Republic should use its presidency, among other things, to initiate a constructive discussion on the different starting points and positions of Member States in this regard and to seek a compromise, e.g. on the topic of the social aspects of the transition.

The last dimension consists of the jointly formulated priorities of the trio. The program of the trio is created by the Czech Republic in cooperation with France and Sweden and its final form is thus a compromise between the positions of all countries. Its preparation is ongoing and it will be presented in early 2022 before the start of the French presidency. The timing of the Czech presidency in the middle of the trio is advantageous in that it will have the opportunity to influence both the topics taken over from France and to set the agenda for the incoming Sweden.

In addition to the opportunity to promote our own priorities at the EU level, it is also desirable to use the Council presidency to communicate the benefits of EU membership to the relatively eurosceptic citizens of the Czech Republic. This is also an aspect that is independent of current events in the EU and can be prepared for well in advance. For the time being, however, communications regarding the Czech presidency are focused for the most part on keeping up to speed with the ongoing preparations and logistical issues that are essential for the minimum management of the presidency. Within the Department for the Czech presidency of the EU Council, the Office of the Government has also set up a Communications Unit which has already started to implement the adopted Communication Concept for the presidency. An official Twitter account for the presidency preparations has also been set up, where the Government Office sends updates on the progress of the preparations, the activities of ministers in this area and what events will take place during the presidency.

The official communication therefore neglects to focus on the topic of EU membership in general and what it brings to Czech citizens. The Czech presidency offers an ideal opportunity to present some of the concrete work Czech politicians do at the European level and the influence they have there, and to break the prevailing view of the Czech public that “Brussels decides for us and without us”. A survey by the STEM Institute for Empirical Research showed that in December 2020, only 39% of Czechs knew that the Czech Prime Minister and ministers represent the Czech Republic in EU institutions and decision-making processes and that the Czech Republic has an influence on EU events. At the same time, communication about Czech successes

directly influences Czech satisfaction with EU membership – it peaked (at almost 70%) in February 2009, when the Czech presidency successfully managed the Russian gas crisis. In 2009, Czech citizens were also more interested in European issues, EU institutions and Czech influence on them. However, in April 2021, only 19% of the public knew that the Czech Republic would hold the EU Council presidency. While awareness has certainly been affected by the covid-19 pandemic, this is about half the percentage as at the same time before the first Czech presidency.



The Czech presidency represents a huge challenge for the public administration, so it is essential that there is a corresponding political interest. All political parties and their representatives must be prepared for the presidency, and they should immediately follow up on the preparations made so far once the government is in place after the autumn elections. The Czech presidency must be a central political priority for the new government. It will be crucial for the new ministers to quickly familiarize themselves with the agenda and with their counterparts, which implies 100% attendance at Council meetings. In order to facilitate this process, it is advisable for individual ministries, following the example of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to initiate a political dialogue with representatives of parliamentary parties on sectoral priorities, thus ensuring good information exchange and consensus.

The approval of the 2022 state budget should confirm an increase in the funds dedicated to the Czech presidency and there should definitely not be any cuts – either in the presidency budget or in departmental operational expenditure, which could also negatively affect the presidency.

It is necessary for the new government to adequately communicate the political priorities of the presidency, which must reflect the long-term interests of the Czech Republic in the EU. Even while maintaining its position as an impartial negotiator, the Czech Republic can play a role in highlighting certain issues within EU policy by bringing them to the fore. The foreign policy topics under consideration for the informal European Council meeting, namely transatlantic relations, the Western Balkans and the Indo-Pacific region, reflect both Czech and European priorities.

The Czech Republic must also take advantage of the communication opportunity that the presidency brings. Apart from informing that the presidency will take place, official communication should also convey what it will mean and why it is important for the Czech Republic. This also requires political leadership and that Czech political representatives have a clear position with regard to the EU. In view of the autumn elections to the Chamber of Deputies, campaign attacks on the EU have started to appear along with a strengthening of rhetoric about “dictates from Brussels”, which will be difficult to turn into positives in public communication after the elections, just several months before the start of the presidency.

Even after the end of the six-month presidency, it will be possible and beneficial to continue in informing the Czech public about the activities of Czech representatives at the EU level and to continue working on the topics initiated or emphasized during the presidency. The needs of Czech citizens should be clearly linked to EU issues. Similarly, it should be possible to establish active partnerships with other European institutions and their Prague offices to promote awareness of the EU, not just in the capital.

Further, it is essential that the upcoming Czech presidency be followed up by systematic work with the people involved in its implementation and use be made of their considerable experience in the administration of EU affairs within the Czech civil service.

The presidency should leave a longer-term imprint on Czech European politics and Czech society. Neglecting its political significance would be very unfortunate. Especially in the context of the experience of 2009, when the collapse of the government in the middle of a well-run presidency led to a communications fiasco.

## Context

- The lasting considerable importance of the institution of the presidency, despite the limited role of the presiding country in the post-Lisbon institutional set-up.
  - The possibility for the presidency to advance or slow down agendas according to its priorities.
  - The expected large volume of legislation to be considered during the Czech presidency.
- 

## Present

- Discussions on the presidency's priorities gradually picking up speed, especially at the bureaucratic level, but less so at the highest political level.
  - Intensification of logistical preparations and the intention to increase the presidency budget.
  - Poor public awareness of the presidency.
- 

## Recommendations

- The new government should formulate narrower priorities for the presidency. They should reflect the long-term interests of the Czech Republic within the framework of European integration and emerge from in-depth professional, administrative and political discussion, as well as the planned timetable for the discussion of legislative proposals.
- Even given the uncertainty of post-election developments, the ministries should immediately start a dialogue with the parliamentary political parties on the priorities of the presidency.
- The presidency must be used as an opportunity to improve the communication of European affairs to the public, because such a chance will not arise again for a long time.



# EU reaction to covid-19



Vendula Kazlauskas  
Magda Komínková

“How would we have justified having spent so much money on vaccines that we would then have had to get rid of?”

— **Milena Hrdíková**

24 March 2021

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“He has now shown himself to be an incompetent negotiator. And he even deprived Czech citizens of 140,000 more vaccines that he could have got. Babiš himself is directly to blame for this, even if he points the finger at whoever else, he cannot talk himself out of this.”

— **Markéta Pekarová Adamová**

2 April 2021

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“We are looking for vaccines all over the world. We are willing to buy AstraZeneca from Denmark. I am flying to Moscow on Monday where I want to negotiate the possible supply of Sputnik V after its approval by the European Medicines Agency.”

— **Jan Hamáček**

14 May 2021

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“When I fought with Sebastian Kurz within Europe to distribute vaccines according to population, the declared solidarity unfortunately did not happen. It was not pretty. I then turned to my friends and Viktor Orbán was the first to promise me this delivery of 40,000 vaccines.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

4 June 2021

When discussing the EU's involvement in addressing the crisis caused by the new covid-19 disease, it is important to mention that health policy falls under the supplementary competencies of the Union. This means that the EU only complements the health policies of the Member States and supports national governments in achieving common goals. Despite the limited possibilities, efforts to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic have been evident from the outset at the EU level. The actions of the EU and the individual Member States can be divided into two main categories: 1) measures to reduce the number of patients and slow the spread of the virus, and 2) measures to support national economies. In response to the rise in the number of those infected, the EU issued measures in extremely rapid succession. Most of them were quickly negotiated and subsequently entered into force.

The European Commission coordinated the closure of external borders, worked with states to organize repatriation flights, secured vaccines and medical supplies, and financially supported research in the field. At the same time, it has sought to combat disinformation about the spread of the disease.

It is clear that the economic impact of the pandemic will be significant. Since the beginning of the crisis, the EU and the Member States have been trying to prevent businesses from closing down and jobs from disappearing. The new multiannual financial framework and recovery plan presented by the Commission at the end of May 2020, which uses – unprecedentedly for the EU – loans on the international financial markets, should contribute to the economic recovery. The creation of this common instrument has been interpreted as a major shift in the EU's fiscal integration, and also a change from the hitherto eurozone-only indebtedness. It is also advantageous from the institutional point of view for the Czech Republic to be involved in the new recovery fund and negotiations on its form.

Changes of opinion, inconsistent positions, rash and incoherently explained decisions and internal political battles are problems that permeate the entire fight against covid-19 in the Czech Republic. From a foreign policy perspective, it is important to recall the worst moments of the crisis, when hospital care was collapsing and yet Czech representatives were unable to agree on whether it was appropriate to use the hospital beds offered from abroad. Even though the Czech Republic was actively offered assistance by neighboring countries – apart from Germany (which offered its medical capacities several times), also Poland, Slovenia and Switzerland – and the governors of the most affected regions also asked for the possibility to transport patients abroad, Prime Minister Babiš and Health Minister Blatný refused these offers and requests. According to them, Czech capacities were sufficient to cope with the situation. In the end, only one Czech patient was transported to Poland.

The key to overcoming the pandemic situation was to obtain the vaccines being developed as quickly as possible. In June 2020, the Czech Republic decided to join the common European approach. This was possible thanks to the solidarity of Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy, who gave up their lead in the supply negotiations and agreed to a joint approach with the other countries. The Commission was manda-



ted to negotiate the purchase and supply of vaccines on behalf of all Member States, including the Czech Republic, which gained a level playing field with other EU countries and access to vaccines at the same time.

However, the actual form of the vaccination process varies considerably from country to country and depends entirely on the national strategy adopted. Following its vaccination strategy, which takes a frugal approach, the Czech Republic initially ordered only 81.1% of the vaccines to which it was entitled based on its population. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš joined Austrian Chancellor Kurz in his criticism of the European Commission for allegedly unfair vaccine distribution. Through its negotiating tactics and its alliance with Austria and Slovenia, the Czech Republic then deprived itself of tens of thousands of extra vaccine doses. Following this, the Czech Prime Minister criticized the European Commission and the joint purchasing system and did not rule out the possibility of purchasing the Sputnik V vaccine from Russia. Especially in the early days of vaccinating the population, the Czech Republic did not progress as quickly as it could have if it had ordered a larger number of doses. By the summer of 2021, however, it was already becoming clear that the biggest obstacle to vaccinating the Czech population was not a lack of vaccines, but insufficient interest in vaccination.

In February 2021 Hungary started purchasing and administering the Sputnik V vaccine, which had not then (and still has not) been approved for use in the EU by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) (after which it also started using the unapproved Sinopharm vaccine), thus breaking the EU's unified approach to vaccination. Shortly after the delivery of Sputnik V doses to Hungary, Prime Minister Babiš visited the country, finding out about their experience with the vaccine and discussing the possibility of using it in the Czech Republic. He also visited Serbia for a similar purpose. Although the Czech Republic's top constitutional officials then agreed that the Czech Republic would use only EMA-approved vaccines, a few days later the Prime Minister and the President decided to send a request to the Russian President for supplies of Sputnik V. The position of the Czech political administration towards the purchase of Sputnik V was similarly ambiguous in the following months. The controversy came to a head in April 2021 with the events surrounding the planned trip to Moscow by Interior Minister Hamáček and the revelation of the Vrbětice case.

The hedging between a common EU approach to vaccination and independent efforts to obtain vaccines not yet approved in the EU left its mark on both the Czech domestic political situation and the Czech position at the EU level.

However, despite inadequate preparations for vaccine distribution and the logistics of inoculating, as well as complications with vaccine delivery in spring 2021, the Czech Republic managed to vaccinate its population at about the same rate as the EU average before the summer. As a whole, the EU has set a target of vaccinating at least 70% of the adult population by the end of summer 2021. Although the pace of vaccination in the Czech Republic has often been criticized, if there is sufficient interest among Czech citizens, the Czech Republic should have no problem meeting this target, as should most other EU countries. The Czech Republic is thus clearly benefiting

from its EU membership, which has enabled it to vaccinate faster than many non-EU countries - Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Russia or China.

As vaccination rates increase, so too does the importance of a single European approach and coordination at the EU level regarding the joint purchase of additional vaccines and the issue of 'vaccine passports'. The European Commission's March proposal for a so-called „digital green certificate“ was negotiated by the EU Council and the European Parliament on an accelerated basis so that this passport facilitating free movement across the EU could enter into force before the start of the main summer tourist season on 1 July. However, the Czech Republic and other states were again not relying solely on a united European approach and were also negotiating bilateral agreements with other countries to facilitate travel.



The chaotic and uncoordinated approach of EU countries to the course of the covid-19 pandemic in its early days was later largely successfully consolidated. Nevertheless, there was a rivalry between states and a breakdown of the EU-wide approach - whether in the scramble for extra vaccine supplies or in the inconsistent approach to vaccines not registered for use within the EU. A common approach will continue to be important. The Czech Republic should therefore take a constructive position on, for example, 'vaccination passports' and push for their widest possible use. Moreover, the European Commission has ambitions that this system could be further expanded and serve as an example for other similar certificates being developed in other parts of the world. The Czech Republic can play an active role in these initiatives and negotiate their adoption with its non-European partners.

In order to reach the goal of vaccinating 70% of the adult population, the Czech Republic will also have to manage a communication campaign and possibly join EU efforts in this area and in the fight against disinformation.

In addition, as vaccination coverage increases in the EU, there will be increasing pressure for solidarity with third countries suffering from vaccine shortages. Although Prime Minister Babiš criticized European exports of vaccines to the rest of the world at the European Council in May 2021, as early as January the then Foreign Minister Petříček joined an appeal to the European Commission urging the EU to provide vaccines to the Balkan countries and help Ukraine cope with the pandemic. In view of the Czech Republic's traditional partnership with the countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans, this opens up an opportunity for the Czech Republic to support these countries, negotiate vaccine supplies for them, and thereby strengthen its position in these regions.

Given the context that the EU has only supporting competencies in the field of health, a deeper debate on the future definition of its competencies (also in the context of the ongoing Conference on the Future of the EU) can also be expected. Moreover,

the Czech Republic will be leading these debates in the second half of 2022 under its presidency of the Council of the EU. The Czech Republic should therefore already be defining its approach to this issue at the domestic level.

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## Context

- The persistence of the covid-19 pandemic, which is affecting EU countries despite advancing vaccination rates.
- Negotiating the supply of sufficient vaccines by the European Commission on behalf of all Member States and the resulting benefits of easier vaccine distribution and better trading conditions.
- Czech domestic and foreign policy being influenced by the government's hedging between the common EU approach to vaccination and efforts to obtain other, albeit not EU registered, vaccines.
- After the chaos in spring 2020 and the associated approval of uncoordinated measures in individual EU countries, an interest in finding a common approach, taking decisions in an accelerated legislative process and negotiating, for example, a single „vaccination passport“.

## Present

- Delivery of a sufficient number of vaccines from the common EU supply and the subsequent fulfillment of the target of vaccinating 70% of the EU population.
  - The need for a national and EU-wide information campaign due to the declining interest in vaccination and disinformation in the public space.
  - Ongoing negotiations between EU institutions on proposals under the so-called European Health Union.
  - The emergence of new mutations and debates on the need for third doses.
  - Persistent under-vaccination in third world countries.
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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should strive to increase the vaccination coverage of its population, including through a well-formulated communication campaign.
- The Czech Republic should actively advocate for increased vaccine supplies to the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans, e.g. by supporting the supply of unused vaccines from EU countries.
- The Czech Republic will influence the debate on the European Health Union and the definition of EU competencies in the field of health in the second half of 2022 from its position of presiding state. It should therefore already be defining its priorities in this area and allocating sufficient capacity to them.



# EU budget and the Recovery Fund



Zuzana Čapková  
Vendula Kazlauskas  
Magda Komínková

“Why would we borrow when we already borrow on the financial markets? We don’t need to borrow from the European budget.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

31 May 2020

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“My first problem is with the really very large amount of EUR 750 billion to be spent in a very short period of time. It is not clear to me how it was arrived at.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

6 June 2020

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“The outcome of the EU summit is good for the Czech Republic, I am glad about it... We need to restructure our economy, we must focus mainly on investment, we must focus on our healthcare... We should try to speed up digitalization as much as possible.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

21 July 2020

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“The aim of the fund is not to patch holes in public budgets or to feed subsidies to the biggest players in traditional industry, but rather to support small and medium-sized enterprises, start-ups, the sustainable economy, so that it will be competitive in the future.”

— **František Kopřiva**

23 June 2021

The EU budget after 2020 is subject to several major challenges – the orientation towards new priorities, the UK's withdrawal from the EU, but especially the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. The European Commission has responded to the situation created by the pandemic with three main steps. First, by introducing more flexible rules for the use of cohesion policy funds; second, by relaxing the rules on state aid; and third, by setting up an emergency recovery fund, known as Next Generation EU, beyond the standard EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which was in the final stages of negotiation in the second half of 2020.

The proposal for the original MFF was presented by the Commission in May 2018. After two years of negotiations, the Commission finally decided at the end of May 2020 to propose the creation of a new instrument to support the recovery of EU economies hit by the effects of the pandemic, Next Generation EU, to be embedded in a new „strong, modern and improved“ long-term EU budget. The parameters of the recovery fund and the new long-term European budget for 2021-2027 were agreed by Member States at a summit in July 2020. The long negotiations were blocked mainly by a dispute over the overall size of the recovery plan and its distribution between grants and loans, with the EU deciding to borrow funds from financial markets to kick-start Member States' economies. The EU will guarantee this loan with its MFF – each country up to the extent of its contribution to the EU budget. However, the increase in their guarantees needs to be approved or ratified by all EU Member States before the drawing of funds can begin. Compromise was also difficult to find on the governance of a key instrument of the Recovery Plan and there was a debate on conditionality regarding the rule of law.

While borrowing is new to the EU, the issue of common EU bonds was discussed during the economic crisis 2009-2012. Member States will borrow indirectly on very good terms, thanks to the EU's high credit rating and relatively low borrowing rates compared to that of some Member States. The funds raised will be repaid from future EU budgets after 2027 and at the latest by 2058. EU leaders have agreed on an allocation of EUR 750 billion, most of which will be distributed in the form of grants. In total, the EU should have EUR 1,824.3 billion available over the seven-year period, the total combined amount of the MFF (EUR 1,074.3 billion) and the EU's recovery instruments.

During negotiations on the MFF, the Czech Republic belonged, as before, to the Friends of Cohesion group and in November 2020 Prague hosted one of the meetings of these countries. In a joint declaration, these countries rejected a reduction in funding for cohesion policy. However, in order to strengthen these “traditional” areas of the budget (cohesion and agriculture), the July agreement of the leaders of the Member States reduced the amounts planned for the EU health program (EU4Health), support for youth and education (Erasmus+) and research and innovation (Horizon Europe). The European Parliament therefore refused to approve the MFF in this form and pushed for an increase in these areas in the concluding phase of negotiations. At the same time, Parliament called for the EU budget's own resources to be strengthened and, in particular, that the use of EU funds be linked to compliance with the rule of law in EU Member States.



It was the negotiation on the conditionality of the disbursement of funds on the basis of a satisfactory state of the rule of law that made the final phase of the negotiations on the MFF and the Recovery Fund problematic. Member States first agreed that if in the future a country was suspected of breaching principles of the rule of law, while at the same time jeopardizing the EU's financial interests, the Commission would propose to suspend all its access to EU funds. This process would be approved by a qualified majority of Member States in the Council.

Following this decision, taken against the will of Hungary and Poland, both countries blocked the adoption of the budgetary framework. It was only at the European Council in December 2020 that the impending budgetary provisionality was averted, when a clarifying text was adopted and agreed by all parties. According to this text, the compatibility of the new rule of law conditionality mechanism with European law is to be assessed by the EU Court of Justice. Hungary and Poland subsequently sent an appeal for such an assessment in March 2021.

The Czech Republic supported the compromise reached by the German presidency on this issue and did not back its Visegrad partners. However, after talks with Polish President Duda, President Zeman announced that the V4 countries should be united in this dispute and support Hungary and Poland. According to a survey for the European Parliament, the Czech public supported the condition of budgetary conditionality least of all in the entire EU.

The Czech Republic could become one of the countries at real risk of being stopped from drawing on EU funds. Because of Prime Minister Babiš's conflict of interest in receiving subsidies for Agrofert projects, a significant group of MEPs from various factions adopted a resolution stating that the Czech Republic does not have sufficient mechanisms in place to prevent conflicts of interest.

In response to the covid-19 pandemic, Member States can also receive temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency situation (known as the SURE instrument). It provides Member States with financial assistance in the form of loans from the EU, which can then be used to address the increase in expenditure associated with efforts to preserve jobs. Although initially reluctant, the Czech Republic eventually applied for a loan for its Antivirus program. Of the EUR 2 billion it will borrow, the Commission had already disbursed the first billion by mid-March 2021.

Next Generation EU has increased pressure on the revenue side of the EU budget. Even after the start of the financial period, it is still unclear where the EU will get all the funds it intends to distribute. The only new internal source, on whose introduction EU leaders agreed at the summer European Council is a tax on non-recycled plastics. In mid-July 2021, as part of the Fit for 55 package, the Commission put forward proposals for new sources of revenue through the EU Emissions Trading System and carbon taxes. The planned presentation of a digital tax was postponed. Following this, by June 2024, the European Commission wants to propose a financial transaction tax, the so-called financial contribution linked to the business sector, and a new common corporate tax base.

The Czech Republic will receive more funding in the new period than in the previous one. Originally, the allocation was to be reduced, but the Recovery Plan will actually increase funds for the Czech Republic and others. The budget negotiations were successful from the point of view of the Czech Republic and most of the demands were met. The main success of the negotiations can be considered to be the Czech Republic's negotiation of the possibility of more flexible use of Structural Funds money. The Czech Republic has the possibility of transferring up to 25% of contributions between individual Structural Funds according to its needs. The allocations of Next Generation EU grants are divided into two main parts - the first will reach states between 2021 and 2022, and the second in 2023 on the basis of an evaluation of the economic development in the previous two years. This scheme was also one of the Czech Republic's priorities during the negotiations.

At the beginning of March 2021, the Czech government approved the distribution of European subsidies for the Czech Republic in the programming period 2021-2027 among the operational programs. The final partnership agreement between the Czech Republic and the Commission on cohesion funds has not yet been approved.

The preparation for drawing from the recovery fund proved more difficult. This is conditional on the submission of National Recovery Plans (NRPs), which should lay out the reforms to be undertaken to mitigate impacts and enable EU economies to respond to future climate, digitalization and sustainability challenges. The NRPs should have been sent to the European Commission by the end of April 2021. However, the Czech NRP was not finally approved by the government until 17 May 2021 and was only sent to Brussels at the end of May. The Czech Republic decided to draw grants of up to CZK 172 billion and will not apply for soft loans of CZK 405 billion. The bulk of the funds (70%) will have to be drawn by 2022, the rest by 2023. In 2022, it will be possible to revise the NRP.

The Ministry of Industry and Trade has been criticized many times for underestimating the preparation of the NRP, for lack of transparency in the drafting of the plan, including a failure to involve relevant partners in the discussion and the document preparation process, or for not incorporating their comments into the final plan, even though the European Commission stressed the need for a broad national debate. For example, environmental organizations pointed out that the NRP proposed insufficient measures to combat climate change, while the Chamber of Commerce did not find in it adequate steps towards the digitalization of public administration, much sought after by the business community, and reproached the government for forgetting to promote lifelong learning. The initial plan, which Prime Minister Babiš brought to Brussels in autumn 2020, was not even sanctioned by the government, which he had not let discuss the content of the plan in advance. In the next version of the document, some basic rules were not respected. One of the main problems was the failure to meet the requirement to use 37% of funds towards climate protection, as required by the agreed rules. The Czech recovery plan fulfilled this rule only to 22%. The opposition pointed out that the NRP should have been endorsed by the Parliament before being sent to Brussels for it to have been based on a broader political consensus. In July 2021, the European Commission approved the Czech recovery plan, but with the

condition that the Czech Republic resolve its conflict of interest issues by the second half of 2022.

In relation to the new European budget, the prospect of the joint indebtedness of EU Member States for decades was mentioned often, as it goes against the principles of the majority of the Czech political representation. It can, though, be said that the creation of a joint program means an end to debates on the indebtedness of the euro-zone alone and thus its closer integration, specifically its exclusion from the common broader integration framework, and on the other hand, it preserves the possibility for the Czech Republic to participate in the negotiations on these instruments and to get involved in them.



Even though the Czech National Recovery Plan has already been approved by the European Commission, the Czech Republic should draw up a long-term strategy on how the Czech economy should look in the upcoming years so that the funds can be used effectively and the investments have a truly positive impact. The recovery plan should not be used to cover expenditure that is missing from the annual national budget, but should serve as a means of transforming the Czech economy into a modern and advanced economy oriented towards areas where the Czech Republic has been lagging behind for a long time, such as renewable resources, digitalization, structural problems on the labor market, etc., which the European Commission has alerted the Czech Republic to in the past during the European Semester evaluation. The NRP should be perceived as a crucial opportunity to modernize the Czech economy and to move closer to the more developed EU countries in terms of living standards.

The condition for drawing funds from the NRP, however, will be to resolve the issue of Prime Minister Babiš's conflict of interest by the second half of 2022. Failing this, the Czech Republic would not only be unable to draw further funds from the NRP, but would also have to return those obtained in autumn 2021 by pre-financing. A further escalation of the problem may jeopardize the MFF funding on the basis of the new rules linking the use of EU funds to a country's respect for the rule of law. The Czech political representation should clearly declare its support for the EU rules, despite the fact that this may bring it into conflict with certain Visegrad partners.

The Czech Republic should now conclude a Partnership Agreement with the European Commission as soon as possible so that it can start drawing on MFF funds, as well as having plans approved for the use of funds from other sources. To do this, operational programs need to be well prepared so that funding is fast and efficient - but also sufficiently transparent. Given that the Czech Republic has traditionally run into problems in the use of EU funds, it will be necessary to pay special attention to these issues, as in this period programs not only for drawing funds from the MFF but also from the NRP will have to be prepared.

It is also necessary to prepare the public for the reality that the Czech Republic will not always be a net recipient of money from the European budget. Therefore, political representatives should start to prioritize the other benefits of EU membership than financial ones in their communications. The Czech Republic should focus not only on structural funds, but also on the funds formerly known as community funds and to learn to work with innovative instruments.

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## Context

- Approval of the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Recovery Fund.
- A fundamental and inclusive shift in EU fiscal integration through the adoption of the Recovery Fund.
- Increased pressure for conditionality between the rule of law and the use of EU funds.

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## Present

- Ongoing approval of national NRPs and negotiations on Partnership Agreements as part of the MFF.
- The ongoing resolution of the issue of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš's conflict of interest.

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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should develop a long-term strategy for how the Czech economy should look in the coming years and direct funding from the NRP and MFF towards, e.g., renewable resources, digitalization, structural problems in the labor market, science and research.
- It is essential to prepare the state administration well for the unprecedented amount of funds from the NRP and MFF, to ensure effective distribution and transparent disbursement.
- The use of EU funds must not be jeopardized by conflicts of interest of government officials.
- The Czech Republic should start preparing for the transition from a net recipient to a net payer and communicate the benefits of membership accordingly.

# European and Czech digital policy



Kryštof Kruliš  
Pavel Havlíček

“We want a digital Czech Republic and we are starting to have it. Who would have thought that we would meet with video calls, that you would buy a highway stamp during the ads of your favorite series or file a tax return without having to find out when exactly the office is open.”

— **Andrej Babiš**  
12 May 2021

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“Creativity, critical thinking, working with data, the ability to make decisions, these are soft skills, and digital transformation will not work in our favor unless we equip society with these skills.”

— **Tatiana le Moigne**  
12 May 2021

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“Artificial intelligence and processes based on the decisions not of humans, but of machines, do not, of course, mean only progress and benefits for us, but they also carry hidden threats that we may not be aware of, and this, proportionally to how quickly they overcome the barriers of our mistrust and how they become irresistibly part of our daily lives.”

— **Viktor Vodička**  
(Director of the Association of Czech Consumers)  
26 November 2020

A comprehensive framework for the direction of EU policies in the digital sector until 2024 was codified in the strategy entitled “A Europe fit for the digital age” and in the follow-up White Paper on Artificial Intelligence and the European Data Strategy. The strategy envisages investments in strategic technology areas, such as 5G networks (also 6G), quantum computing technologies and secure cloud capacities at a pan-European level. In doing so, the EU should keep pace with other world technology centers, whilst not letting the attainment of other policy goals slip. The transition to the age of the digital economy and society in the EU is associated with a tightening of the ethical aspects of digital technologies and also with an acknowledgement of the encroachments of the digital agenda into the field of democracy. At the same time, the current inconsistency of the internal market in the digital field has contributed to the fact that today’s global technology giants that work with end-user data, mainly GAFA, do not come from the EU. Looking to the future, the EU will likely work on a defensive strategy combining high regulatory standards for the digital sector, efforts to tax technology companies and special competition law, which will naturally provoke a negative response in the US and potential countermeasures targeting EU exporters to the US.

At the end of 2020, the European Commission presented a proposal for a Digital Services Act (DSA), aiming to innovate the regulatory environment for Internet services from social networks to e-commerce services. Another proposal is the Digital Markets Act (DMA), which, in relation to the largest platforms with a global reach, comes with the introduction of new competition law instruments designed to combat the negative effects of monopolies within the digital sphere. The package of proposals presented by the European Commission also includes a draft Act on Data Management, which aims to promote the accessibility of personal and non-personal data by enhancing confidence in data sharing mechanisms both on the part of the public sector and between companies. In addition, Czech EU Commissioner Věra Jourová presented the European Democracy Action Plan, which embraces an important principle in the fight against disinformation, by including the regulation of digital political advertising, co-regulation of social networks and the introduction of sanctioning mechanisms against parties involved in disseminating disinformation against the EU.

In April 2021, the European Commission proposed a regulation on artificial intelligence which sets out a legal framework designed to build society’s confidence in the operation of AI-based technologies in accordance with human rights and proposes a robust regulatory system in this regard. It is particularly the Ministry of Industry and Trade which is actively involved in the shaping of the attitudes of the Czech Republic to these proposals and has also incorporated IT companies and the civil society into the process, and this with a view to the possibility that the process of adopting such acts will in part fall to the Czech presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2022. The Czech Republic’s position has up to now been dominated by a more liberal approach to internet regulation, which at the same time recognizes a pressing need to innovate on rules. At the same time, the Czech Presidency follows on from that



of France, which, on the other hand, is considered a supporter of more protectionist approaches, including an emphasis on so-called digital sovereignty.

The field of new technologies and the transition to the digital economy and society is the subject of a number of strategic documents at the Czech level too, including the framework document Digital Czech Republic, which covers the Czech Republic in Digital Europe, the Information Concept of the Czech Republic and the Digital Economy and Society. The central organ for the coordination of the Digital Czech Republic program is the Government Council for the Information Society. As part of the strategy "The Czech Republic: The Country For The Future", a comprehensive National Artificial Intelligence Strategy of the Czech Republic was developed. The contents of the national documents are strongly interwoven with documents emerging at the EU level. The onset of the pandemic has led to a significant increase in demand for digital services, including e-Government. With a major contribution from the private sector, digital tools such as Smart Quarantine and eRouška were developed. The digitalization of public administration has also continued with the introduction of systems such as electronic motorway vignettes, the gradual activation of the citizen portal and the expansion of the possibility for electronic identification. Overall, the last few years have seen an acceleration of the advancement of digitalization, although new projects are still accompanied by growing pains.

Efforts to introduce a digital tax impacting global digital companies have been blocked at the EU level by Ireland, Denmark and Sweden. The Government of the Czech Republic put forward a draft bill on digital services tax to the Chamber of Deputies in November 2019. The government bill came with a rate of 7%, which would, in combination with the wide range of digital services covered, have represented a greater tax burden than in most other EU countries. In January 2020 the US, through its ambassadors to the Czech Republic, protested against the digital tax, emphasizing that its introduction would predominantly affect companies from the USA. Exporters to the USA, who feared the introduction of selective tariffs focused on Czech products, therefore also resisted the introduction of the tax. The law was not discussed in detail due to the pandemic until mid-May 2021. A number of amendments aimed at reducing the rate to 5%, 3% or 2%, which combined with future changes of US administration, could reduce, although not completely eliminate the risk of retaliatory tariffs by the United States. The introduction of a digital tax at the national or EU level without reaching a consensus in a global forum, primarily the OECD, is not an ideal option and may ultimately bring tensions in transatlantic ties. The criteria of high levels of global turnover, which according to the proposals are to activate the obligation to pay a digital tax, are at the same time fodder for those who see discrimination in the proposals. If the Czech Republic decides to follow the path of the national digital tax, it should have adequate economic and legal counter-arguments at the ready, to reflect the development of talks in the relevant international forums on the taxation of the digital world and the fight against tax havens. In the future, the global minimum level of taxation of all large multinationals, regardless of their field of activity, which

began to emerge in mid-2021 at the initiative of the Biden administration, may help to address the issue significantly.



The character of international relations and globalization will also increasingly determine the way in which the world's major players approach the issue of regulating artificial intelligence and other new technologies. Meetings of international organizations developing technological standards and norms will become increasingly important. If the EU continues to strive for a high standard of regulation of new technologies, such as in the GDPR regulation on the handling of personal data, it will become very important to what extent the EU standard will be attractive for non-European states and whether global companies will reflect any regulation in their services for customers outside the EU. The current debate at the EU level on regulatory acts in the field of digital technologies may thus have a significant spillover into international issues in the future.

This issue of taxation and regulation of the digital environment in the EU, but also elsewhere in the world, will become a key area of focus. Efforts by the EU and some of its countries to tax digital giants may soon be supplanted by the emerging global agreement to introduce a minimum level of taxation for large multinational companies, which should apply to all sectors of the economy. On the back of European initiatives from the end of last year, for example, the Code of Practice on Disinformation has already begun to be amended, but it remains a non-binding tool in the area of social network self-regulation. Further moves, including in the area of digital political advertising, discussions on community rights within digital platforms or the debate on transparency in the online environment, will continue over the coming months and years. Therefore, it will be necessary for the Czech Republic to be active in these matters, and to have a clear and cogently argued position that it will be able to communicate at the EU level. This applies not only to the EDAP, but also to the even more significant DSA and DMA, which will be addressed in the coming years.

The Czech goal in this regard should be to reject the fragmentation of European approaches, and rather to uphold a strong common position within the EU, under which Czech priorities could be harboured. However, this will not be possible without certain compromises, which will have to be based on the European mainstream in this matter, which in comparison with the Czech position, is more skewed in favor of customer protection, stronger sanctions especially against very large platforms, but also defense of the integrity of electoral processes.

Another essential dimension is the preparation of Czech institutions for the implementation of regulatory measures coming from the EU. The example of GDPR has shown that Member States have serious problems ensuring the adequate functioning of European regulatory systems in the national environment in terms of regulatory institutions, competencies and the ability to enforce regulations. The Czech Republic

should be proactive and gradually invest in increasing the domestic capacity of the state administration as well as the professional backing of state and non-state actors. Only in this way will it be possible to ensure the creation of an adequate domestic situation, able to adopt, on time, a regulatory system from the EU whilst ensuring that all socio-economic and legal-institutional specifics of the Czech Republic are taken into account. Subsequently, it will also be easier for the state administration and the judiciary to ensure the effective enforcement of the resulting system in practice.

A shift in the Czech approach to digitalization and taking full advantage of it, including opportunities stemming from the EU, can only be accomplished if a sufficiently clear public debate is carried out in the Czech Republic. In addition to the few civil servants working on the issue today, it should be attended by a wide range of experts, civil society and the media.

Welcome allies here may be the Czech European Commissioner Věra Jourová, but also relevant politicians and the Czech Permanent Representation in Brussels, who are actively concerned with the topic and can thus confer it more and better into the public consciousness. In the context of the post-covid recovery, the importance of digital issues will continue to grow, which should also be sufficiently reflected in the focus of EU financial instruments. Only in this way will it be possible to develop the digital market, innovation, and also science and research in this area strongly enough so that the Czech Republic and the EU do not completely lose pace with American or Chinese initiatives.

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## Context

- The ongoing process of transformation of society, the economy and the functioning of public administration with the help of digital technologies, which has been intensified by the covid-19 pandemic.
  - The changing quality of life in Czech Republic and in the world influenced by the use of technologies based on artificial intelligence or blockchain and the extent of involvement in digital transformation.
  - The accompanying socio-economic negative impacts of transformation and the need to address values and human rights in the context of the digital agenda.
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## Present

- Crucial new legislative proposals in the area of digital services, data movement and regulation of artificial intelligence-based technologies, whose discussion will take up a substantial part of the European Commission's agenda for the rest of its term of office.
- The Digital Agenda forming a large part of the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU, including the completion of negotiations on key packages of legislation regulating the Digital Single Market of the EU.
- Ongoing disputes between Member States over the future substance of the European approach to digital regulation, which will also affect the Czech presidency with France and Sweden.

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## Recommendations

- Based on a national discussion between state and non-state actors, the Czech Republic should present a balanced approach to digital proposals at the EU level, combining the need for openness to global technological developments (including, e.g., the need for secure data movement in the transatlantic area) with questions of security and the social responsibility of new technological solutions.
- The Czech government and state administration should strengthen their ability to present credibly the national position at the EU level and push it through as part of the agenda of the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU.
- The Czech government and state administration should have adequate economic and legal counter-arguments at the ready, reflecting the development of negotiations in the relevant international forums on the taxation of the digital world and the fight against tax havens, if the Czech Republic does decide to follow the road of a national digital tax.

# Climate policy

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Romana Březovská  
Jan Svoboda  
Kristina Zindulková

“Member States must have the possibility to decide on the amount and timing of their contribution to the common goals of the EU. The European Commission can only recommend targets to individual Member States.”

— **Daniel Beneš**

[Vice President of the Confederation of Industry and Transport of the Czech Republic]

4 March 2020

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“Reducing the use of fossil fuels will strengthen our energy self-sufficiency and restrict the financing of a wide variety of undemocratic regimes, including those supporting terrorism.”

— **Zdeněk Hřib**

10 May 2021

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“I expect that the spontaneous transformation of the Czech energy sector as a result of investment, but also the price of emission allowances, will in fact mean an end to the use of coal sooner than we are currently calculating.”

— **Richard Brabec**

20 May 2021

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“To me this plan seems very fragmented and lacking in strategy. I’m searching in vain for what the aim is, for what exactly it should be, this economic renewal.”

— **Danuše Nerudová**

24 May 2021

Evidence of the covid-19 pandemic is to be found reflected in figures recording the total amount of carbon dioxide emissions, but the “positive” impact has been short-lived. Even by December 2020 emissions associated with energy use were 2% higher than in December 2019. The year 2020 was also one of the three hottest years since measurements began, whilst at the same time rounding off the hottest ever decade. Measured concentrations of emissions indicate that the world is on track to warm by more than 3°C by the end of the century, far exceeding the safe temperature target set in the Paris Agreement (PA). Clearly, it is not desirable to wait for disasters or crises to prompt concerted action on climate change mitigation, but rather to employ well-thought-out decarbonization strategies sooner rather than later. The Czech Republic also supports the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, as shown, for example, by the recent survey, *Czech Climate 2021*, according to which nearly 2/3 of the public thinks that the Czech Republic should reduce emissions regardless of the activities of other countries. In the Czech Republic, the bark beetle outbreak has also made itself felt over the last few years – the felled forests have been transformed from a carbon sink into a carbon source.

As COP26 in Glasgow was postponed due to the pandemic, so too were the personal interactions necessary to address issues related to the not yet finalized PA Articles by next year. A further grounding in reality is provided by reports from the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) informing about insufficient Nationally Determined Contributions to climate change mitigation and about the inadequate ability of humanity to cope with its impacts.

Among other climate policy milestones of the past year was the “return” of the USA to the PA. In this context, the Czech Republic can find inspiration in US efforts to frame the achievement of climate neutrality as an opportunity for the creation of well-paid jobs.

The EU has succeeded in holding to its emphasis on a green transition in the post-crisis recovery and in not allowing the climate issue to fall from the list of political priorities. Introduced in December 2019, the European Green Deal continues to provide a framework for developing coherent policies towards climate neutrality by 2050. The most crucial step is the April agreement on the adoption of a European Climate Law. This “law of laws” enshrines the declared objective of climate neutrality into legislation and at the same time lays emphasis on the continued fulfillment of the mid-term goal - by 2030, the EU is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% from 1990 levels. Other key elements of the Deal are the carbon border tax on imports into the EU and the EU Regulation (Taxonomy) for sustainable activities.

Although initially the Czech government pushed back against the raising of emission targets, ultimately it capitulated with a view to drawing funds from the Just Transition Fund and deciding on its own energy mix. Supporting the goals of climate neutrality is a contribution towards the ambitions of the EU, but unlike the Czech Republic, many countries have already set the objective of becoming climate neutral and are creating new governmental institutions for the ecological transition. Even the



City of Prague has presented its Climate Plan to 2030 and has ambitions to cultivate climate-paradiplomacy.

The advent of a low-emissions future is also reflected in the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS), a key tool for meeting the EU's targets. Since 2019, the price of emission allowances has been rising at a record pace. This has forced a shift away from electricity and heat produced from coal. The reform and extension of the EU ETS is specially relevant for the Czech Republic as the third largest exporter of electricity in the EU and the sixth in the world.

The EU provides Member States with generous resources to achieve Europe's climate goals through the Modernization Fund, the Just Transition Mechanism and other programs. In the Czech Republic it is, however, difficult to use the funds for a meaningful and timely transformation: among other things, the government has postponed a decision on the end date of coal combustion and is threatening the wholesale replacement of coal by fossil gas, whose combustion is not compatible with climate neutrality in the long run.

In May 2021, the Government approved the National Recovery Plan (NRP), a reform and investment plan funded by the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF). In July of the same year, the plan was approved by the European Commission, according to which Czechia met both conditions for utilizing the fund, to invest at least 37% of the total amount for green transition and at least 20% for digitalization. The actual implementation of the planned projects within the NRP remains absolutely crucial, as it is not possible to assess the final impact on the climate only from the theorized amounts laid out in the plan.

A bold step within Czech climate policy took place when the Czech government filed a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice of the EU against Poland over the extension of mining at the Turów mine for 6 years without carrying out an environmental impact assessment or proper public consultation. The court ordered a temporary closure of the mine, but its activities continue and both parties are negotiating the conditions for a possible withdrawal from the lawsuit. At the same time, however, the Czech government itself is facing a lawsuit from the "Czech Climate Litigation" campaign for non-fulfillment of obligations arising from the PA.

The understanding of climate change as a multiplier of threats necessitates the framing of the topic as a security and development challenge. This interconnection is also being addressed at the UN in the Security Council, where the Czech Republic, through the initiative "UN Group of Friends on Climate and Security" seeks to create an institutionalized umbrella for climate security and thus its systematic solution.



The forthcoming Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which it is assumed will contain information on insufficient global climate change mitigation, ought to give further impetus to states to reduce their

emissions more sharply, and not just to declare their intentions. Cities and private businesses also have their role to play in the mitigation of climate change, and particularly Czech ones have not yet engaged to their potential in constructively solving the climate crisis and its impacts.

From a broader perspective, it is necessary to reconcile Czech climate commitments with climate and diplomatic reality. The Czech Republic cannot lag behind - postponing the end of coal mining and only slowly looking for new technical and societal solutions (appropriate support for RES, community energy, battery systems, just transition, etc.), and at the same time expect to be regarded as a credible partner in the international environment. If it wants to use EU funds for these changes, the Czech Republic must commit itself to ambitious targets.

Due to the forthcoming presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022, the Czech Republic will have to leave its typical reactivity, and the sooner the better. Without delay, the Czech Republic should pass legislation on climate neutrality and focus on the transparency of its actions during its economic recovery with the aim of not undermining its own, the EU's, nor global climate ambition. This also ties in with the updating of the long-term low-emission strategy of the Czech Republic, which is no longer in line with EU objectives, and with the incorporation of ambitious EU legislation (Fit for 55 Package) into the Czech legal environment.

In distributing hundreds of billions of crowns from EU funds, the Czech Republic should focus on the goals of transformation, and not only on the exhaustion of 100% of the amount as such in the given periods. It is also important that clear goals and rules are set, with the public being involved and informed, and that an emphasis is put on the use of funds under the direction of the most competent people who are able to lead the Czech Republic to climate neutrality.

The Czech Republic should support reforms that maintain the EU ETS as a functional tool for long-term emissions reductions that is also capable of reflecting uneven impacts on society. Czechia is an export-oriented economy and the introduction of regulations that would mean the better competitiveness of Czech companies, such as a carbon tax, is welcome. At the same time, however, the reforms must comply with the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Another key issue is the energy security of the state and the construction of new nuclear reactors. Due to the scandal of the warehouse explosion in Vrbětice and the subsequent inclusion of the Czech Republic on Russia's list of 'unfriendly countries', the parliament is considering whether to exclude Russia and China from the planned construction of the new reactor. If the construction were to go ahead, the new nuclear power units at Dukovany would become the largest public contract in the history of the Czech Republic. However, as exceeding both the time and the financial projections has become the rule for new nuclear builds, the project is a very risky investment. This is one of the reasons why there should be an energy concept for the Czech Republic as it may turn out to be the case that the new nuclear power plant is not completed in the end.

Czech development cooperation and economic diplomacy should likewise bear in mind climate commitments. With regard to development cooperation, activities should be screened so that support is provided in line with climate policy objectives, in particular in the area of supporting renewable sources of energy. The Czech Republic should also start contributing an adequate amount to the Green Climate Fund. As for economic diplomacy, it is a matter of strengthening trade relations regarding those strategic materials, technologies and resources which will be a prerequisite for the transition to climate neutrality (green hydrogen, solar panels, batteries, etc.). It is time to look for new business opportunities, to be innovative and, through economic diplomacy, to strengthen strategic partnerships based on the principles of the European Green Deal, even beyond the borders of the EU.

It is desirable to unfurl the ambitions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and establish climate change as a priority in the context of the humanitarian-development-security nexus. It is just this strengthening of policies across departments that can comprehensively tackle the greatest challenge of our generation. The Council presidency trio of France, the Czech Republic and Sweden offers a great opportunity for the Czech Republic to develop its climate diplomacy and show that it is a reliable and capable partner, provided that it manages to approach its own commitments dutifully.

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## Context

- Insufficient reduction of greenhouse gas emissions at the global level leading to global warming which far exceeds the Paris Agreement temperature target.
- EU-wide approval of the 2050 climate neutrality target and an increase of the 2030 emission reduction target.
- Demonstration of system vulnerability by the covid-19 pandemic's impacts highlighting the need for thought-out decarbonization strategies and the strengthening of (climate) resilience.

## Present

- Providing funding to EU Member States to rebuild the economy following the coronavirus pandemic in line with the objectives of the European Green Deal.
  - The slow pace of the Czech government in fulfilling its climate commitments arising from international agreements.
  - Increasingly visible framing of climate change as an economic, political, development and security issue.
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## Recommendations

- Climate ambitions must be taken into account in the Czech Republic's foreign policy, for example in the area of economic diplomacy and development cooperation.
- The Czech government must align national climate policy with European emission targets and adopt a proactive stance in the fight against climate change, for example from a foreign policy perspective by using the opportunity of the forthcoming EU Council presidency to develop Czech climate diplomacy.
- Relevant ministries (MFA, MoE, MIT, MRD, MoF) must support the involvement of other actors, such as cities and companies, in resolving the climate crisis which requires cross-border and international cooperation.



# Germany

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Jakub Eberle  
Pavĺína Janebov

“At the moment, due to the high incidence numbers and the fact that the British variant has taken off in our country, the Czech Republic has become a feared destination for Germany. And the Germans themselves are getting more and more nervous. But the fact that the Germans are critical of us and are taking unilateral steps is not anti-Czech. They themselves say that this also applies to Slovakia or parts of Austria.”

— **Tomáš Kafka**  
4 March 2021

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“We have not yet discussed the exact number of beds, but when we dealt with a similar variant in the spring, it was a case of several dozen beds. Every week we have meetings with the Saxons, the Bavarians and also with representatives of the German federal government, where we are discussing both a joint approach in the fight against covid and these crisis options.”

— **Tomáš Petříček**  
15 October 2021

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“We are on the border and we are part of a single European space, so when it comes to people’s health, the border shouldn’t play any role.”

— **Petr Kulháněk**  
(Governor of the Karlovy Vary Region)  
4 February 2021

The covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions related to it have brought a need to address practical problems in Czech-German relations, especially in the cross-border agenda. In particular, bureaucratic relations were key, while 'big politics' played a smaller role. The traditional complication of the Czech-German relationship, namely the asymmetrical administrative structure of the two states, surfaced again here. Centrally governed Czech Republic came up against German federalism where the constituent states have a significant role. On the other hand, Prague could rely here on the well-established positive relations between the Czech Republic on the one hand and Bavaria and Saxony on the other, into which a great deal of energy has been invested over the last ten years.

The initial lack of coordination between social security systems meant complications for cross-border workers who, in a difficult situation, could not find adequate support on either side of the border. In the spring of 2021, the German government took a tough and guarded approach towards the Czech Republic compared to other neighboring countries. For example, at the time of the Czech third wave of covid-19, the border was not only closed, but even guarded by the federal police, which was unique in relation to neighboring countries. At the same time, however, Germany provided the much worse affected Czech Republic with medical supplies and medical personnel and offered the use of its hospitals' spare capacity. The initial refusal that some specific offers met with from the Czech government can be interpreted more in terms of domestic politics than in terms of Czech-German relations.

The newly created diplomatic coordination platform between the Czech Republic and Germany ('Abstimmungskreis') has proven to be a useful tool, also for dealing with possible future crisis situations. The relationship between the foreign ministries played an important role, largely replacing the missing or creaking links between the ministries responsible for health, domestic or social policy. Despite the long-term trend of transferring bilateral agendas directly to individual ministries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs added significant value here.

Communication, especially on the subject of solutions to coronavirus, took place at the highest political level and the Czech Prime Minister was in contact both with the Chancellor and the Prime Ministers of Bavaria and Saxony. However, political interest in the cultivation of Czech-German relations on a general level remained rather weak and there was no substantive strategic reflection on relations with the Czech Republic's largest neighbor, not least because of the need to address the urgent problems associated with the pandemic.

Unnecessary irritation in Czech-German relations was caused by a parliamentary proposal to introduce mandatory quotas on the sale of Czech food in shops, which the German ambassador in Prague, along with several of his counterparts from other EU countries, repeatedly opposed.

In the Vrbětice case, Germany clearly stood up for the Czech Republic, despite the Czech government's less than ideal diplomatic communication with its allies. The Federal Republic showed solidarity both in the EU and NATO, where its representatives



actively participated in the formulation and adoption of common positions in support of the Czech Republic. After the expulsion of Czech diplomats from Moscow, Germany offered the capacity of its embassy there. On the other hand, neither Berlin, nor any other Western European country, joined in the expulsion of Russian diplomats.



A key driver for the further development of Czech-German relations will be the concurrent autumn parliamentary elections. Although the situation in both countries is unpredictable, most conceivable governmental set-ups carry significant risks and challenges. Angela Merkel, who has been the guarantor of pragmatic policies, empathetic towards the Czech Republic, and who has averted crises or defused tensions on conflict issues such as migration and energy, will end her time as German chancellor. None of her possible successors has a special relationship with Prague, just as none of the possible Czech prime ministers is close to Berlin.

This is a reflection of a longer-term problem of political party representations of the two countries alienating one another. Diplomats complain that imaginary lists of phone numbers between politicians are only very thin. German politics is overwhelmed by domestic challenges and solving a series of European and global crises, leaving little attention or energy for the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic, on the other hand, is unable to carve out its place with an approach that is active, consistent and constructive over the long term.

In recent years, a keystone has been the ties between the Social Democratic parties, the Czech ČSSD and the German SPD, which have also nominated foreign ministers since 2013/2014 (with a brief and insignificant interlude of Martin Stropnický on the Czech side). Their work together has helped to coordinate European policies on the Socialists & Democrats platform, but also acted as an informal hotline in times of crisis. Both the ČSSD and the German SPD are in real danger of leaving the government and there are no other party ties that could effectively replace them (with the minor exception of the link between the KDU-ČSL and the CDU/CSU). ANO and ODS do not have a direct partner on the German side. The Pirates have yet to build a possible link with the German Greens, with whom they cooperate in the European Parliament.

Weak personal ties may be a risk in view of the possible divergence of Czech and German policy on some key issues. The next German government is likely to be more open to deepening European integration than the current one. A key issue for it will be the ecological transformation of the German economy and society, which will have direct implications at European and neighborhood level. Judging by the electoral programs and the long-term positions of key Czech players, we can expect no more than cautious and timid steps by Prague in relation to the EU and green issues.

On the other hand, the long-term convergence of views on relations with strong geopolitical players is a positive trend. The Czech Republic has sobered up from the naive atlanticism of the Bush era, while Germany has been hardening its formerly

often uncritical position towards Russia and China for several years now. This is not to say that there are no longer differences, as demonstrated, for example, by the opposing positions in relation to the German-French proposal to hold an EU summit with the Russian president. But these often relate to strategy and tactics rather than to the overall perception of the Russian or Chinese regime (and are the subject of fierce public debate in both countries). Nevertheless, there is ample room for pragmatic cooperation in building the EU's strategic autonomy whilst at the same time maintaining a strong link to the US within NATO, which is declared by both sides as a common interest.

A proactive approach will be desirable after the elections, especially from the Czech side. The relationship with Germany is absolutely critical for the Czech Republic, while for Berlin Prague is only one of many neighbors and European partners. Czech politicians should therefore use the situation to create a positive atmosphere, try to build personal contacts with the new German government very quickly and present it with a concrete agenda for cooperation at European and bilateral level.

Both the Prime Minister and members of the government should personally visit Berlin, as well as the capitals of the neighboring federal states, Munich and Dresden, as one of their priorities in the initial months of their mandate. The Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group of the Czech Republic – Germany, which has been functioning relatively successfully up to now, should also be re-established as soon as possible and relations with counterparts in the Bundestag cemented. Political parties should make better use of the Czech-German Discussion Forum, for example by nominating their prominent foreign policy experts to its Council.

The Forum's working groups could then be used to prepare a bilateral non-paper summarizing the common priorities of the new governments in bilateral, European and foreign policy, in which diplomats, politicians and experts from both countries would participate. The output could then serve as an expert basis for the political formulation of the intergovernmental agenda, e.g. within the Strategic Dialogue, but also for the expected update of the Foreign Policy Concept of the Czech Republic. In this, the relationship with Germany should have a key and clearly defined position.

Investing in bilateral exchange scholarships for key social and political actors would also help to build professionalism and personal relationships on both sides. Experts, politicians, diplomats or journalists would be given the opportunity to spend at least a few months in similar workplaces in the other country, e.g. working on specific joint projects. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should push for the establishment and funding of a pilot scheme, e.g. from the Czech-German Fund for the Future. Involvement of both neighboring federal states is also desirable here, which could compensate for Berlin's consistently lower interest in bilateral programs.

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## Context

- The growing importance of the cross-border agenda in bilateral relations as a result of the covid-19 pandemic.
- The solidarity of Germany after the publicity of information on the Vrbětice case.
- The upcoming parliamentary elections in Germany and the Czech Republic.

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## Present

- Relatively well-managed handling of cross-border impacts of the pandemic.
- Weak personal ties between Czech and German political parties, persistently low interest in cultivating political relations with Germany.
- Convergence of Czech and German perspectives on relations with strong geopolitical actors.

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## Recommendations

- It is necessary for the new Czech government to be proactive in its relations with Germany, to establish personal ties and to identify common themes early on.
- Existing institutions and cooperation frameworks (the Czech-German Discussion Forum, the Inter-Parliamentary Group) need to be adequately used to formulate the topics of political dialogue.
- The MFA should invest in concrete initiatives to strengthen professional capacities and personal ties in Czech-German relations.

# Poland

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Vít Dostál

“The issue of abortions is a huge and highly emotional topic in today’s Poland, so, the fact that they are stirred up about it, is not surprising. On the other hand, the tone is relatively sharp and does not match what we are dealing with – we are dealing with the issue of abortions in our territory, we are dealing with national law and laws for our doctors.”

— **Václav Láska**  
30 April 2021

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“The impact of mining on the lives of tens of thousands of people on the border is indisputable. I understand the concerns of the people in Hrádek and Frýdlant, among others. At the same time, however, I am a diplomat and my task is to try to solve problems outside the courts if possible. That’s why I wanted to talk to my counterpart in person once again. This trip to Warsaw is the last gesture of our will to agree before we decide to file a lawsuit.”

— **Tomáš Petříček**  
12 February 2021

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“The Polish side has got into a very difficult situation, but not through the fault of the Czech Republic, as is sometimes said in Poland now. Simply put - the Polish side steam-rolled us and we used the court as an extreme means of fighting back.”

— **Richard Brabec**  
9 June 2021

Czech-Polish relations have deteriorated significantly in recent months. The main cause of this development was the dispute over mining in the Polish brown coal mine Turów immediately on the Czech border. However, this is not the only reason for the poor quality of mutual relations. Alongside this dispute, the absence of a common positive agenda in European politics, the deepening of problems with the rule of law in Poland and the visible disillusionment with this trend on the part of the Czech public and political elites do not benefit relations either.

In the first half of 2021, the dispute over the Turów mine escalated. The Czech Republic has repeatedly warned the Polish side of the seriousness of its unilateral steps and its disregard for the positions of the Czech Republic and the European Commission on the issue of an insufficient environmental impact assessment over the mine's extension. For all the Czech diplomatic efforts, however, Warsaw decided to continue mining, to which the Czech Republic responded with a lawsuit. Subsequently, the Court of Justice of the EU handed down a preliminary ruling that there should be an immediate cessation of mining pending a decision in due process. Poland did not stop mining, and Prague petitioned the EU Court of Justice to set compensation at EUR 5 million a day.

Only with the preliminary ruling of the Court of Justice of the EU was the Polish side brought to the negotiating table. The talks kicked off at the end of June and are receiving considerable political attention on both sides. The situation, however, has generated a lot of tension, especially in Poland. The mine and the power plant connected to it have an important function in the Polish energy sector. Unfortunately, the whole dispute was framed very deliberately by the Polish government-controlled media. The essence of the problem itself was concealed, and misleading information and conspiracy theories were spread around the question.

The Turów issue is not the only problem on the Czech-Polish borderlands. The topic of territorial debt continues to linger, where the Czech Republic is to hand over 368 hectares of its territory to Poland due to a historical settlement. On the eastern border, the subject of disputes is the air pollution coming from Poland, and in the west, in addition to Turów, it is Polish light pollution from greenhouse farms. There has been virtually no progress on all these issues over the past year. Some movement was achieved in the case of Czech diplomatic real estate in Warsaw, which was inadvertently nationalized after World War II with Poland subsequently refusing to return it to the Czech Republic. The closing of the issue with a symbolic sale for 1 zloty is nearing completion.

The clogging up of the agenda with these rather abstruse difficulties and then the covid-19 pandemic complicated the development of mutual relations in other areas. Poland expressed clear support for the Czech Republic following the revelation of the Vrbětice case. However, there was no visible joint initiative in Eastern politics, even though opportunities presented themselves, for example, in connection with events in Belarus. This is because both the Czech Republic and Poland are among the long-term advocates of Belarusian civil society. Similarly, joint negotiations were not resumed

at the level of Deputy Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs (the so-called 2 + 2 format), even though Poland is one of Czechia's key security-military partners, as is laid out in the Czech strategic documents.

The deepening conflict between Poland and the European institutions on the rule of law as well as further developments in Poland, especially regarding the rights of women and sexual minorities, have also had a negative effect on mutual relations. At the end of 2020, Poland, together with Hungary, blocked negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework and the Reconstruction Fund due to the conditionality of the use of these funds on respecting the rule of law. This fact, along with the amendment of the Polish law on abortions, met with a negative response among parts of the Czech political elite, media and civil society. The atmosphere surrounding this issue was further exacerbated by correspondence from the Polish Embassy in Prague, which warned of the fact that a proposed Czech legal amendment under discussion would enable foreign women (including Poles) to have abortions more easily in the Czech Republic.



Czech-Polish relations need revitalizing and rigorous political work. Following the autumn parliamentary elections, joint government consultations should take place as widely as possible. Bilateral communication was disrupted by the pandemic and negotiations in this traditional format have not taken place since July 2019. In addition, it will be an opportunity to inform Polish ministers about the priorities of the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU. Last but not least, should be the restoration of the 2 + 2 format, which offers a fairly broad agenda for negotiations (eg. bilateral military and security cooperation, implementing the NATO 2030 strategy, relations with the new US administration and the transfer of Czech experience of hostile Chinese influence).

Resolving the Turów case will be an essential step for the future of relations. The Czech side must insist on monitoring of the impact of mining and compensation for the affected region. On the other hand, given the importance of the mine and the power plant for the Polish energy sector, it cannot be expected that mining will be permanently stopped. This should also not be a Czech goal, as the negative impact on mutual relations would be huge.

The solution of the Turów case should go along with an intensification of negotiations on the other long-standing issues mentioned above. With the closure of the problem of Czech diplomatic real estate in Warsaw, the Czech Republic should respond with a similar gesture – for example, progress in resolving the territorial debt, where political will on the Czech side is essential. The case of Turów was also a reminder that some issues with Poland are difficult to resolve successfully without gaining the attention of Jarosław Kaczyński. Despite his secondary government office, he remains the most powerful politician in the country as chairman of the main governing party. Czech state officials should therefore establish direct contact with Kaczyński.

Potential is also to be found in Eastern policy. The Czech Republic and Poland should cooperate in shaping EU policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries and towards Russia, where Poland has incomparable expertise. Given that a priority for the Czech Republic is to support civil society in Belarus and also the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, the Czech Republic should strive to join the Lublin Triangle (a consultation format of Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania), which pursues these goals, at least in the role of an observer or special guest. The period before the Czech presidency is a welcome moment for that. Finally, another promising theme for Czech-Polish cooperation is that of false Russian historical narratives, which both countries face.

It can be assumed that the dispute between Poland and the European institutions over the rule of law will not subside. On the contrary, it will deepen further. Czech government officials should, for now, not become involved in this dispute. However, they should clearly declare to Polish counterparts in informal talks that in the event of an escalation of the dispute, they will stand up for EU law. Still further, it is important to remember that the course of conflict established by Warsaw has the potential to polarize the two societies, which risks turning what was until recently an excellent and improving relationship into one of long-term mutual misunderstanding.



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## Context

- The deepening conflict between Poland and the European institutions on the issue of the rule of law and Poland's blocking of the long-term EU budget and recovery fund during autumn 2020.
- Deterioration of Czech-Polish relations, especially in connection with the Polish decision to extend mining in the Turów mine.
- Disruption of mutual communications due to the covid-19 pandemic.

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## Present

- Absence of a common positive European agenda.
- Neglect of a number of controversial bilateral issues with the potential for political conflict.
- Disillusionment of relevant parts of political elites and civil society with developments in Poland on the issue of the rule of law.

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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should strive for a resolution in the Turow case with guarantees and compensation but without the ambition for a permanent cessation of mining.
- The government which emerges from the autumn elections should kick-start the bilateral agenda as quickly as possible by quickly convening government consultations and working to resolve long-standing problematic issues for the relationship.
- The Czech Republic should use the moment before the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU to renew the 2 + 2 format and to cooperate on Eastern policy issues.

# Central Europe

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Pavλίνα Janebová  
Vít Dostál

“I would argue that the job of any foreign minister is first and foremost to ensure excellent, high-quality relations with our closest neighbors.”

— **Jakub Kulhánek**

29 April 2021

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“It really is an idiotic view to regard the Visegrad Group as something that is breaking up the European Union. The motto of the EU is united in diversity. We certainly do not want to return to Bolshevik unanimity. Uniformity of opinion is often very harmful.”

— **Miloš Zeman**

10 February 2021

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“I would be very glad to see European countries working together, and to have that cooperation based on trust and respect. But I don’t think the pressure that the EU sometimes puts on Hungary and Poland will lead to better cooperation or a better political culture across Europe.”

— **Petr Fiala**

16 July 2021

Other than bilateral relations with neighboring countries, the Visegrad Group (V4) remained the dominant framework for Czech Central European policy last year. In addition, cooperation within the Slavkov format with Slovakia and Austria or within the Central 5, created in response to the covid-19 pandemic, continued to develop. Despite rising political interest, there continues to be little substantive involvement of the Czech Republic in the Three Seas Initiative (3SI).

The Visegrad Group celebrated its 30th anniversary in February. On this occasion, the Heads of Government signed a joint declaration which in addition to their intention to continue to coordinate their policies in selected areas at EU level, underlined their support for the integration of the Western Balkan countries into the EU and their emphasis on revitalising Eastern Partnership policy. The intention to increase the annual budget of the International Visegrad Fund by EUR 2 million in order to strengthen youth mobility activities and the visibility of the V4 among the younger generation can also be viewed positively. Priorities of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership were confirmed during the Polish presidency at the virtual meeting of the V4 and Eastern Partnership Foreign Ministers in April (with the participation of the Foreign Minister of Portugal, which held the EU presidency at that time, Finland, Sweden and the European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement) and at the June Meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad States and the Western Balkans. Here, the V4 Ministers also spoke in favor of the involvement of the Western Balkan countries in the Conference on the Future of Europe. Cooperation in the field of V4 defense policies also focused on the preparation of the V4 EU battlegroup, planned for the first half of 2023.

Over the past few years, the division of the Visegrad Group into the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the one hand, and Hungary and Poland on the other, has continued to deepen, given the further deterioration of rule of law in both countries and the distancing of their governments' policies and rhetoric from the EU mainstream. This culminated in late 2020 when Hungary and Poland threatened to block the adoption of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework and of the Recovery Fund. At Poland's initiative, the Visegrad states jointly expressed support for the Czech Republic in relation to the Vrbeřtice case, although at Hungary's request the final wording was watered down. In Czech political and media discussions, Visegrad continues to be a platform for different ideological ideas about the direction of Czech foreign policy, which reduces the ability of politicians to perceive Czech membership of the group realistically and work rationally within it.

The Slavkov format, which was chaired by Austria from July 2020 to June 2021, focused mainly last year on addressing issues related to the covid-19 pandemic, but also on transport, energy, digitalization, development, migration and cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. This region was the focus of a meeting in March between the foreign ministers of the three Member States and Portugal, which held the EU presidency at the time. Contacts were also held at prime ministerial and parliamentary level. The Slavkov format and Austria's activation within it are also pro-

ving beneficial for Czech-Austrian bilateral relations, which have not fulfilled their potential for a long time.

Alongside the topic of the covid-19 pandemic, the Western Balkans is also the focus of cooperation between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia within the Central 5 grouping. Despite the aspirations of Slovenia to develop the initiative beyond addressing issues related to the pandemic and so to ensure a more stable connection between Central European countries, the Czech Republic prefers a looser interpretation and more practical focus to the format. Currently, the main aim, according to Foreign Minister Kulháněk, should be adequate coordination of border controls between countries with regard to the further spread of covid-19.

In October 2020, the fifth summit of the Three Seas Initiative took place in Tallinn with the participation of President Miloš Zeman. At this year's July summit, the Czech Republic was represented by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Transport and Industry and Trade Karel Havlíček. Despite a declared emphasis on infrastructure development and the practical dimension of the project, the Czech Republic is one of the last countries still not to have contributed to the 3SI Investment Fund. It also continues to present the megalomaniacal and much-criticized Danube-Oder-Elbe canal project as its only priority project under the Initiative.



Hungary took over the V<sub>4</sub> presidency in July 2021. The Hungarian presidency traditionally falls in the period preceding parliamentary elections, and the Fidesz government can be expected to use the presidency, among other things, to present its foreign policy credentials to the Hungarian electorate, seeking to build the image of a strong leader. The presidency's priorities are divided into three pillars - stability (in terms of the future of the EU, the economy and cohesion and security), reopening (of the economy and society) and partnership (inter-parliamentary cooperation, V<sub>4</sub>+ relations). Hungary openly declares its determination to work with the parallel Slovenian presidency of the EU Council, which - thanks to the political proximity of the two governments - could contribute to strengthening its voice at the EU level, e.g. in the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe. Despite the fact that political attention in the Czech Republic over the same period will be fixed on (post-)electoral developments, its leaders should guard against indifference and reactivity. In particular, together with Slovakia, they should prevent Hungary from presenting some of its stronger positions, e.g. on the functioning of the EU or typically on migration, as though shared by all Visegrad countries unless there is an explicit agreement to do so. Discussions with European and non-European partners are planned within the V<sub>4</sub>+ format. In addition to the priority regions of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (where the Hungarian-led V<sub>4</sub> intends to actively cooperate with Slovenia in preparing for the EU summit), these include Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Baltic and Nordic countries, South Korea, Japan, Egypt, India, Central Asian coun-

tries and, more recently, Morocco. Negotiations in this format can be beneficial as far as relations with partners outside the EU, but they do not make much sense for countries with which the Czech Republic has built up good bilateral relations and should not be held at their expense.

A further escalation of tensions between the EU and Hungary and Poland over the unsatisfactory state of the rule of law can be expected in the coming period, now also in connection with possible limitations on drawing from the EU's post-covid reconstruction fund. In response to such developments, the Czech Republic should take a pragmatic stance – not initiating vocal criticism of its 'neighbors', but at the same time not being complicit with Budapest and Warsaw in unacceptable steps against democratic institutions and specific groups in society, making its opposition to them abundantly clear and, if necessary, delineating itself from them clearly at the EU level. This will be greatly facilitated if the perception of Visegrad cooperation by politicians and the media, especially over the last six years, as a political and value grouping can be redefined and returned to more realistic notions of practical regional cooperation in selected areas and policies. One of the important instruments of this cooperation is the International Visegrad Fund – an emphasis on the realistic application of the increased funds pledged by the Prime Minister in February to concrete activities, for example in the field of youth mobility, is a task for the Visegrad countries in the near future.

Compared to the Visegrad Group, other formats of Central European cooperation in which the Czech Republic participates do not enjoy the same level of media and political attention, even if they are sometimes cited by some political representatives as alternatives to the 'toxic' Visegrad. Such considerations do nothing for Czech Central European politics. The Czech goal should not be to choose from among the existing groupings that which, according to its ideas, is most compatible with the Czech Republic's values, and then prioritize it over the others. Rather, in the Czech Central European policy, individual initiatives, along with key bilateral relations, should complement each other. The natural course should be for the aim of regional or neighborhood policy to be to find the form and themes of cooperation with all relevant partners in order to ensure stable coexistence. In this context, the Czech Republic should avail itself of the period of preparations for the Czech EU presidency and use all Central European initiatives to appropriately coordinate and communicate its own priorities.

It is essential to evaluate individual initiatives in terms of their practical benefits. In the 6 years of its existence, the Slavkov format has proved to be a viable, albeit politically not very visible format, with results in the above-mentioned areas such as transport and development, and the Czech Republic clearly benefits from its further development. On the other hand, further institutionalization and broadening of the thematic scope of the Central 5 beyond the fight against the consequences of the covid-19 pandemic would not have much added value for the Czech Republic.

A format to which the Czech Republic should pay more attention is the Three Seas Initiative. The objectives of the 3SI, which comprise improving links in Central and

Eastern Europe in the areas of transport, energy and digitalization, are sufficiently specific and beneficial for the Czech Republic as part of the region. In view of the support of the United States, the 3SI also represents another platform for greater US involvement in the region, and specifically the development of Czech-American relations. However, the Czech Republic should rapidly come up with proposals for realistic projects and contribute an adequate amount to the 3SI Investment Fund. Last but not least, prior to its EU Council presidency, the Czech Republic should work closely with Latvia, which will host the next summit in the summer of 2022, in aligning its focus and the priorities for the presidency. The Czech Republic should seek to host the Three Seas Initiative Summit in 2023.

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## Context

- The 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Group and the reaffirming of the existing priority areas of cooperation, accompanied by an increase in the budget of the International Visegrad Fund by EUR 2 million.
- Further development of Central European formats such as the Slavkov Trilateral, Central-5 and the Three Seas Initiative.
- The deepening of conflicts between Poland and Hungary on one side and the European institutions on the other, particularly regarding the state of the rule of law in both countries.

## Present

- The ambitions of the Hungarian V4 presidency before the parliamentary elections there; the expected indifference and reactivity of the Czech Republic in this period, due to the post-election situation.
  - The ongoing and polarizing political debate on the benefits and costs of Czech participation in the V4, in which radical approaches to Central European cooperation are gaining ground - either to leave the V4 or to prioritize it significantly.
  - The absence of any significant progress in the Czech involvement in the Three Seas Initiative, despite having declared interest in this format.
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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should use the Central European cooperation formats to communicate and coordinate its priorities in relation to the EU presidency.
- It is necessary, in the Czech Republic, to have a more rational discussion on the Visegrad Group while at the same time being more confident and emancipated towards some partners, particularly when it comes to clearly defining what is and what is not a common Visegrad position.
- The Czech involvement in the Three Seas Initiative needs to be advanced, first and foremost by contributing to the 3SI Investment Fund and selecting appropriate priority projects.





# Western Balkans

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Iva Merheim-Eyre

“We will not allow the Union to become the judge of our shared history, our self-determination or the language which we use.”

— **Tomáš Petříček and Ivan Korčok**

17 December 2020

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“The European Union is currently busy with many challenges, especially the impact of the pandemic. However, further EU enlargement must not fall victim to these challenges and must continue.”

— **Miloš Zeman**

5 May 2021

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“Serbia has long been an important partner of ours and, as with other Western Balkan countries, we support its bid for membership in the EU. I personally have been active in proposing several times at the European Council that, as part of the solution to illegal migration and the security of Europe, it should be in the Schengen zone...”

— **Andrej Babiš**

10 February 2021

In the past year, the Czech political representation has repeatedly declared in its statements that the enlargement of the EU to include the Western Balkan countries is one of the priorities of Czech foreign policy. However, for all these public pronouncements, largely in coordination with Slovakia and other Central European countries, the Czech Republic has not managed to initiate a significant shift in the enlargement process. At the November 2020 Council meeting the process was fundamentally disrupted by Bulgaria's decision to make Northern Macedonia's membership contingent on a bilateral treaty regulating issues of Macedonian national identity and the historical roots of the Macedonian language (Bulgaria demands recognition that both Macedonian identity and the language have Bulgarian roots).

The ambassadors of the Czech Republic and Slovakia approved the text of the conclusions from the Council meeting, but the following day both countries exercised their right of veto. Both foreign ministries issued a joint statement openly criticizing the conclusions of the meeting and opposing making the process contingent on issues of national self-determination, which are not for the EU to decide. The importance attached by the foreign ministers to this step is evidenced by the fact that they wrote a joint article for the EUObserver on the whole matter, where they discuss, among other things, the importance of the principles of respect for European diversity as well as legal certainty in the enlargement process.

The Council's decision signaled not only a great disappointment for North Macedonia, which had even changed its name to join the EU, but also an overall reduction of confidence in the European prospects for the whole region. Conflicting emotions were also aroused by the statement in May by the Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement, Olivér Várhelyi, about the possibility of dividing the accession talks of North Macedonia and Albania and opening, for now, only talks with Albania. Such a move was opposed by Slovakia and by Germany, which at the time of its 2020 presidency was promoting the opening of accession talks for the two countries in June 2021.

New attempts to negotiate with Bulgaria were made in May, when Várhelyi visited representatives of the new interim Bulgarian government in an attempt to advance negotiations ahead of the June parliamentary elections. Over the same days, the Foreign Ministers of Austria, Slovenia and the Czech Republic, represented by the newly appointed Jakub Kulháněk, made a joint visit to North Macedonia and Albania. The ministers called on EU Member States to stop delaying the process of accession talks. They identified the integration of the region as a strategic priority for the EU.

However, the region's confidence in the EU has also been weakened by its response to covid-19. Although the pandemic has pushed the debate on enlargement to the sidelines, it has also provided a great opportunity to show that solidarity and cooperation between the EU and the Western Balkan countries is not just empty platitudes and that in addition to the promise of EU membership it can also offer concrete benefits. Despite a promising start with the pledge of EUR 3 billion worth of aid for the fight against coronavirus and economic recovery, as well as the fact that the EU

had distributed EUR 41 million worth of medical equipment by May 2021, the EU has proved to be an unreliable partner on the crucial issue of vaccination.

Even though the EU committed to funding 651,000 BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine doses to all partners in the region, the first deliveries of tens of thousands of vaccines were only made in May 2021. Russia and China, meanwhile, have been providing vaccines to the region for months. The distribution of vaccines under the multilateral COVAX program, of which the European Commission is one of the founding members, has also proved problematic. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina has paid for 1.2 million doses, none of which had been delivered as of May 2021. In contrast, the average vaccination coverage in the EU at the same time had reached almost 55%. The importance of European support for vaccination in the Western Balkans was highlighted by the Czech Republic in January 2021. In a letter from 13 Member States addressed to the European Commission which called on the EU to facilitate vaccines for Eastern Partnership countries, the Czech Republic, as one of the signatories, also expressed its “strong support” for the idea of sharing a part of the vaccines allocated to Member States with the Western Balkan countries under the Team Europe initiative. In 2020, the Czech Republic allocated a total of CZK 250 million for this initiative; and since the beginning of this year, another 30 million. Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is one of the priority countries for bilateral development cooperation, is, however, the only Balkan country supported by the Czech Republic under this program. Unlike several other countries, the Czech Republic has not donated any vaccines from its own stocks. However, it has sent medical and hygiene supplies to the value of several million crowns to the region since 2020.

Despite the promise of vaccines from the EU and the COVAX program, in spring 2021 several Balkan states turned to Russia and especially China to purchase vaccines. In March 2021, the Czech Republic, together with 9 other Member States, addressed a rather forceful letter to High Representative Josep Borell on the risks of the EU losing credibility. Among other things, its signatories called for more strategic negotiations with the Western Balkan states, more effective communication and the need to be aware of the geopolitical implications of the presence of other international actors. Among specific proposals was to invite the Balkan states to the Conference on the Future of Europe. Unfortunately, this letter did not receive any substantive response. Serbia, which donated tens of thousands of vaccines to neighboring states months before the first shipments from the EU, opened a Sputnik V factory on its territory in June.

The characteristic feature of current Czech foreign policy is clearly illustrated by relations with Serbia, namely, a disunity of approach by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the President of the Republic. Tomáš Petříček, as Foreign Minister, was a proponent of strengthening the EU's geopolitical influence in the Western Balkans and of a responsible approach by the Member States. He pursued this policy line in 2021 in strong tandem with Slovakia. Until Petříček's dismissal, there was strong cooperation between him and Slovak Foreign Minister Ivan Korčok.

At the EU level, cooperation between the duo of Tomáš Szunyog (EU Special Representative for Kosovo) and Miroslav Lajčák (EU Special Representative for the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue) was visible. In addition to meetings with political leaders, both have been active in traditional and social media as mediators seeking to mend relations between Kosovo and Serbia, with input from the EU and the wider transatlantic community. In their speeches, they put emphasis on Kosovo and Serbia negotiating as equal partners in terms of rights and obligations. In doing so, they are also using to their advantage the unique position of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which are not perceived as geopolitical players in the Balkans, but as states that, with their experience of transition, have an understanding of the development of the Balkan states. Probably thanks to the proactive approach of the above-mentioned quartet, the support of the Czech Republic has been more visible both in Brussels and in the region itself.

We see a very different style of communication from Miloš Zeman, who in one of the few public interviews he gave in 2021 reiterated his conviction that the recognition of Kosovo by the Czech Republic was a “mistake”. In the same interview with CorD Magazine, he also called Serbia “one of the European leaders in vaccination”. He attributed its success to, among other things, the use of Russian and Chinese vaccines. During the visit of Serbian President Aleksander Vučić in May 2021, the President made no secret of his interest in learning more about Serbia’s strategy. The visit was mainly about discussing the issues of Serbia’s EU accession and economic cooperation. However, there was also a lengthy apology for the bombing of Yugoslavia, which Zeman labeled an “act of power arrogance” that the Czech Republic (under his leadership) was supposedly cowardly to resist. Vučić, on the other hand, made the surprise offer of a donation of 100,000 Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines. This was the first presidential visit since the outbreak of the pandemic, and the second meeting with President Vučić regarding the Sputnik V experience, the first having been conducted by Andrej Babiš during his visit to Serbia in February 2021. Given the context of these meetings, both visits seemed primarily to be an effort to build a relationship with the Russian vaccine diplomacy proxy at a time when EU diplomacy is trying to create a counterbalance to these influences.



A lack of unity in communications around issues related to the Western Balkans could easily complicate the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2022. Given that the enlargement of the EU to include the Balkan states is one of the priority points of the presidency, the Czech Republic’s position on the distribution of geopolitical forces and the building of dialogue in the Western Balkans will be closely monitored. If the Czech Republic wants to move the enlargement process forward, it will first and foremost have to convince the Member States that the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia must not stand in the way of opening

accession talks. However, Bulgaria is not the only Member State that has doubts about enlargement. The worsening economic situation, particularly in southern Europe, the post-Brexit atmosphere and the strained relations between liberal and conservative governments of Member States are amplifying the presence of voices calling for a slowdown in European integration until the current model of an ever closer union of Member States is rethought. Fear of increased immigration is another sensitive issue. If the Czech Republic wants to help remove these obstacles, it should use the presidency to build bilateral relations that can increase trust between Member States and the Western Balkans.

In October 2020, Tomáš Petříček announced that as part of the presidency, the Czech Republic was preparing a summit of Western Balkan and EU leaders on the issues of enlargement and further cooperation. Slovenia, which will hold the EU presidency in the second half of 2021, will also intensively address the issue of enlargement and among other things, is also planning a summit on this topic. The Czech Republic should try to build on these activities. How strongly the Czech Republic will ultimately promote the interests of the Western Balkans will also depend on the autumn parliamentary elections. The electoral program of the Pirates and Mayors coalition is so far the only one that explicitly includes support for the European hopes of the Western Balkans. The program of the Spolu coalition speaks only in general terms about support for European integration. Jakub Kulhánek's visit to Skopje indicates that the ČSSD intends to continue Petříček's work.

Although the ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe, in its joint declaration, talks about overcoming Europe's geopolitical challenges including those related to migration, the Member States have not yet used this platform to strengthen relations with the Western Balkan countries, which are directly affected by these issues. An open conference concept laying emphasis on the local activities of the Member States would be an ideal opportunity to strengthen bilateral cooperation, for example through public debates on the future of European integration. The conference declaration refers to the pandemic as an unprecedented test of the EU and its solidarity, which must be overcome with a stress on inclusiveness and the promotion of European values in the world. The Czech Republic should point out to the conference that we will not overcome the pandemic any time soon without accelerating aid to the EU neighborhood.

In the end, however, the Czech Republic should not forget that efforts to enlarge the EU can take many forms. At a time when negotiations on the opening of accession talks show no progress, it is important to emphasize the smaller gestures that bring the EU closer to its neighbors in everyday life. Improved transport links, preferential roaming and other benefits used by the general public can have a very positive influence on the reputation of European and Czech diplomacy, and these changes do not have to be at a European level. V4 regional coordination in similar cases can be equally beneficial for the Czech Republic.

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## Context

- Reduced confidence in narratives about the European perspective and partnership due to blockage of accession talks by Member States and slow distribution of vaccines.
- Postponement of political discussions on EU enlargement because of the covid-19 pandemic.
- The upcoming Czech EU presidency as a challenge of coordinating Member States, especially regarding unblocking accession talks with North Macedonia.
- Bulgaria's July parliamentary elections offering little hope of a new alignment of political forces and reaching an agreement with North Macedonia.

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## Present

- Cautious active involvement of the Czech Republic in discussions on the future of the Western Balkans, especially in coordinating with other Central European states.
- Rapidly adapting development assistance activities for needs associated with the covid-19 pandemic in 2021.
- The complicated role of the Czech Republic in negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina due to the disunified approach of the Czech political representation on the issue of Kosovo's independence.



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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should use its forthcoming presidency to play a mediating role in the development of bilateral relations between the EU Member States and the Western Balkan countries.
- The Czech Republic should prioritize enlargement and concrete steps towards it as a key objective of its foreign policy. A good symbolic example is the bilateral cancellation of roaming charges agreed in May 2021 between Greece and Serbia.
- In the spirit of the March letter to Borell, the Czech Republic should use the space given by the Conference on the Future of Europe to organize activities in cooperation with the Balkan states and to raise the profile of the need to accelerate vaccine supply to the region.

# Russia

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Anna Jordanová

“On the basis of unequivocal evidence obtained by our security forces during the investigation, I have to state that there is a reasonable suspicion of the involvement of officers of the Russian secret service GRU, Unit 29155, in the explosion of the ammunition depots at the Vrbětice site in 2014.”

— **Andrej Babiš**  
17 April 2021

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“We have decided, in accordance with Article 11 of the Vienna Convention, to limit the number of Russian diplomats in Prague to the same number as are currently in our Embassy in Moscow.”

— **Jakub Kulháněk**  
22 April 2021

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“In preparing the tender for the construction of Dukovany Unit 5, we are not only deciding on the largest contract in the history of our republic, but also on which part of the world we want to belong to. Whether we belong to the free part of the world or to that part where people do not have the opportunity, through free elections, to influence the course of events.”

— **Miloš Vystrčil**  
31 March 2021

For most of the period under review, the Czech Republic's relations with Russia remained tense. The Czech government, through then Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček, criticized in particular the Kremlin's continued human rights violations and pressure on the opposition. Starting with the poisoning of Alexei Navalny in August last year and the clampdown on demonstrations in support of him, and ending with criticism of the inclusion of the Prague Civil Society Centre and People in Need on the list of so-called „foreign agents“. NGOs have reported on other specific cases in the Czech information space - for example, the local branch of Memorial reported on the case of Russian historian Yuri Dmitriev.

April and May of this year were critical months in relations between the Czech Republic and the Russian Federation, with Prime Minister Andrej Babiš together with Deputy Prime Minister and acting head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Interior Jan Hamáček announcing that they had obtained evidence of the involvement of Russian military intelligence, the GRU, in the explosion of ammunition depots in Vrbětice in 2014.

In the wake of this revelation, the Czech government finally took a step that had in fact been debated virtually since 1989, but for which there was no political will - i.e. to significantly reduce the high number of staff at the Russian embassy in Prague, which is regularly pointed out by Czech intelligence services, even at the cost of drastically reducing the staffing of the Czech embassy in Moscow.

Subsequently, relations with Russia continued to deteriorate. A significant point was reached with the inclusion of the Czech Republic as the only country aside from the USA on the so-called list of hostile states, which according to Russia are supposed to carry out hostile actions against the Russian Federation or its citizens.

In addition to the expulsion of employees from the Russian diplomatic mission in Prague, the crisis led to negotiations on the exclusion of Rosatom as well as China's CGN from a possible future tender for the construction of a unit at the nuclear power plant Dukovany. In July, the Senate returned the proposed low-carbon bill to the Chamber of Deputies with a demand to exclude companies from Russia and China (and possibly other risky countries) even from maintenance contracts and other related services, and also with a requirement to further strengthen parliamentary scrutiny and security checks in this strategic tender.

The spring of this year has shown that the continuity of foreign policy towards the Russian Federation easily becomes a victim of the domestic political priorities of individual political actors. Repeated questioning of the presence of GRU officers in Vrbětice by President Zeman and his entourage and his related persistent attacks on the security services (BIS) have led to a blurring of the security and information situation in the Czech Republic itself and have also served Russia's internal propaganda against the Czech Republic. Although Prime Minister Babiš formally rejected the President's utterances, it failed to bring about a sought-after and sufficiently understandable clarification of the situation for partners at home and abroad.

The overall political and communications crisis that erupted on the domestic political scene immediately after the Vrbětice affair was uncovered also contributed signifi-

ificantly to the relatively weak response of EU and NATO allies to the Prime Minister's call for solidarity in the expulsion of diplomats.

Another tangible impact of this situation was the debate around the Russian uncertified vaccine Sputnik V, the use of which the President tried to push through politically contrary to the expert opinion of the then responsible Minister of Health. This contradiction has become a rich vein for various currents of disinformation, including pro-Russian ones. The use of Sputnik V for vaccination in the Czech Republic became practically unthinkable from a political perspective after April 2021, and, moreover, doses of other vaccines had already begun to flow into the Czech Republic in sufficient quantities. The interest of Czech citizens in being vaccinated with this Russian vaccine without the approval of the relevant authorities was not high, but in the context of the overall (dis)information crisis, Sputnik V remained a relatively strong issue even given the muted Czech interest.



The division among Czech politicians in relation to Russia is no longer just a stated problem, but a real threat, the underestimation of which has concrete consequences. In this sense, the statements from the President's office in particular can no longer be seen as just a difference of opinion. Just as the meeting at Prague Castle between the Russian ambassador and the presidential advisor Nejedlý without the presence of the President or any other formal representative of the elected authorities cannot be ignored. Regardless of Miloš Zeman's other activities, the Czech government and other institutions (especially the parliament) should actively work on a clear and articulate line of communication with citizens and foreign actors to at least offset this imbalance. This includes the formulation of a clear position in negotiations with EU and NATO allies on joint steps regarding Russia (and Belarus), which are currently the subject of heated debate within both alliances.

The Czech Republic should strive to maintain its current successes in the coming year; for example, when resuming the activities of the Czech embassy in Moscow, it should not be pushed into a repeat of the disproportionate increase in the number of Russian staff at the embassy in Prague. This would be to the credit of the Czech Republic in future relations with NATO countries and on the security agenda, especially with the new US Biden administration.

At the same time, the Czech political representation should keep in mind the Vrěťice explosions in 2014 and the actions of the Russian government after this year's disclosure of its involvement and draw appropriate conclusions for the broader setting of relations and strategy towards Russia in the future. A significant overlap of domestic and foreign policy in this area is to be expected in the period ahead: whether in the aforementioned political and energy spheres, or in matters related to domestic resilience and internal security issues (see the case of the April arrest and terrorism charges for several men who fought on the pro-Russian side in the Donbas).

The initiative of the current Foreign Minister Jakub Kulháněk to moderate a strategic debate on the approach to Russia across political parties and to find a basic consensus may prove beneficial in the future. Alignment of basic values and priorities is absolutely essential for the foreign policy of the Czech state to be meaningful, and the absence of this consensus can no longer be ignored. However, the fundamentally different attitudes of some parties and movements, as well as individual influential figures, will be a substantial obstacle to this.

The promotion of democracy and human rights should remain an important issue in relations with the Russian Federation. The Czech Republic should maintain its existing support for democratic groups and human rights and anti-corruption initiatives, especially in these times when pressure on them from the government and security authorities is continuously growing (and may intensify further ahead of September's parliamentary elections in Russia). It is therefore necessary to prepare for a situation where some members of the Russian opposition, media or civil society will be forced to leave the country in a hurry. The Czech government should then consider its options for assistance, both on its own (through visas) and in cooperation with other institutions. An example would be this year's assistance to Belarusian students who have entered Czech universities.

Independent Russian and Russian-language media covering events in Russia will also need support in the coming period. The Czech Republic could use its existing experience and capacities in this area (and from other regions, e.g. the Eastern Partnership) independently, bilaterally with other states or on relevant multilateral platforms, including the EU or the Council of Europe. There is also the possibility of using non-governmental and informal platforms, such as the Friends of Free Russia initiative, the Prague Civil Society Centre or RFE/RL side projects.

At the same time, we must not forget about the domestic media; the problem of politically motivated disinformation campaigns linked to Russia will remain a major issue. This is also in the context of building more comprehensive resilience within Czech society to negative influences from abroad, including the Russian Federation. The Czech Republic has already taken some significant steps in this context: e.g. a new instrument for screening foreign investments (in effect since May 2021), new powers for military intelligence in the field of cyber, etc.; however, it remains to be seen how effective and sufficient these instruments will be in practice.

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## Context

- The Vrbětice case as a major turning point in bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and the Russian Federation.
- Increasing pressure on the Russian political opposition and independent initiatives that the Czech Republic and other democratic countries support, especially ahead of the parliamentary elections in September.
- The gradual, albeit slow and often painful, building of a basic consensus among European states in relation to Russia at the EU level and (since the new US administration) within NATO.

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## Present

- Connecting the immediate security dimension to the Czech Republic's long-term human rights and humanitarian agenda.
  - Persistent strong ties of some Czech politicians and government officials to Moscow in some areas of state administration.
  - Czech Republic as a direct target of Russian hostile activities.
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## Recommendations

- The Czech politicians should recognize the deep internal differences of opinion on the Russian Federation as a security risk because they are exploited by Russia, and it should do everything possible to reach a basic consensus on relations with Russia across political parties and Czech society.
- The Czech Republic should strive to unify its position within NATO and the EU and present its position in a unified and consistent manner; as a direct target of Russian hostile activities, it has both opportunities and immediate reasons to do so.
- Czech institutions should continue to support independent and democratic initiatives, whether individually, bilaterally or on pan-European platforms.
- The Czech Republic should take concrete steps, given the current situation in its relations with Russia, to strengthen its resilience, including strengthening coordination in the fight against hybrid threats or withdrawing from the murky Russian banks based in Budapest.





# Eastern Partnership



Pavel Havlíček

“The V4 Ministers reaffirmed their strong support for the Eastern Partnership as a strategic dimension of European Neighborhood Policy and highlighted its key role for the stability, security and economic prosperity of the region. They reaffirmed the values enshrined in the Prague Declaration adopted at the founding 2009 Eastern Partnership Summit.”

— **Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers  
of the Visegrad Group countries**  
29 April 2021

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“We strongly support the efforts and initiatives of Member States and the European Commission to share vaccines from allocated contracts with our closest neighbors in the EU, such as the Western Balkan countries.”

— **Tomáš Petříček**  
6 January 2021

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„The V4 Prime Ministers commit themselves to promoting common European objectives in the further development of the Eastern Partnership, supporting the European aspirations and orientation of the partners and deepening cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries.“

— **Andrej Babiš**  
17 February 2021

In the past year, European Eastern Partnership policy has undergone a period of stagnation and of being sidelined. This was mainly related to the covid-19 pandemic, but also to the three postponements of the Eastern Partnership Summit not only by the Croatian, but also subsequently by the German and Portuguese presidencies of the EU Council. This is despite the fact that only until the end of last year were the “20 Deliverables for 2020” in force, representing a roadmap for implementing the objectives of the Eastern Partnership. After all the switches, this key meeting of the leaders of the European Member States and the Eastern Partnership, which should give the policy a major new impetus, will only take place at the very end of 2021 under the patronage of the Slovenian EU leadership.

To some extent, on the other hand, having the focus of European interest on some of the weaknesses identified by the European Commission in the reflection process, including the rule of law, democratic norms and other basic principles within the Eastern Partnership, represented a new opportunity. It is precisely these that are coming to the fore in the context of the increasingly widening gap between the EU supply and Eastern Partnership demand and the need to resolve conflict situations. A new initiative bringing together think tanks from the Eastern Partnership countries and the EU was also launched, and several Czech organizations have joined. The think tank network has already presented several official outputs to the European Commission, including on the rule of law or social resilience and security as new EaP themes.

The region of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus itself has gone through a series of crises and bilateral escalations. In addition to the pro-democracy protests in Belarus, which erupted after 9 August 2020 in the wake of a fundamentally rigged presidential election, the region has also been shaken by the ongoing escalation in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh. Georgia and Moldova have also struggled with internal problems, influenced by complex internal political processes connected to their electoral processes and to political polarization. Ukraine is a separate case, where political revisionism has been on the rise, but it has been even more affected by the ongoing military aggression from Putin's Russia.

The Czech diplomatic position has been fairly consistent throughout, sticking to the group of like-minded states supporting the EU's eastern policy. The Czech Republic has been actively involved in resolving the crisis in Belarus and reacted quite sharply to events in the Russian Federation and, through European structures, in Kyrgyzstan too, which also found its way on to the European agenda last autumn. In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Czech diplomacy called for an end to the violence and offered to mediate negotiations between the two sides, but otherwise stuck to the EU position.

In addition, the Czech government has joined a group of states calling for the distribution of covid-19 vaccines and personal protective equipment to Eastern Partnership countries, which have been left behind in this regard not only compared to EU countries, but also to the Western Balkans. Not even the supply of vaccines from the multilateral COVAX program has proved effective whilst Europe's reputation compared to other players in the region has been undermined. Individual EU states started compensating for the situation by helping bilaterally, mostly to their clo-

sest neighbors. This was evident, for example, in Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. The Czech Republic decided to help mainly through the provision of personal protective equipment and other technical and financial assistance, but did not offer its own vaccines to the Eastern Partnership countries.

The Czech Republic also continued preparations for its forthcoming EU Council presidency in the second half of 2022, which could be a good opportunity to move some elements of policy in the Eastern Partnership agenda to a new level. At the center of the Czech approach should be, in particular, issues related to the resilience of the EaP countries, economic recovery after the pandemic, but also, for example, green transformation and cooperation in the field of people-to-people ties, including education.

At the V4 level, there was a significant Visegrad endorsement of ideas about strengthening security cooperation with the associated trio of countries, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, which appeared in the V4 joint declaration on the future of the Eastern Partnership at the end of April this year. Additionally, Visegrad also signed up to the Partnership's core set of values and called for solidarity with the Eastern Partnership countries in regard to Russian aggression and the ongoing problems associated with the covid-19 pandemic and subsequent recovery.



The Eastern Partnership faces a number of challenges in keeping its policies on a sensible and sufficiently ambitious path to bring the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus closer to Europe and help them to strengthen their sovereignty and territorial integrity, which has long been challenged by the Russian Federation. For this reason, it is important for the Czech Republic to be even more active in campaigning to defend EU Eastern policy in the future, when the continued sustainability of this initiative will be questioned by some.

In the period ahead, it will be crucial to put the Eastern Partnership back on the European agenda and to use the opportunity ahead of the forthcoming December summit to prepare and agree on a sufficiently ambitious agenda for the future of this policy after 2021. The Joint Staff Working Document, a background paper describing European priorities in the Eastern Partnership region after 2020, has laid out some of these opportunities, although expectations related to, for example, the security agenda or hybrid action have been cooled by the European Commission. It will be important to convert the newly created list of priorities, modelled on the older 20 Deliverables for 2020, into practice with concrete tasks for European institutions and Member States. It is in this respect that Czech diplomacy should be an active player, taking on concrete commitments based on long-term priorities in the Eastern Neighborhood.

At the same time, it is clear that the crises in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus as well as Russia's aggression against Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova and other countries in the region will not just go away. Nevertheless, despite these adversities, the Czech Republic should continue to work towards the approval of a sufficiently am-

bitious framework for the Eastern Partners that would meet their expectations while ensuring the continuation of the Partnership for all six countries, even though Belarus has officially declared its withdrawal from the Eastern Partnership, to which Czech diplomacy will have to respond.

In this context, European and Czech diplomacy should focus primarily on the associated Trio of countries, which are demonstrably seeking closer cooperation with the EU and the formalization of this alliance. Czech support should be more visible both at the EU level and within the framework of cooperation with NATO, where the Czech Republic should continue to defend the pro-Western orientation of Ukraine and Georgia. Events in Moldova, seeing the consolidation of a genuinely pro-reform and pro-Western-minded elite represent a major opportunity in the context of recent developments in the country.

Czech diplomacy should therefore strengthen its approach to the Trio Initiative and further help it to develop and gain diplomatic and political support from allies within the EU, especially with regard to closer security cooperation and regional conflict resolution, social resilience, economic recovery, and support for addressing the consequences of the covid-19 pandemic and vaccine distribution. However, the Czech Republic's long-term interest is still to work with all six countries, even if this means focusing more closely on the citizens of the six countries and working more with opposition circles, as in the case of Belarus.

Czech diplomacy should use all instruments at the bilateral, regional and multilateral level in order to be able not only to direct sufficient financial resources into the new direction of the Eastern Partnership, but also to bring greater flexibility to enable all participants to set up the right conditions for proper functioning. A good opportunity for this presents itself with the Czech EU presidency in the second half of 2022, which, thanks to the joint approach with Sweden and France, may be a good moment to make this policy more visible on European soil. At the same time, though, the Czech Republic must not back away from its commitments and the clearly defined priorities and targeting of key issues, which even after more than 12 years since the launch of the policy remain the fight against corruption, the rule of law, democratic processes, human rights and support for the non-profit sector and the media.

This will be especially important in the case of the future European position towards Belarus, where the Czech Republic should look for creative ways to involve the country and its citizens in the Eastern Partnership, while minimising contacts with the dictatorial regime of Alexander Lukashenko, which is liquidating all forms of protest in the country and increasingly subordinating its country to the interests of Moscow. The situation around Nagorno-Karabakh will require a similarly clear-cut values-based approach, both to the bilateral conflict between the two countries and to the involvement of Russia, Turkey and other actors in this newly re-heated conflict. There is a new opportunity too for Czech diplomacy in the Crimean Platform initiative, which, at several levels, is to address the situation and the eventual return of the temporarily Russian-occupied peninsula to Ukraine.

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## Context

- Eastern Partnership on the back burner in view of the covid-19 pandemic and other European challenges and priorities.
- Multiple crises, conflicts and escalation of Russian aggression in the Eastern European region.
- Severe impact of the covid-19 pandemic in the Eastern Partnership countries versus the EU's so far weak assistance with recovery and provision of vaccines and other support.

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## Present

- Negotiations and preparations for the key summit on European Eastern Policy and fine-tuning its direction for the new decade.
- Active involvement of Czech diplomacy in discussions on the future direction of policy and crisis management in Eastern Europe, including Belarus and other regional issues.
- Greater recognition by the Czech Republic and the V4 of the deeper differentiation of the Eastern Partnership (Trio) and the promotion of a stronger security element within this policy.

## Recommendations

- Czech diplomacy should promote an ambitious plan for the future development of the Eastern Partnership that will be sufficiently flexible.
- The Czech Republic must continue its strongly normative approach towards the Eastern European region and strongly promote the basic pillars of the Partnership.
- The Czech Republic should continue to coordinate and prepare for its forthcoming EU presidency, in which the Partnership should play an important role.





# Ukraine

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Michal Lebduška

“The 2nd meeting of the Ukrainian-Czech Experts Forum took place in Kyiv, where participants discussed cooperation between Ukraine and the Czech Republic in the fields of politics, economy, history, combating disinformation, and more. The meeting was opened by Deputy Ministers @VasylBodnar and @AlesChmelar.”

— **Embassy of Ukraine in the Czech Republic**  
26 May 2021

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“Today in Bratislava with the C5 countries, we are fine-tuning the details of travel in our region. Then we discussed the situation in Ukraine with Minister @Dmytro-Kuleba and assured him of our continued support.”

— **Jakub Kulhánek**  
13 May 2021

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“After my visit to Kyiv, I am more convinced than ever that this ambition is realistic for the whole of Ukraine. I saw the resolution and the strength to change. I saw a modern society looking to the future. The Czech Republic will do everything possible to make Ukraine’s European ambitions a reality.”

— **Aleš Chmelař**  
14 June 2021

While before the covid-19 pandemic, contacts between the Czech Republic and Ukraine were developing intensively, and there was even the first visit for a long time by the Czech Prime Minister to Kyiv in the autumn of 2019, the outbreak of the pandemic all but halted this trend. Instead, since spring 2020, the Czech Republic has been supporting Ukraine in the fight against the pandemic. In April last year, the Czech government set aside funds for emergency humanitarian aid, which has been delivered to Ukraine several times amounting to approximately EUR 1.7 million by May 2021. At the same time, the Czech Republic took part in assisting in eastern Ukraine under the “V4 East Solidarity Programme for Eastern Partnership Countries.”

In addition to limiting mutual contacts, the pandemic has particularly struck the Ukrainian diaspora in the Czech Republic, which has struggled with limited travel options and government regulations restricting the issuance of visas. Czech officials also pointed out that some foreigners were unable to participate in the vaccination program for a long time. At the same time, though, there have been publicized cases of false certificates of negative tests for covid-19 being bought on the black market, which may have resulted in Ukrainian citizens travelling to the Czech Republic and becoming a source of the spread of the disease.

Due to the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, security issues remain key in relation to Ukraine. In the country itself, the deoligarchization process has seen a relatively harsh crackdown on pro-Russian powers led by oligarch Viktor Medvedchuk, who is considered the Kremlin's closest ally in Ukraine. In addition to punishing particular individuals, three pro-Kremlin television channels have been closed down. Then, in the first half of 2021, the fighting on the front line in the Donbas escalated significantly, which, together with the massing of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, again showed that the situation in the region is still very tense.

The Czech position remains consistent. In May, Jakub Kulháněk attended a joint meeting of the foreign ministers of the Central 5 countries, to which Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba was also invited. During the meeting, the ministers supported both Ukraine's territorial integrity and its efforts for further Euro-Atlantic integration. The meeting was tied to Ukrainian support for the Czech Republic in connection with the Vrbětice case, which was a very positive gesture. Along with verbal support for the Czech Republic, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Kuleba mentioned in a telephone conversation with his Czech counterpart that Ukraine was ready to accept Czech diplomats who had been expelled from the Czech embassy in Moscow.

In addition to contacts at the level of foreign ministers, other projects continued. At the end of May 2021, the Czech-Ukrainian Business Forum took place, which confirmed the interest in deepening economic cooperation between the two countries, and also the second Czech-Ukrainian Intergovernmental Discussion Forum was held. The main topics of the discussion forum included the exchange of practical experience in the field of combating Russian propaganda and disinformation, as well as bilateral and multilateral relations, historical memory and information on the currently emerging Crimean Platform. The NGOs' discussion was accompanied by a visit of the De-

puty Minister of Foreign Affairs Aleš Chmelař and consultations at the governmental level.



It is key, as soon as possible, to resume contacts interrupted by the covid-19 pandemic and to build on expanding Czech-Ukrainian contacts from the pre-pandemic period. Also, the development of trade and support for reforms that will determine the country's future and its Euro-Atlantic ambitions are crucial to Ukraine's future development. The pursuit of the necessary reform agenda is closely linked to the further liberalization of trade relations between the EU and Ukraine. It is still the case that a key motivation here are the opportunities that are opening up for Ukraine in the context of the association process, from which Czech business also benefits significantly. Therefore, the Czech Republic should be active in these matters at both bilateral and EU levels.

In addition, Czech diplomacy should focus on new opportunities opening up due to changes in European Eastern Partnership policy in the summer of 2021. The new European Eastern Policy plans presented by the European Commission target the core values of the Eastern Partnership and enable Czech and European diplomacy to further develop relations with the Eastern European countries concerned. Among them, Ukraine is a key partner whose interest in this agenda needs to be maintained and further motivated, especially ahead of the important Eastern Partnership Summit to be held at the end of this year.

The planned 9th meeting of the Czech-Ukrainian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic, Industrial and Scientific and Technological Cooperation, which is planned for the second half of 2021, will be a positive step towards the revival of economic contacts. It should, however, be complemented by further symbolic steps on the part of the Ministry of Industry and Trade, ideally by the visit of the Minister and First Deputy Prime Minister Karel Havlíček to Ukraine, which was cancelled last year due to the first wave of the pandemic.

It is essential to maintain support for Ukraine in the area of security, which will also be a challenge in view of the upcoming Czech parliamentary elections. However, in addition to the Czech security support to Ukraine, there is wide scope for mutual cooperation and exchange of experience in this area. Since 2014, Ukrainians have had a wealth of practical experience in combating direct Russian aggression as well as hybrid threats, disinformation and state propaganda. This experience can now be very useful for the Czech Republic in the wake of the Vrbětice case and the deterioration of Czech-Russian relations. Last but not least, in the context of this case and the recent escalation of the conflict in Donbas, it is essential to maintain sanctions against the Russian Federation until Ukrainian territorial integrity has been fully restored and to be prepared to work together to tighten them in the event of further escalation. The emerging Crimea Platform, which is to address the subject of the Ukrainian-Russian

conflict and wider security issues in the Black Sea region, may also provide a new opportunity for meetings and exchange of experience.

The covid-19 pandemic has also posed a major challenge to the large Ukrainian diaspora in the Czech Republic. Therefore, clear mechanisms should be set up in the future to facilitate the stay of non-EU foreigners in the event of any similar crisis so that they do not remain outside the system. Specifically, in the context of a pandemic, they should be given access to vaccination as soon as possible. At the same time, it is also essential to continue to support Ukraine in its fight against the pandemic. As a non-EU country, Ukraine has had significantly more limited possibilities to obtain vaccines and launch its own vaccination program. Therefore, going forward, it would be right if Czech humanitarian aid to Ukraine, ideally in cooperation with other partners in the region, were to focus to a larger extent on the supply of vaccines, of which the Czech Republic has a surplus. Cooperation in the field of health, however, should not take the place of the long-standing development of cooperation between the Czech Republic and Ukraine in other areas, especially in education and training.

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## Context

- Reduction in the intensity of mutual contacts due to the covid-19 pandemic and an end to the previous positive trend.
- The negative impact of pandemic-related restrictions on the large Ukrainian diaspora in the Czech Republic.
- Continued Russian aggression towards Ukraine leading to an extensive escalation of the conflict in Donbas.

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## Present

- Building on previous initiatives in the form of the Czech-Ukrainian Business Forum and the Czech-Ukrainian Intergovernmental Discussion Forum.
- Preparations for the departure of the new Czech Ambassador to Kyiv.
- Mutual support and solidarity in Ukraine's response to the Vrbětice case.

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## Recommendations

- The MFA and Ministry of Industry and Trade should build on the positive trend from pre-pandemic times and expand bilateral contacts, which should be complemented by a visit at the highest level.
- With regard to the Vrbětice case, the Czech Republic should deepen cooperation with Ukraine in the security sector and use Ukrainian experience in combating Russian aggression.
- The Czech Republic should support Ukraine in the fight against the pandemic by supplying vaccines, which Ukraine, as a non-EU Member State, has difficulty accessing.

# Belarus

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Tereza Soušková



“It is unacceptable that the Belarusian regime has abused international aviation law to persecute its opponents. We call for an investigation of the case and the immediate release of Roman Protasevich and all passengers of the #Ryanair flight to Vilnius.”

— **Jakub Kulhánek**

23 May 2021

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“We have been a proud partner of the Ice Hockey World Championship for 28 years. But we respect and support human rights. Therefore, #SKODA will not sponsor the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship so long as Belarus is one of the organizers.”

— **Škoda Auto**

16 January 2021

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“I thanked Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya for everything that she does for Belarus. We support the Belarusian struggle for democracy and fundamental rights. Czechia has experience with the transition to democracy - we are ready to share it and so help Belarus.”

— **Tomáš Petříček**

13 October 2020

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“I have assured her [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya] that she will always have our support in the fight for freedom and respect for human rights.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

8 June 2021

Developments in Belarus followed the course of two major events last year. The first was the global coronavirus pandemic and the second was the falsified presidential election of 9 August 2020, the winner of which was declared to be Alexander Lukashenko, sparking mass protests by Belarusians. Demonstrations calling for democratic reforms have long gone unanswered by the regime, which has instead tried to silence them from the very beginning. The regime responded to ongoing protests with arrests, police violence, prison torture, intimidation and dismissal of staff, exclusion of students and teachers, and forced emigration. The presidential candidates and the main opposition figures were arrested or forced to emigrate, as was the case with Lukashenko's main opposition opponent, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, now in Lithuania, from where she devotes her time to international advocacy and supporting the Belarusian opposition movement. The regime also carried out raids on members of the opposition Coordination Council, whose members included the well-known writer Svetlana Alexievich. To support her before her detention, several diplomats gathered in her apartment, including the Czech Ambassador to Belarus, Tomáš Pernický.

The Czech Republic supported the three rounds of European sanctions against selected economic entities and members of the Belarusian regime associated with the falsification of the results of the Belarusian presidential election and the suppression of protests. The primary target of the sanctions was the country's leadership, not across the board measures against the Belarusian citizenry. The list now includes 166 people, including Alexander Lukashenko himself, who is not allowed to travel to EU Member States and has had his European assets frozen. Along with him, senior military officials, judges and university rectors who expelled students for participating in the protests, were added to the sanctions list. In addition to the persons targeted, the sanctions also apply to 15 Belarusian companies closely linked to the Belarusian regime.

The Czech government expressed support for the demonstrators. In August 2020, Prime Minister Babiš likened the situation in Belarus to what was happening in Czechoslovakia in 1968 and called for a repeat election. He even met with the Belarusian expatriate community in our country. However, at the V4 summit, he refused to meet with opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya on the grounds that he did not want to take an overhasty step that would not be in line with the European position. Subsequently, there was at least a virtual meeting between Tsikhanouskaya and Minister of Foreign Affairs Tomáš Petříček in the form of a Forum 2000 video conference.

The reaction to the violence against the protesters came about following public pressure from both Czech and Western companies, such as when, for example, the carmaker Škoda Auto announced that it would no longer be sponsoring the Ice Hockey World Championship if it took place, as originally planned, in Belarus (in partnership with Latvia). In response to being withdrawn from the organization of the championship, Belarus imposed a six-month embargo on imports of the carmaker's products.

Widespread action has been taken against opposition media and non-profit organizations in the country. The Belarusian regime has blocked most of the country's

independent and opposition media, many of them being put on a list of extremist organizations. In the offices and homes of the employees of these organizations police carried out raids, and the workers themselves were interrogated and some detained. The crackdown affected, for example, the largest news server Tut.by, the Belarusian-aimed Polish television channel Belsat, Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, the Viasna human rights center and many others.

The regime's clampdown on opposition media culminated on May 23, when a Ryanair plane bound for Vilnius from Athens was forced to land in Minsk, escorted by a Belarusian fighter, due to the alleged presence of a bomb on board. Upon arrival, the passenger Roman Protasevich, who worked abroad as an opposition activist and journalist and co-founded the Nexta telegram channel, was detained. The information and activist channels Nexta and Nexta Live, operating on the Telegram social network, were one of the main sources of information about the protests last year and had already been included in the list of extremist organizations in the autumn.

The grounding of the aircraft carrying Protasevich was an unprecedented threat to and violation of civil aviation safety in Europe and called for a clear and decisive response at both national and European level. On behalf of the Czech Republic, Foreign Minister Jakub Kulháněk summoned the Belarusian ambassador to protest in the strongest terms against Belarus's behavior. European leaders, meanwhile, in response to the grounding and Protasevich's detention, introduced the latest and most extensive round yet of sanctions. Among other things, they banned Belavia Airlines from entering European airspace, declared the Belarusian airspace a danger for civilian traffic, and strongly advised European airlines to avoid overflights of Belarus airspace.

At the beginning of June, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya came for a four-day visit to the Czech Republic at the invitation of Senate President Miloš Vystrčil. She gave a speech in the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, where she expressed gratitude for the support shown towards Belarus and praised the specific steps that the Czech Republic had taken, highlighting the Medevac humanitarian program. Miloš Vystrčil called her the winner of the presidential election. Tsikhanouskaya also met with President Miloš Zeman and Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who expressed to her their support for the fight for freedom and respect for human rights. In addition to the highest state officials, Tsikhanouskaya also met with leaders of the Czech opposition, representatives of the non-profit sector, several ambassadors and also with the local Belarusian community.



The Czech Republic has long supported the civic and non-profit sector in Belarus by means of grants and projects under the remit of the Program of Transformation Cooperation and the sharing of Czech experience abroad. After the rigged presidential elections and the regime's violent reaction to the demonstrations, the Czech Republic decided to increase the funding to support Belarusians by CZK 10 million. This money

is mainly used to finance humanitarian and medical assistance for affected Belarusians. Czech diplomacy, in coordinating activities, is very effective at using contacts among the Belarusian community in the Czech Republic, and informal consultations with the Czech non-profit sector, and in combining these with their experience and know-how of supporting civil society in other non-democratic countries. This work should be supported and continue in the future.

The Czech Republic, in supporting ordinary Belarusians, is relatively good at circumventing cooperation with the regime. Aid has primarily been aimed towards providing humanitarian and legal assistance and relocation. As part of the MEDEVAC program, 89 Belarusians who suffered injuries as a result of violent police interventions or torture came to the Czech Republic and were provided with psychological, postoperative or rehabilitation care. Likewise, thanks to European funding, several Czech universities have offered scholarships to students from Belarus who, due to the political situation in the country, cannot complete their studies or have been persecuted due to their anti-regime activity. It is also worthy of mention that the Belarusian human rights organization Viasna was the recipient this year of the Homo Homini award for the protection of human rights, awarded annually by People in Need, indeed from the mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib.

Looking to the future, there is great potential in Belarus for the strengthening of cultural diplomacy and of people-to-people contacts especially given the recent introduction of the visa facilitation agreement for Belarusians traveling to the EU. In the event of a regime change, this may be an interesting direction for Czech diplomacy to take. In this context, it would be strategic to proceed with the establishment of the Czech Center in Minsk, even if for now, there is not the political environment and this agenda is rather on the back burner. Given the current situation, however, it is unthinkable to resign from the task of advocating for the human rights agenda, which is crucial in view of the protests against the rigged presidential elections and related repressions.

With the protests and the consequent violent response of the regime, as well as actions such as endangering international flights and the detention of Protasevich, Belarus has distanced itself from the EU like never before. At the same time, there has been an official freeze on contacts within the Eastern Partnership format. Under the current set-up, dialogue with the Belarusian regime is virtually impossible; since last year's presidential election the country has moved even closer to Russia, whom it recognizes as the only ally that can keep the current government in power. Relations between the two will thus likely strengthen and Belarus will become bound more tightly to the Russian orbit. All the more important, therefore, the directing of Czech support to civil society and the Belarusian opposition, for whom the Czech diplomatic service wants to establish an official representation in Prague, following the example of Lithuania.

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## Context

- Unprecedented escalation of the situation after the presidential elections in August 2020, continued persecution of the opposition, activists and the suppression of independent information sources by the Belarusian regime.
- Threat to European air safety by forcing the grounding of an aircraft with the Belarusian opposition activist Protasevich on board and his subsequent imprisonment.
- Russia's pressure to tighten ties to Belarus as a result of post-election protests.

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## Present

- Relatively swift and united EU response, in announcing sanctions against Belarusian regime officials and companies.
  - The Czech Republic has very effectively rolled out assistance in the humanitarian, medical and educational fields to affected Belarusians.
  - The recent visit of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya to the Czech Republic and meetings with top state officials.
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## Recommendations

- A clear and hard line needs to be shown, especially in relation to Protasevich's detention.
- The Czech Republic should continue to provide appropriate assistance to the Belarusian opposition, civil society and Belarusians persecuted by the regime.
- The Czech Republic should strive to coordinate its activities at the international level (Council of Europe, OSCE, EU, UN), which would contribute to better aid effectiveness.
- In the event of a regime change, it is possible to consider strengthening economic and cultural diplomacy, for example by opening a Czech center in Minsk.



# Human rights in foreign policy



Gabriela Svárovská



“As Foreign Minister, I support the call of some UN states against China. We ourselves have repeatedly commented on the human rights situation in China, either in national statements in the Human Rights Council or together as the EU. Unfortunately, this time we could not agree within the government on whether to attach a signature for the Czech Republic...”

— **Tomáš Petříček**  
7 October 2020

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“The tense situation in Belarus confirms that Czech and European politics need additional tools to strengthen their human rights policy. This role can be filled by the Magnitsky Act, which allows for the imposition of sanctions on human monsters violating human rights. I will put the Act on the Protection of Human Rights, that is to say the Czech version of the Magnitsky Act, before the Chamber of Deputies in the autumn.”

— **Jan Lipavský**  
31 August 2020

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“The Czech Republic has long failed to meet some international human rights standards, for example, it has not yet fully adopted the Istanbul Convention...”

— **Anna Šabatová**  
21 July 2020

The year 2020 brought with it a significant attenuation of activity in the Czech human rights foreign policy, caused in part by the coronavirus pandemic, reflecting a certain pan-European slowdown. It brought, too, momentary hope for a revival thanks to a solid response to the rigged elections and brutal post-election violence in Belarus, many missed opportunities and several new items on the to-do list. The underestimation of the importance of the human rights agenda in foreign policy and the incompatibility of individual foreign policy actors remains, however, a lingering problem. From this, flows the unpredictability of Czech human rights foreign policy, and the disappearance of its recognizable face from forums and agendas where the Czech Republic used to be a sought-after partner.

Participation in the UN Human Rights Council continued through the attentions of diplomats, guided by professional honour rather than political assignment, (the Czech Republic is a member of this body in 2019–2021). However, it remained publicly unnoticed; the Czech Republic did not visibly join any internationally monitored activity of the EU Member States. The presidency of the so-called Human Dimension of the OSCE was successful.

In the UN Human Rights Council, the Czech Republic co-sponsored EU resolutions on the human rights situations in the DPRK and Myanmar, as well as on freedom of religion or belief and on the rights of the child. Traditionally, in its speeches, the Czech Republic has supported the work of UN Special Rapporteurs and on several occasions has objected to the unfair prosecution and imprisonment of specific human rights defenders, journalists, activists and intellectuals, namely from Belarus, Russia, China and Iran. Foreign Minister Tomáš Petříček took part in an event organized to mark the 10th anniversary of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Peaceful Assembly and Association, one of the most active human rights expert mandates within the UN, co-established by the Czech Republic in 2010. Immediately afterwards, however, he refused to support a UN resolution criticizing the law on State Security, imposed on Hong Kong by the Chinese central government in order to further restrict the people of this enclave, specifically, their freedom of association and assembly, freedom of expression, the media and other civil and political rights.

The Czech Republic has contributed to the adoption of the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, which will enable targeted measures against natural and legal persons, entities and bodies in the sense of state and non-state actors in the event of their responsibility for serious human rights violations anywhere in the world. It actively participated in the preparation of the EU Action Plan for Human Rights and Democracy for the years 2020–2024, a document that defines the framework for the work of EU delegations.

Funding for human rights and democratization projects continued under the Transition Promotion Program, for which, however, the pandemic year has meant a number of obstacles due to restrictions on travel and personal contacts. Visa assistance and other support were provided to specific at-risk human rights defenders and journalists.

In terms of geography, the greatest attention was paid to Russia, China and Belarus. Overall, however, the geographical priorities of Czech human rights policy have narrowed sharply to below a credible minimum. From the thematic point of view, there is a prevailing emphasis on human rights defenders, the activities of civil society, freedom of expression and the media, and the fight against torture, that is to say topics in which the Czech Republic has built up experience and a certain credit over the years.

Human rights in Russia stand in the shade of security and geopolitical issues, although the extent of their violation is a crucial indicator of the nature of a system built on corruption and injustice. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' interest in this agenda and concerns for the state of civil society in Russia resulted in statements condemning the most striking violations and protests against the placing of two Czech NGOs on Russia's list of „undesirables“ (People in Need in 2019, and the endowment fund Prague Civil Society Centre in December, 2020). In both cases, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded with a public condemnation and took steps to ensure that the EU make similar statements. Repeated objections to human rights violations in Russia raised by Czech diplomats in Brussels also contributed slightly to preventing attempts to bring the EU and Russia closer together at a time when the Kremlin leadership was behaving aggressively in domestic and foreign policy, including with the West.

The Czech Republic did not oppose the signing of the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI), for example because of the forced labor widely practiced in China. At a meeting of the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, the Czech delegation refused to join a statement condemning Chinese repression in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, which was supported by 39 democracies, including 20 EU Member States. The Minister of Foreign Affairs justified this decision by saying that there was disagreement among the government, although previously the statement would be approved by the ambassador to the UN, or the deputy minister in charge in case when the text of the statement was in clear accordance with the long-term Czech position. The obstacle was the alleged disapproval of the President, who, however, does not have to be consulted by the government or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in such a situation from a constitutional point of view.

Events in Belarus before and especially after the August presidential elections revived the 20-year tradition of supporting civil society in the country. The Prime Minister, with an otherwise limited interest in foreign policy, seized the chance to appear as a non-negotiable democrat with a few pithy statements. However, less than a month later, he vetoed the invitation of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the exiled leader of the Belarusian opposition recognized by most of Europe, to the V<sub>4</sub> summit in Lublin. The Minister of Foreign Affairs met with non-governmental organizations and the diaspora, was interested in the fate of political prisoners, and in the first days after the elections he also visited the Belarusian service office of Radio Liberty (Radio Svaboda). The government pledged financial support to Belarus for humanitarian and civic needs for 2020 and 2021, funding for specific projects, medical assistance to victims of repression and their families, rehabilitation stays, support for indepen-

dent media and civil society, albeit ministries had to find the resources internally. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs finally set aside eight million CZK of the promised ten at least for 2020. The Ministry of the Interior implemented the MEDEVAC program. Thanks to the cooperation with the local Belarusian diaspora, 60 people were transported to the Czech Republic for treatment by the end of the year. Other institutions, including Czech universities, local administrations and cultural or ecclesiastical institutions, provided help and moral support to dozens of needy. It is mainly these actors who continue to monitor developments in Belarus, keep them in the public eye, and thus help to maintain the interest of official foreign policy.

Since 2004, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has operated a financial instrument to support its human rights and pro-democracy policy. However, the development of the Transition Promotion Program has stagnated in recent years, both in terms of budget and personnel. The program, which for more than fifteen years has enabled both Czech NGOs and embassies of the Czech Republic to accompany political and diplomatic steps with effective financial support, has along with the entire sector of development cooperation and humanitarian aid been cut back and its development hindered. In 2020, the Transition Promotion Program had a reduced budget of CZK 70 million available for the second year in a row (increased in the end to a total of CZK 81.5 million). This neither corresponds to the strategic importance of the human rights agenda and the promotion of democracy in the world, nor to the Czech potential in the governmental and non-governmental sectors.

Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of 2011 remains an unfulfilled domestic task. This is unacceptable for a European state that claims that the promotion of respect for human rights is a top priority. The situation surrounding the ratification of this convention exposes, among other things, how the Czech Republic is ill-prepared to resist disinformation and to erect a barrier against the scaremongering, the dividing of society and the breaking down of political cohesion.



In order for policy on the protection and promotion of human rights and democracy to regain credibility it is essential that it return to the strategic priorities of foreign policy, preferably in the new foreign policy concept that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will present after the upcoming parliamentary elections. The key will be to fill the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs with someone who has a strong political mandate and who will be able to re-establish and effectively perform a coordinating role in foreign policy and work on giving it a more consensual guise. The 2015 Human Rights and Transition Promotion Policy Concept of the Czech Republic should also be updated.

Respect for human rights and democratic principles is a basic building block of the international system, for which the Czech Republic is co-responsible and in the main-

tenance of which it has a vital interest. This also includes the systematic resistance to disruptive elements in international organizations such as the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the UN.

Monitoring the issue of human rights and the state of democracy in the world is a multi-faceted task, the coordination of which naturally falls under the competency of the Department of Human Rights and Transition Policy. It must be staffed sufficiently to be able not only to evaluate information from multilateral, bilateral and EU sources, but also to propose adequate measures and coordinate their implementation. The human rights agenda also suffers from insufficient staffing at embassies. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should strengthen its expertise by way of systematic cooperation with non-governmental experts and academia, for example in the form of regular consultations and pertinent analyses commissioned on a competitive basis from a wide range of potential suppliers, including foreign ones.

The human rights situation is an important indicator, for example, in the early detection of growing conflicts, humanitarian crises and uncontrolled migration. In this sense, human rights considerations need to be better reflected in security policy and development cooperation. Even in the development of economic relations, the agenda of human rights and democracy is not without significance. The level of corruption and the overall state of the rule of law, including the independence of the judiciary, are important criteria for assessing the investment climate. The association of any Czech company with the use of slave or child labor or with the persecution of independent unions is risky in terms of the reputation of both the company itself and its home state.

Geographical priorities can to a large extent remain as they have been in the past with the emphasis on Eastern Europe and the wider European neighborhood. From a thematic point of view, the emphasis should remain on civil and political rights and the principles of good governance, in particular freedom of expression and the media and freedom of association as exercised by civil society, as well as the fight against torture. Nor can economic, social and cultural rights, environmental rights, or equality and non-discrimination issues be neglected; here the best course of action is their promotion through Transition Promotion Program projects with grass-roots participation and the development and strengthening of local communities, with appropriate overlap with development cooperation. Especially when it comes to building democratic change from the bottom up, the Czech non-governmental sector has particular expertise. It is necessary to implement the human rights and democratization agenda, among the other priority topics and themes, by means of long-term or occasional cooperation with like-minded countries in the EU and outside it, so that the division of labour match the capabilities of Czech diplomacy, the objectives being pursued and is of benefit to all sides.

Foreign policy on human rights needs to be better connected to domestic instruments, such as anti-corruption and sanctions. The most urgent requirement is the so-called Czech Magnitsky Act, for which a seminar was held in September last year on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies.

Human rights foreign policy cannot be separated from the willingness and ability to meet international standards at home. The full adoption of the Istanbul Convention is part of a (geo)political struggle for a functioning international system for the protection of human rights, in which we should certainly not stand aside. It is worth considering in this context the role and weight of the Government Council for Human Rights, which in her capacity as „Executive Vice Chairperson“ is led by the Government Commissioner for Human Rights, however, the council is chaired directly by the Prime Minister. The answer to the question of how much room is left for expert recommendations with such a situation in the Council, suggests itself. The Istanbul Convention, in its content, does not fundamentally deviate from the current international human rights discourse, and its individual provisions are already regulated for by existing Czech legislation. However, the Czech Republic should - and this not only with regard to the Convention, but above all to solving the problem itself - design some preventive measures and focus on the proper treatment of victims of domestic and sexual violence. The refusal to ratify is a signal of resignation from participation in the system of regional cooperation in the field of human rights, which is essential for maintaining the fine web of relations in Europe, the significance of which goes far beyond the field of human rights.

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## Context

- Serious human rights crises in the world overshadowed both in Czech Republic and the EU by domestic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and repeated lockdowns.
- The link between lack of freedom, corruption and bad governance on the one hand and limited public trust and the ability of governments to respond adequately to the pandemic on the other.
- The relationship between the riskiness of potential foreign partners in strategic contracts and the human rights situation in their countries; insufficient government expertise in this area.

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## Present

- The lack of a strategic approach to human rights in foreign policy, insufficient integration with other areas, (e.g. security and economic), inadequate personnel and financial resources.
- Untapped potential of the Transition Promotion Program, the “brand” of Czech human rights foreign policy.
- Loss of the reputation of Czech Republic as a state with an active human rights policy, weakening of the potential to form coalitions with like-minded states.

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## Recommendations

- The new concept of foreign policy, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs will present after the parliamentary elections, should recognize the strategic importance of the human rights agenda and the support of democracy. Subsequently, the Human Rights and Transition Policy Concept of the Czech Republic and its priorities should be updated.
- In order to ensure its protection and enforcement, foreign policy in the area of human rights must be linked to domestic instruments, including anti-corruption measures and the possibility of introducing targeted sanctions, for example, in line with the draft of the Czech Magnitsky Act.
- The Czech Republic should immediately ratify the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe.

# International migration

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Sylvie Burianová  
Hana Votradovcová



“We want migration to become one of the key issues in EU-third country relations. Then we can work better together to tackle the causes of illegal migration, improve countries’ asylum and border systems, or help with returns and the fight against human trafficking.”

— **Jan Hamáček**

11 May 2021

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“It’s a positive that there are no quotas, that’s very important to us. The same goes for the possibility for individual Member States to support in solidarity [countries in need], but to choose how.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

24 September 2020

on the Pact on Migration and Asylum

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“Of course, it is necessary to work at it, so that these people can stay in their home countries. But EU policy, which has passed the buck to Greece and Italy, whilst others distance themselves, is unfair and inhuman.”

— **Karel Schwarzenberg**

1 November 2020

In the last year, Czech migration policy has been influenced mainly by the publication of the Pact on Migration and Asylum at the European level and the effort to minimize the damage caused by restrictions on labor mobility as a result of the covid-19 pandemic. As a result of the ongoing covid-19 pandemic, international migration has been pushed into the background as a theme of domestic and foreign policy. The global spread of the infection and the resulting movement restrictions have reduced migration flows and short-term mobility both in Europe and across the world. The year 2020 saw the lowest rate of irregular migration to Europe since 2013. Although the pandemic delayed the implementation of many migration policy initiatives, the Czech Republic's position on this issue remains consistent with an emphasis on externalizing migration control by preventing illegal migration and strengthening border protection, development cooperation and humanitarian aid whilst at the same time supporting legal economic migration. Among the successful initiatives in third countries is the ongoing MEDEVAC health and humanitarian program, which renders medical care to vulnerable populations in migration-affected regions in the Middle East, North Africa and the wider Sahel, or to places without accessible specialist care, but also to Eastern Europe (Belarus, Georgia, Ukraine). A positive assessment can be made too of the implementation of the Aid in Place program in the form of financial and technical support for the Balkan states with the purpose of strengthening capacities in the field of asylum policy or reception of migrants. In this regard, mention may be made, for example, of material humanitarian aid sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina in January this year and of financial support for Greece.

Migration was referred to in the February Declaration of the V4 Prime Ministers on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Partnership, in the form of a call to ensure "the proper functioning of the Schengen area, stemming migration flows, proper border protection and cooperation on asylum and consensual reforms of the Common European Asylum System." Together with Estonia and Slovenia, in December 2020 Visegrad states presented a common position towards the New Pact on Immigration and Asylum, which criticized it, in particular for the absence of a proper balance between the principles of responsibility and solidarity whilst stressing the need for voluntary relocation or other means of acceptance of migrants together with the importance of making provision for possible instability and migration flows from all (i.e. eastern) neighboring countries. On the other hand, the V4 states especially welcomed the abolition of the mandatory relocation mechanism for migrants in the form of quotas, which they have long rejected. A positive move has been the approval of the Czech government for the provision of 100 million crowns in September last year for a joint project of the V4 and Germany to the value of 30 million euros targeting economic and technical assistance to Morocco as a source and transit country for illegal migration, with a view to the potential development of the country, education, and creating opportunities for young people.



In the long term, it is very difficult to predict what impact the pandemic will have on migration flows. As with most European countries, the people in the Czech labor market who have been negatively affected by the pandemic are especially those dependent on job mobility. Although irregular migration flows to Europe have been reduced, they have not come to a complete halt; a large proportion of migrants have responded to the restrictions by moving to other, often much more dangerous routes. From the long term perspective and in view of the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Africa, as well as poverty and socio-economic deprivation, and the already observable impacts of climate change, migration flows to Europe can be expected to continue; in view of the predicted post-pandemic recession a short term increase should be expected too. The extent and probable media visibility of these flows in post-covid Europe will undoubtedly strengthen the negative rhetoric around migration and the policies in practice on both the domestic and European scene, and this also with it in mind, that there are an upcoming series of electoral battles in the Czech Republic and across Europe. This rhetoric will most probably be reflected in the negotiations on the Migration Pact. Complications are foreseen - the Commission currently envisages approval in 2023. However, the impact of covid and the diverging positions of Member States could significantly further delay negotiations. In particular, flashpoints will be the flexible solidarity mechanism and the screening of newcomers at European borders. Following the tragedies in the Mediterranean and the media coverage of the unacceptable conditions of refugee camps, a sharp emphasis will be placed, at least by the EU institutions, on the issue of migrants' human rights and how to ensure their dignity in Europe. In the broader context of the illiberal direction taken by Hungary and Poland, a further division of opinion between the V4 countries and the 'European center' can be expected, not only due to disagreement over migration policies. Long term, therefore, it is necessary to avoid the issue of migration policies contributing to the isolation of the Czech Republic in the EU. The European negotiations will also include an unpleasant discussion on future relations with Turkey, already a traditional partner of the EU on the question of migration. Turkey, host to no less than 4 million refugees, is seeking to revise the controversial migration agreement of March 2016. The signing of a new agreement and efforts to stop the arrival of irregular migrants from Turkey which is facing widespread criticism from human rights organizations are likely to be accompanied by concessions on the EU side, not necessarily to the advantage of the migrants themselves.

In the second half of 2022, the presidency of the Council of the European Union awaits the Czech Republic. As with its predecessor in the role, France, it can expect the Migration Pact, in whatever form, to be one of the key agendas of its presidency. Paradoxically, Czechia will thus become a mediator in the negotiations on a Pact which it does not approve of itself. However, blocking the negotiations could harm the Czech position. Relaxing the security rhetoric and adopting an approach to migration as a natural phenomenon could show the Czech Republic as an actor open to a

wider discussion. In this, the Czech Republic will be forced to confront the question of how much to differentiate itself from the strong security rhetoric and practices of its Visegrad partners, especially Hungary. In this context, we must keep in mind that the increased number of asylum seekers is an issue that affects the Czech Republic, as with other V4 states, only marginally. Finding a compromise will be very difficult because of the uneven 'burden' on individual Member States. The proposer of the Pact itself, the European Commission, does not envisage approval in the form it is currently presented. The Czech position should be to continue to support the building of a European migration system that is flexible and sustainable. One that is able to react both in times of pressure and day-to-day. Neither compulsory relocation, nor the transference of the majority of responsibility to EU border states, are sustainable. A fundamental aspect of the new European migration and asylum policy should be a genuine sharing of responsibilities whilst working to preserve legal means of migration, not only within the EU, and on the other hand, making efforts to help people who resorted to seeking asylum in Europe for serious and well-founded reasons – war or persecution, but also due to unsatisfactory human rights and humanitarian situations in host countries. Czech foreign policy on the question of migration should remain firmly anchored within the European framework and to the defense of liberal-democratic principles.

In the future, it will be necessary to focus on the continuation of bi- and multilateral cooperation and assistance to countries on the busy Balkan route and on countries of origin, in particular with the purpose of promoting democratic and market principles and sustainable economic development. One of the key regions for the Czech Republic in this respect is Africa, and especially the sub-Saharan region. At the same time, projects aimed directly at stopping migration in third countries, which make financial assistance conditional on the introduction of restrictive measures, have low success in the long term and can potentially create many other negative phenomena (increased tensions in the region, support for corruption, the arming of militant groups, etc.). The relationship between development assistance and migration is very complicated itself and certainly cannot be described as causal. A key step in migration policy is the perception of migration as a natural phenomenon. The attempt to stop migration altogether has no real chance of success and is an idle populist formula. In this respect, it is essential that Czech support within the framework of migration policy is directed not at stopping migrants as such, but rather at creating conditions in third countries that will enable the majority of the population to achieve a satisfactory and dignified standard of living in their country of origin. Primarily, Czech policy should focus on the fight against poverty, promoting human rights, tackling climate change and building basic infrastructure for future development. It is absolutely essential that cooperation with third countries takes the form of a partnership, where these countries have their place at the negotiating table and are a part of both the decision-making process and the implementation of their outcomes.

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## Context

- Short-term reduction of mobility and migration flows due to the covid-19 pandemic, lessening the urgency of foreign policy issues related to migration.
- Publication of the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which seeks to create a new functional and sustainable system of European migration policy based on the principles of fair division of responsibility, addressing irregular migration, finding ways to migrate legally, and partnership with countries of origin and host countries.
- Following the reduction of international migration flows as a reaction to the global spread of the pandemic, an expected short-term increase in migration flows to Europe.

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## Present

- The Czech Republic's efforts to prevent illegal migration, the tightening of border protection and the strengthening of development cooperation and humanitarian aid.
- The Czech Republic's persistently rather skeptical position towards the Pact, criticizing the lack of a balance between principles of responsibility and solidarity.
- The Czech government's approach to migration as an undesirable phenomenon and a danger to society, the use of the topic within the domestic political struggle.

## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should promote a migration policy defending liberal-democratic principles.
- The Czech Republic should support an effective search for a common European position in migration policy across the spectrum of opinions and not isolate itself within the framework of cooperation between Central (and Eastern) European states.
- Financial assistance directed to third countries should not be intended to stop migration as such, but to promote sustainable economic development and the creation of decent living conditions.
- Migrants' countries of origin must be taken as equal partners in migration policy. They need to be involved not only in the implementation but also in the approval of migration initiatives.



# Czech arms exports

The background is a solid dark blue. It features several light blue, wavy, horizontal lines that flow from the left side towards the right, creating a sense of movement. A single white dot is positioned on the left side, between the second and third wavy lines from the top.



“...at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, we are also involved with the issue of arms and military equipment exports, we are part of the licensing process. We do not want them to be exported to areas of conflict and fall into the hands of people acting against the interests of the Czech Republic and its allies.”

— **Jakub Kulháněk**

26 April 2021

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“As Foreign Minister, I support the exports of the Czech defense industry, but I certainly do not support the efforts of traffickers to export military scrap, because there is a risk that it will fall into the wrong hands.”

— **Jakub Kulháněk**

26 April 2021

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“...every step which helps our companies to export their products, I welcome, as it will have a positive impact on our economy, including employment, and also on maintaining the capabilities of our defense industry, which need to be ensured for possible crisis situations.”

— **Jana Černochová**

23 November 2020

It's been a busy period for the export of arms and military equipment from the Czech Republic lately. The economically successful years for exporters have continued, albeit with extensive exports also to countries involved in regional conflicts or the violation of human rights. The Ministry of Defense has implemented several new initiatives to further support Czech companies. However, the public debate has also intensified and become more critical.

The Czech defense industry, which is more than 90% export-oriented, continued to thrive even in the pandemic year 2020. With a volume of just under CZK 18 billion, the record from 2016, the most successful year to date, was almost equalled. From the point of view of economic diplomacy, this is something to be pleased about. From a technological perspective, the continued reorientation of the sector away from the resale of Warsaw Pact-era equipment – including the aforementioned „military scrap“ – towards higher value-added products is also positive.

From the point of view of the protection of human rights or regional stability, however, it is not very gratifying that a number of repressive states or states involved in regional conflicts, such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria or the United Arab Emirates, were again among the largest recipients. And at the same time, the impact on regional conflicts, human rights, the humanitarian situation or support for terrorism are among the mandatory criteria for granting export permits. Indeed, officials informally confirm that there are particular restrictions on licenses to problematic countries, for example, only supplies that cannot be used against demonstrators are reportedly allowed, or weapons are only approved for some of the various security forces of a given state. However, these criteria are internal to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and have no official status externally. It is not therefore possible to monitor, enforce or even have an informed public debate about them at all.

A partial positive is that the Czech Republic is one of few European countries that carries out checks on whether the delivered weapons actually ended up with the declared recipient and were not resold (post-shipment controls). However, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' declaration to the Swedish institute SIPRI, there are only about 10 inspections per year, which is less than 1% of the licenses granted.

The defense industry received significant support from the Ministry of Defense. In the spring of 2021, the specialized Agency for International Defense Cooperation (AMOS) was set up, the aim of which is to give exporters the opportunity to sell goods through government-to-government agreements. The Agency, which is part of the Ministry of Defense, has the task of signing possible deals with the target government, ensuring the certification of goods, but also helping to arrange financial support, for example with the Czech Export Bank or the EGAP insurance company. According to the information available, AMOS wants to select and support only partners whose orders will be manufactured in the Czech Republic and whose taxes will also be paid here. However, it will only be possible to assess the extent to which these ambitions have been fulfilled after several years.

Intensive economic diplomacy at the Ministry of Defense also continued, for example in the form of a number of trips, negotiations and memoranda with potential customers. A look at the destinations shows that these were mainly African and Middle Eastern countries, again often conflict areas or repressive regimes. A series of video clips called #VimeCoMame (We know what we've got) were also released, which promote the tradition and the achievements of the defense industry through case studies of specific companies. In addition to companies with Czech owners, however, those whose ownership structure are in tax havens also feature, and explicit state support for these companies raises significant question marks in terms of the public interest.

From the point of view of democratic checks, on the other hand, it is gratifying that in the last year, the hitherto rather moribund interest of the public and the media in the issue of arms exports has been revived to a certain extent. The increased interest of the NGO sector (especially Nesehnutí (an independent social ecological movement) and Amnesty International), journalists and academics is also noted in the relevant annual report of the Ministry of Industry and Trade. Two events have further contributed to this, highlighting the security, political and moral risks arising from the arms trade in direct relation to the Czech Republic.

The first of these was the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in which Azerbaijan deployed heavy combat equipment from Czech manufacturers. Thus, Czech weapons that should not have been there at all were used to fight in the close neighborhood of the EU and NATO. The goods were exported despite the OSCE embargo, the circumvention of which is known to the public only thanks to the good work of investigative journalists, whilst the state authorities have still not yet explained it satisfactorily. Additionally, Azerbaijan enjoyed the support of Turkey, to which the Czech Republic, a few months before the start of the war, again allowed the issuance of export licenses, previously suspended due to Turkish operations in Syria. NGOs, led by Nesehnutí and Amnesty International, appealed in an open letter to the then Minister Petříček to have the licenses to Turkey suspended again, but did not receive a response.

The second event was the revelation of the true cause of the explosion in Vrbětice, which - apart from the unacceptable activities of the Russian GRU, of course - also highlighted the security risks associated with the trade and storage of weapons on Czech territory. After initial denials, the owner of the stored weapons, Bulgarian businessman Emilian Gebrev, admitted that the supplies were destined for Ukraine in 2014. This would have been in conflict with the then policy of the Czech government and it is not clear in what form, if at all, the export licensing procedure took place. The involvement of the warehouse operator is also under investigation. We do not know the details due to the sensitivity of the ongoing investigation. It is clear, though, that the activities of some business owners do not benefit the interests of the Czech state or the security of its citizens.



Trends in arms exports suggest that no major changes are likely to be expected. Czech exporters, in all probability, can expect more successful years ahead. In 2020, licenses were granted to a similar value as in previous years, which will be reflected in future arms export statistics. The global arms market also continues to grow as a result of intensifying geopolitical rivalry.

The export potential of the Czech industry will in all likelihood be further strengthened by the afore-mentioned activities of the Ministry of Defense, but also by its ongoing consolidation and the related entry of leading Czech players into world markets. The most prominent examples are the acquisition of the American Colt by Česká Zbrojovka (CZG), the partnership between the Czechoslovak Group (CSG) and the German Rheinmetall, or the ongoing acquisition of Aero Vodochody by the Czech Omnipol together with a Hungarian investor.

Arms manufacturers and exporters can, then, in all likelihood continue to enjoy the support of the politicians. Traditionally, a pro-export line has been taken by the representatives of the current executive: President Zeman, Prime Minister Babiš and, in fact, also by the governing coalition partner ČSSD (Social Democrats), although their election program has nothing to say on the topic (as is the case with the SPD, KSČM and the Přísaha movement). A change in policy also cannot be expected from the SPOLU (Together) coalition, which even explicitly advocates support for exports in its program, pointing to their economic benefits (yet, on the other hand, without explaining how this is compatible with the „Havelian“ tradition of supporting democracy and human rights to which the program also commits itself).

Only the Pirates and Mayors coalition – besides the marginal Greens – have come up with a cautious critique of the existing practice. However, the relevant passages of the program are distinctly unclear. Signing up to human rights and endeavouring to restrict exports to “authoritarians” are at odds with the claim that the coalition is only seeking to combat the already illegal trade and is not advocating new restrictions. However, the vast majority of exports to repressive, human rights violating or warring regimes are compatible with current Czech law. Illegal trade is of course already prosecuted today. Against this, the key issue is the compatibility of exports with the interests and declared values of Czech foreign policy, and thus also its consistency, efficiency and credibility.

The first step towards improvement in this regard is to strengthen the transparency and democratic control of the licensing process, which is currently taking place behind closed doors in the relevant ministries. An absolute minimum could be the more timely publication of information on licenses granted, where regular annual reports could be supplemented by, for example, quarterly updates to an online database. The establishment of parliamentary scrutiny would also be desirable, e.g. through continuous and immediate informing of the relevant committees on licences granted (following the German model) or by justifying large strategic contracts before MPs (following the Dutch model).

Strengthening transparency could then contribute to the second step, which is a clearer, publicly justified linking of arms export licenses to Czech foreign policy priorities. If the current government representatives and the majority of the opposition make claims to support human rights, they should also explain how arms exports to countries that are among the worst in the world for human rights violations are compatible with them. The same is true in relation to other declared priorities: commitments to fight organized crime, terrorism or arms proliferation, or efforts to help stabilize and develop regions from which the main migration flows to Europe come.

A number of concrete steps present themselves - and many of them do not have to conflict either with the often legitimate interests in the self-sufficiency of the defense industry or with the advancement of research, development and production of cutting-edge technologies. For example, the Czech Republic could adopt a harder position against licensing the modernization and resale of old Warsaw Pact-era equipment, which has minimal added technological and security value for the Czech Republic, whereas considerable use for it is found by problematic customers. Any support from the state should be subject to clear economic conditions (production and taxation in the Czech Republic), publicly set and actually enforced, but perhaps also to a code of conduct where companies would commit to social responsibility - as is expected, for example, in the documents of the UN and other organizations. Czechia should also elaborate on and intensify its post-licensing controls, especially in the area of particularly risky goods, i.e. small arms and ammunition.

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## Context

- Continued economically successful years for Czech exports of arms and military equipment.
- Extensive exports to, among others, states involved in regional conflicts and human rights abuses.
- Ongoing consolidation of the defense industry and strengthening of key players.

## Present

- New activities of the Ministry of Defense to support Czech exporters.
  - Either support for exports or a lack of interest in the topic from relevant political forces (with the exception of the Pirates and Mayors coalition).
  - Growing media and NGO interest in the topic.
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## Recommendations

- The government should more clearly connect the approval of arms exports to the interests and values of Czech foreign policy.
- The licensing process should be more transparent and open to democratic scrutiny, e.g. in the form of direct parliamentary involvement.
- The government should take a tougher stance on licensing the trade in obsolete Warsaw Pact-era equipment.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should strengthen and expand post-licensing controls at points of delivery.



# Czech approach to NATO



Jakub Kufčák



“In order to realize the ambitious vision of the Alliance, it will be necessary to support progress with resources, including increasing joint NATO funding. The Czech Republic is fully aware of this.”

— **Lubomír Metnar**

1 June 2021

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“We maintain our commitment to an increase, but simply in view of the economic crisis, which has actually affected the whole world, not excepting the Czech Republic, I see it as unrealistic that we could give two percent of GDP in 2024.”

— **Alena Schillerová**

12 June 2020

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“I think it’s clear to say that our defense plans are completely overhauled at the moment.”

— **Blanka Cupáková**

(Economic Deputy of the Ministry of Defense)

5 July 2021

The covid-19 pandemic, occurring with increased intensity from autumn 2020, manifested itself within the Alliance in two main respects. First, it has tested the solidarity, willingness and speed of allies to share, through existing alliance mechanisms, aid such as doctors, ventilators and other scarce resources. Second, across NATO states, there has been an unprecedented engagement of armed forces assisting civil authorities to battle the pandemic. For NATO and individual national civil and military authorities this has been an invaluable experience and a practical test of national emergency response mechanisms.

Against the backdrop of the covid-19 pandemic, the increase in NATO defense spending, which was triggered by Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea in 2014, continued for the sixth year. The incoming US administration of President Biden changed only the form of communication with allies, not the content of US alliance policy. Thus, the slow convergence of the US and European positions in NATO towards power rivalries with Russia and, recently, increasingly with China seems set to continue. 2019, at the NATO Summit, saw the launch of an important modernization process called NATO 2030, which aims to put forward proposals for adapting the Alliance to the current and future security environment. At this June's summit, allies endorsed the NATO 2030 agenda and took the first steps towards its implementation. Finally, it was agreed to start the process of updating the outdated 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, but also, in principle, to increase NATO's common budget significantly. Both the new NATO Strategic Concept and its associated costs, in particular the increase in NATO HQ staff, are planned to be approved by the Allies at the 2022 Summit.

The Czech Republic took a constructive view on the NATO 2030 process, with Defense Minister Metnar supporting both the key proposals to increase the NATO common budget and the importance of NATO-EU relations, which should become one of the priorities of the Czech presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2022. Weaker, on the other hand, was the coordination of state officials in communicating with and requesting solidarity from allies in connection with the explosion of an ammunition depot in Vrbětice in 2014, which the Czech secret services blame on agents of the Russian military intelligence GRU. The allies declared their solidarity with the Czech Republic nonetheless, and expressed deep concern about Russia's destabilizing actions. The Vrbětice case has amply demonstrated that the Czech Republic is not just a safe NATO "hinterland" surrounded by allies, but part of the eastern wing of the Alliance. This should be reflected in the adequate readiness of the Czech road and rail infrastructure and the ability to accommodate large numbers of allied troops responding to a potential crisis on Czech territory.

The Czech Republic both sent and received aid during the covid-19 pandemic. There was also an unprecedented domestic deployment of the Czech Armed Forces to support the fight against the pandemic, which strengthened the image of the army in the eyes of the public. The public demand for an increase in the army's budget, thus fostered, could help increase the pressure for continued growth in defense spending as a requirement for the completion of the modernization of the Czech Armed Forces.

The Czech Republic continues to be at the tail end of NATO countries with low defense spending, which, moreover, has recently become the subject of political battles between the minority government and its supporting partner, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Despite these problems, the ruling coalition ultimately fulfilled its commitment to spend 1.4% of GDP on defense in 2021.

Maintaining the planned pace of defense spending increases in the coming years is, though, highly unlikely and yet absolutely crucial for the success of the modernization particularly of conventional forces for collective defense, i.e. the rearmament of the mechanized brigade with new infantry fighting vehicles. In this largest modernization project of the Czech army, the US ASCOD or the British-Swedish CV90 are favored over the German Lynx. However, the predictability of this process has been affected by the intervention of the Prime Minister, through the Ministry of Industry and Trade, with the requirement that any potential supplier must build a new majority state-owned factory in the Czech Republic. This followed a letter from Germany's Rheinmetall offering the Prime Minister to open a joint production facility similar to the one in Hungary. The Ministry of Defense, on the other hand, is demanding that the comprehensive service support throughout the lifetime of the combat vehicles be provided by the 100% state-owned VOP CZ, which would also obtain the production licences for the tendered armored vehicles. Even without further delays, deliveries of the new armored vehicles should start in 2023 and end in 2027, i.e. 2 years later than was the original plan and promise of the Czech Republic to provide NATO with a rearmed heavy mechanized brigade for the purpose of collective defense.



The main task for the Czech Republic as a NATO member remains to strengthen its own capabilities, which can contribute to the Alliance's defense policy. The Czech Republic should take advantage of both the covid crisis and the Vrbětice incident to start behaving as an active part of the Alliance, e.g. through increased involvement in the Alliance's presence in the Baltics.

The epidemic has shown that the Czech Republic has long overlooked the importance of national, civil-military exercises involving the highest political representatives of the state, in addition to the generally discussed defense spending. The frequently chaotic decision-making of the government during the crisis casts a bad light on its reliability when it comes to implementing Czech commitments to the alliance for collective defense. Neither is the credibility of the Czech Republic helped by the light-heartedness with which the government appears to approach promises made to allies regarding Czech defense spending and the modernization of the Czech Armed Forces' capabilities for NATO's collective defense. The Czech Republic must maintain the rate of growth of defense spending in the long term to be in line with the approved modernization plans of the Czech Armed Forces, which would otherwise have to be completely revised several times. The government should also pay more attention to

the area of military mobility, where the Czech Republic is currently serving rather as a detour along the main European corridors on the west-east axis. The Czech Republic should also be prepared, though, for the build-up of reinforcements from other NATO countries in the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic's long-term ambition should be to increase its commitment to NATO's collective defense from one mechanized brigade to two.

Without action to strengthen its own readiness, its own capabilities and steps to reprioritize the Czech contribution to the protection of NATO's eastern flank, the Czech Republic will remain a hanger on and simply inhabit a secure environment that our more responsible allies protect for us. An important signal may come with the progress made in the area of NATO-EU cooperation during the Czech presidency of the EU Council, which is an opportunity to take to a higher level the interconnection of national capabilities, alliance requirements and instruments of European cooperation, e.g. in the area of military mobility or the reform of the Rapid Reaction Forces of both NATO and the EU. The Czech Republic should remain proactive in its support of the increase of the NATO common budget. Without it, there is a risk that the agreed priorities stemming from the NATO 2030 reform agenda will remain on paper only. Negotiations both on the particulars and on the approval of NATO's new Strategic Concept will also be key. The Czech Republic should support a greater shift reflective of Russia's hostile stance and the growing rivalry with China, even at the expense of bilateral relations.

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## Context

- Transatlantic cooperation moving towards greater synergies in power rivalries with Russia and China.
- Confirmation of the Allies' commitments at the June summit to continue increasing national defense spending and a proposal to increase the NATO common budget in the future.
- Testing the political unity of the Allies and the limits of common democratic and geopolitical interests by updating the NATO Strategic Concept.

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## Present

- Insufficient Czech defense spending, threatening the planned rate of increase in spending and thus the modernization plans of the Czech Armed Forces.
- Chaotic government decision-making during the epidemic related to a lack of civil-military exercises and a resulting weakened credibility to fulfill Czech commitments on collective defense.
- Czech Republic continues to act as a „detour“ for military mobility. Only slow improvement of host country capabilities.

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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should use the Vrbětice incident to clearly prioritize NATO's eastern wing and increase its role and engagement in the Alliance's presence in the Baltics.
- The Czech Republic should complete the planned reform of the Czech Armed Forces. A reduction in the budget or a slowdown in armaments would have disastrous consequences and would weaken the territorial defense capability of the Czech Republic and NATO.
- The long-term ambition of the Czech Republic should be to increase its commitment to NATO's collective defense from one mechanized brigade to two.

# Transatlantic relations

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Petr Boháček  
Matěj Jungwirth

“The European Union and the US should not only compete, but also cooperate more in technology, research, development and innovation ... We bought American helicopters. We believe that such an investment strengthens our mutual Atlantic partnership.”

— **Andrej Babiš**  
17 June 2021

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“If we want to play a more pivotal role [in science and innovation within NATO and the EU] that matches up to our research, development and production potential, we need to invest more.”

— **Tomáš Kopečný**  
25 May 2021

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“The United States is a key partner with whom we should seek to work in a wide range of areas, including new technologies (such as cybersecurity, 5G and artificial intelligence). Nor can we do without the US in the search for solutions to global problems.”

— **Karel Havlíček**  
9 November 2020

Transatlantic relations remain a fundamental pillar for the security, stability and development of Europe and the Czech Republic. The Euro-Atlantic area faces a number of challenges that are not purely military in nature, require non-military solutions and thus go beyond NATO, the traditional cornerstone of transatlantic cooperation. Given the significant asymmetry of Czech-American bilateral relations, the main instrument of transatlantic relations for the Czech Republic is the European Union and the Czech approach and contribution to the EU-wide transatlantic position.

Recent times have been marked by a spirit of hope for a new era of transatlantic relations following four years of weakening during the Donald Trump administration. Joe Biden, as the first US president to attend (albeit virtually) a meeting of the European Council in 11 years, reaffirmed the US's steadfast commitment to NATO and Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. In addition to toning down the rhetoric on Member States' low defense spending, the US Administration has also stopped attacking the European Defence Fund as a threat to the sale of US weapons systems to Europe. Instead, the United States was invited to participate in a key project of the EU-funded Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the field of critical military mobility. Washington is also negotiating a deal with the European Defence Agency (EDA), in which Brussels even wants to include a relaxation of the long-standing untouchable strict restrictions on the import of European weapons systems into the United States. Despite these developments in EU-NATO defense cooperation, including coordination on defense planning processes, concerns about duplication of defense activities persist.

Yet still the strengthening of transatlantic security relations is hampered by a weak and disunited Europe, which in many respects is not a reliable partner for the United States. The new US administration, together with the EU, has put pressure on Russia in the form of sanctions in response to the poisoning of opposition politician Alexei Navalny. But on the issue of Nord Stream 2 or during the tensions over the large-scale military exercises by Russian troops near the Ukrainian border, Washington and Brussels remained divided in their approaches. In the Vrbětice case, the EU stuck to symbolic diplomatic steps only, to which the poorly coordinated approach of the Czech Republic contributed.

The EU's foreign policy fragmentation was further manifest in the relatively slow search for consensus in response to the demonstrations in Belarus, on the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and once again on the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. On the other hand, a growing consensus is emerging on the transatlantic level with regard to China. The EU was the first to impose sanctions on Chinese officials over the "re-education" camps for the Uighur minority, which the United States emulated two months later. The EU eventually suspended ratification of the investment agreement with Beijing, and instead of resuming discussions on US-China trade talks, discussions on a trade deal and greater cooperation with Taiwan opened up in Washington as well as in Brussels.

After the Biden administration took office, the EU and the US agreed to end some import tariffs on American and European goods, and a temporary settlement was reached in the long-running trade dispute between the Atlantic aviation behemoths – Bo-



eing and Airbus. An important development on the economic front was the adoption of a minimum 15% tax rate for the largest global corporations, regardless of where they are formally based, during the OECD summit in July.

In addition to traditional economic cooperation, the areas of new technologies and climate change are of growing importance to the transatlantic relationship. In early March, the President of the European Commission proposed the creation of a Transatlantic Technology Alliance to the new US President. Thanks to the return of the US to the Paris Agreement, Brussels and Washington can once again be joint leaders in climate policy, where the EU is pushing the US towards a greener position. But on the key issue of putting a carbon tariff in place, the very ambitious European approach is still pitted against the restrained attitude of the new American administration.

On the two main transatlantic issues regarding the coronavirus pandemic - mutual recognition of covid-19 vaccination and the issue of releasing patents on covid-19 vaccines - no clear consensus is to be found. Joe Biden's surprising support for proposals to release patents on vaccine development was perceived negatively by the European Commission. The fact is that the EU has exported many times more vaccines to third countries than the US or the UK.



While the preceding four years have signaled the EU's efforts to increase its geopolitical weight by demarcating itself from the United States as its historic patron, the coming decade will be marked by the search for new ways of making transatlantic cooperation work. The EU and its Member States will have to invest heavily in building capacity in defense, technology and in foreign policy unity, to ensure that Europe becomes a beneficial partner for the United States and that the transatlantic link does not lose its meaning. The question remains, whether sufficient political will and ability can be found to fulfill such ambitions. Strategic autonomy as a geopolitical objective of the EU will depend, in particular, on how it is to be practically achieved in economic, technological and climate terms.

In the new EU-US Agenda for Global Change, the EU stresses, in particular, cooperation in the areas of tackling pandemics, climate change, technological development, support for democracy and multilateralism, while security is pushed to the background. This corresponds to the fact that geopolitical rivalry has long been playing out not primarily in the military-security sphere, but rather in the economic-technological sphere, which transatlantic cooperation should also reflect. Areas ranging from artificial intelligence, quantum computers, cyber technologies, to big data, semiconductors, robotics, or 5G and space technologies offer a better measure not only of geopolitical power, but of the overall state of the economy and society.

For the EU, whose greatest strength and competencies lie in the economic sphere and in normative regulation of the market, the promotion of science, research and innovation is a logical field of activity. Despite this, however, it lags dramatically behind in technology and innovation. Strengthening transatlantic technological cooperation is a possible solu-

tion. The EU will have to balance efforts to strengthen Europe's technological, innovative and economic competitiveness and autonomy on the one hand, with the development of mutually beneficial transatlantic cooperation in development and innovation on the other. Europe will also have to choose between protectionist support for European national champions and strengthening the competitive and innovative environment of the single market and cooperation with third countries. Without fair mechanisms across the EU, disadvantaged and weaker states, including the Czech Republic, may prefer to prioritize bilateral cooperation with the US and the purchasing of US technology instead of strengthening the EU's unified position and European industrial and technological capabilities. Likewise, the United States will have to choose whether to continue to push for the involvement of the US arms industry in European defense cooperation at the expense of strengthening (but also increasing the industrial autonomy of) Europe.

The fight against climate change has significant potential to become one of the main themes of transatlantic cooperation. A concrete opportunity will be the issue of carbon tariffs on imports which will require intensive coordination between the EU and the US. Without successful coordination across the Atlantic, the carbon tariff may in turn become a source of dispute. The clash of protectionist policies will continue to pose a risk to transatlantic relations. Biden's "Buy American" initiative, which encourages the US government and authorities to favor US-made goods and products in public procurement even at the expense of cheaper EU imports, may easily come into conflict with the EU's efforts to protect and strengthen its own economy.

The Czech Republic cannot pick and choose in its transatlantic relations and oscillate between a bilateral and an EU approach; on the contrary, it should constructively and actively contribute to formulating a common EU position towards the USA in a number of transatlantic negotiations that directly affect Czech national interests.

Apart from 5G, in which the Czech Republic has built a clear position, it is not yet clear what the Czech position is on other specific transatlantic issues and how Prague wants to promote them at the EU level. This applies to the topics of corporate tax, carbon tariffs, renewed support for liberal democracies, privacy protection in the digital environment or the area of technological development defining geopolitical influence.

The creation of a Transatlantic Technology Council would lay the foundations for coordination between the US and the EU. However, internally, the Czech Republic must clearly define the key areas of national scientific and technological excellence by which it could contribute, within the framework of the EU, to technological cooperation across the Atlantic, and tailor its science diplomacy accordingly both inside and outside the EU.

The traditional form of EU-US transatlantic cooperation may, though, no longer be sufficient given the interconnectedness of the global economy. The transatlantic link should aim to maximize the involvement not only of the United Kingdom and Canada, but also to extend a strong format of cooperation to countries such as Australia, South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. In this sense, the Czech Republic can contribute through its existing ties with Taiwan and expand them with further technological, economic and investment cooperation.

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## Context

- The new US administration as an opportunity to revitalize and strengthen transatlantic relations.
- Lagging technological, economic and geopolitical development of Europe.
- The shift of the West's geopolitical rivalry with China and other countries much more to the technological and economic level.

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## Present

- Development of technological, climate and economic cooperation as key areas for future transatlantic relations.
- EU-US cooperation as the main platform for realizing the potential of transatlantic relations instead of bilateral relations.
- Strengthening the EU's foreign policy unity, defense capabilities and technological and economic capabilities as the most effective way to strengthen transatlantic relations.

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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should not approach transatlantic relations in a selective manner and oscillate between a bilateral and EU approach, but on the contrary it should contribute constructively and actively to the formulation of a strong common EU position towards the USA.
- The Czech Republic should identify several key technological areas at a global level that it will develop at the transatlantic level in the long term.
- In matters of economic, climate and technological transatlantic cooperation, the Czech Republic must actively participate in EU negotiations at ministerial and other levels.

# United Kingdom

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Kryštof Kruliš  
Ondřej Mocek

“After a few years, the Brexit process is almost complete. Thanks to @MichelBarnier for the deal with which the UK agrees. This is a historic moment for the EU and the United Kingdom. Brexit with a deal is great news for hundreds of thousands of people and businesses!”

— **Andrej Babiš**

25 December 2020

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“Let’s not look now for who backed down more, but let’s get on to ratification quickly.”

— **Jan Zahradil**

25 December 2020

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“So I say to all Europeans: it is time to leave Brexit behind, our future is in Europe.”

— **Ursula von der Leyen**

24 December 2020

For relations between the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom the year 2020 was marked by the definitive withdrawal of Britain from the EU. Although the impact was offset by a transitional period until the end of 2020, it was not a politically harmonious period. The whole of last year was characterized by the negotiation of a trade and cooperation agreement, which was finally concluded just before the expiry of the transitional period, on 24 December 2020. For the Czech Republic, it was not clear until the last moment what rules would apply from 1 January 2021 and this applied to both citizens traveling to the United Kingdom and companies trading with the islands. The failure of politicians on both sides in unbearably prolonging the uncertainty of citizens and businesses right to the brink was partially overshadowed by the covid-19 pandemic and the overall cooling of economic relations as a result.

When it comes to the question of negotiations on the form of the future relationship, it is right to positively acknowledge the political position of the Czech Republic, which fully held the European line. The Czech Republic (as well as other EU states) did not conduct any parallel talks with the United Kingdom that would weaken the unity of the EU. The resulting agreement ensures zero tariffs for a very wide range of goods and is accompanied by relatively liberal conditions for assessing the origin of products. Nominally then, it is a success and should help, among other things, to keep Czech exporters in the island market. Without an agreement, for example, from 1 January 2021 relatively high tariffs would have applied to imported cars in the United Kingdom. One drawback, however, is the postponement of a number of controversial issues of mutual trade into the future with the possibility of the gradual weakening of the free trade area. Should the United Kingdom decide to move away from EU regulatory rules in the future, thereby favoring British producers, the EU may re-impose tariffs under the terms of the agreement. Potential disputes were not resolved in this way, but the agreement set the boundaries in which they are to take place. The escalation of trade disputes between the EU and the United Kingdom in the future will be constrained mainly by economic interconnectedness and the knowledge that escalating the conflict would not be beneficial to either party.

When monitoring relations with the United Kingdom, it is important currently to pay attention to the position of Czech citizens, the impact of Brexit on the Czech Republic's position in the EU and the post-Brexit developments and cultivation of mutual relations. EU, EEA and Swiss citizens who started living in the UK by 31 December 2020 could, on the basis of the UK's withdrawal agreement from the EU, apply until 30 June 2021 for settled status, which guarantees their lifelong residence in the territory, including unlimited travel and return to the country. Settled status may apply to 50 to 70 thousand citizens of the Czech Republic. The first months after Brexit did not see the large-scale return of Czech citizens, and the status of a settled person brings with it an advantageous position guaranteed by international commitments. Other Czech citizens must undergo a standard immigration check when entering the United Kingdom. Working in the United Kingdom requires meeting the conditions of a points-based immigration system, which takes into account language skills, level of education, occupation and agreed income. Applicants for long-term work or study visas in the United King-

dom must also count on fees that are significantly higher than those paid by British citizens for similar visas in the Schengen area. In addition, in mid-2021, the debate on charging for short-stay visas began to intensify in the United Kingdom. The Czech Republic should monitor inequality in fees for entry into the United Kingdom and the Schengen area and, depending on developments, and with the appropriate cooperation of other EU Member States and EU institutions, take diplomatic steps backed up by the threat of increased visa fees for British citizens wishing to enter the Schengen area.

In the context of the United Kingdom's departure from the EU, it is also necessary to mention the change in the situation in the EU itself. Throughout the whole period of Czech membership in the EU the United Kingdom has been an unequivocal political partner, especially on the issue of further deepening of integration. The British took a restrained stance on the common currency, did not try to push institutional European integration forward too quickly, and were relatively effective in balancing the interests of Germany and France. At the same time, they strongly supported the integration of the EU internal market, including the completion of the free movement of services and the creation of a capital markets union, and ensured the EU's open approach to international trade agreements. The British also had, and still have a very ambitious approach to the issue of climate action, without rejecting nuclear energy. Very often the Czech Republic has either also promoted these ideas or at least considered them. The departure of the United Kingdom may, in the future, mean a weakening of the Czech Republic's influence in the EU and an accentuation of Czechia's position on the integration periphery outside the eurozone. If the Czech Republic wants to hold to its positions, it will have to seek broader and often ad hoc coalitions for its views, as it cannot be expected that the political space vacated by the British will be occupied by an equally influential player.

In the last 12 months, Czech-British relations have been marked not only by Brexit, but also by the covid crisis. Disputes regarding vaccines from British-Swedish company AstraZeneca have become a pan-European issue. In particular, the United Kingdom benefited from more efficient procurement of supplies from AstraZeneca and also had better opportunities to influence the destination of vaccine supplies at the time of greatest shortage. Thus, in combination with the practice of a longer time lag between the first and second doses of the vaccine, the British were able to put out the first dose much earlier and to a wider range of people than in the EU. Shortfalls in the company's expected output of doses in the spring of 2021 were a bitter pill to swallow for many European countries. In the Czech Republic, these setbacks were compounded by the massively spreading covid disease. The Czech Republic thus put a lot of pressure on the European Commission to choose sufficiently repressive measures for AstraZeneca to fulfill its contractual obligations. The possibility of restrictions on the export of vaccines from the EU to the United Kingdom was also in play, which at the time, the Czech Republic supported. Ultimately, after discussions with British officials, the EU did not take this step, not least because of the still emotional post-Brexit period and the clumsy formulation of EU proposals to control the movement of vaccines, which, if implemented, would have meant imposing border controls on the sensitive border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Nonetheless, relations with the UK have also undergone some partially positive changes. The EU-UK trade and cooperation agreement gave the UK the opportunity to participate in the Union's Horizon Europe science program for the next 7 years on the basis of associated country status. This allows British researchers to apply for program tenders and form scientific teams with EU colleagues. However, the agreement does not allow for the participation of the United Kingdom in the European Union Erasmus+ program in the upcoming period for the years 2021-2027. The continuation of student exchanges with the United Kingdom is still possible on the basis of inter-university partnership agreements. Universities should focus on the development of these agreements with British universities. They may, though, encounter limits, both budgetary and in terms of interest in exchange from students in the United Kingdom. As a response to leaving the Erasmus program, the Boris Johnson government has announced the creation of a new exchange program for British students. The new Turing program supports student exchanges to countries around the world, which could have the result of blocking capacity for exchange programs between the United Kingdom and the EU, including the Czech Republic, compared to the Erasmus+ program. Given the popularity of the United Kingdom with Czech students, this is definitely a loss.

The British and Czech sports media, the fan community and politicians shared in the controversy associated with the return-leg of the last 16 match of the Europa League between Slavia Prague and Rangers FC. The case highlighted the fact that the environment of the United Kingdom may seem close to us due to the prevalence of English, but we are not always sufficiently aware of the existing cultural and social differences because of this impression. On both sides, a greater degree of empathy, respect and cultivating the ability to see the world through the eyes of the other side is needed.



Overall, it can be said that British-Czech relations are largely determined by the relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU. Given that this is the case, the Czech Republic is not trying to negotiate parallel agreements with Britain and understands the EU to be a defender of its interests. It is important to maintain this position in the future, as a country such as the Czech Republic can get more out of negotiations with a strong player, such as the United Kingdom is, in joint European negotiations than if it were to act alone.

However, this does not mean that the Czech Republic should give up on building ambitious relations with the United Kingdom. Exactly the opposite. Following Brexit, the need for effective Czech economic diplomacy with Britain will increase. The UK market will continue to be an important target for our exporters. The Czech Republic has maintained a long-term positive trade balance with Britain. In addition, even after Brexit, London will continue to be an important global financial center with a large concentration of advisory services that help to access markets on all continents. The United Kingdom will maintain a strong ecosystem of technology startups into the future and will remain a desirable target for the first steps of our start-up technology companies in expanding outside the EU.



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## Context

- The conclusion of negotiations on the shape of future relations after Brexit just one week before the end date of the transitional period, which still applies internal market rules to mutual trade.
- Zero duties for a very wide range of goods and relatively liberal conditions for assessing the origin of products as a result of the agreement. Lingered controversial issues of mutual trade in the future with the danger of rolling back the FTA regime achieved.
- Negotiations between the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic as with other Member States only through the EU, and thus with the maximum effectiveness of joint negotiations.

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## Present

- Relations between the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom after Brexit still predominantly determined at the level of EU-United Kingdom relations.
- EU-UK relations in the first half of 2021 negatively affected by issues related to access to covid-19 vaccines. Controversial steps by the United Kingdom to unilaterally extend the grace period for the introduction of Irish Sea border checks.
- End of British participation in the EU Erasmus+ program in the next period for the years 2021-2027. Implementation of possible study exchanges only on the basis of inter-university agreements. Maintaining participation in the Horizon Europe science program.

## Recommendation

- In most negotiations with the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic gains more if it succeeds in initiating an EU-wide process than if it acts alone. An example could be the possible dispute over the unequal charging for entry visas to the United Kingdom compared to visa fees for the Schengen area.
- After Brexit, the Czech Republic should strive for a strong economic diplomatic mission in London, not only with regard to the United Kingdom market, but also with regard to the opportunities that London offers for Czech companies as a global financial center.
- It continues to be very important for Czech technology startups to be able to cooperate with the ecosystem of technology companies in Britain and use the local market for possible global expansion and networking.
- After Brexit, the Czech Republic and its universities should focus on the development of agreements with British universities and thus ensure the possibility of at least a partial continuation of exchange stays in the United Kingdom, which are popular among Czech students. This would also be one of the ways to further contribute to the strengthening of mutual social and cultural ties and understanding between the Czech Republic and the United Kingdom. After Brexit, there may be fewer opportunities than before for them to flourish.



# China

A stylized topographic map of China is rendered in a lighter blue shade against a dark blue background. The map features various contour lines and a small white dot indicating a specific location in the central part of the country.

“The situation is intolerable. And, at the same time, as the organizer of the Olympics, China has signed up to the ethos of respect for everyone. I am proud that @Senat\_CZ has stood up against the abuse of the Olympics.”

— **Pavel Fischer**  
17 June 2021

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“In the 17+1 format, for example, there is no space for dialogue. China approaches other states with the condescension of the colonizer – it contemptuously sets the agenda and promises a better tomorrow through flowery memoranda.”

— **Jan Lipavský**  
16 February 2021

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“Some EU countries, though slightly objecting to the Chinese officials’ phrasebook, are all too happy to cooperate and trade with China at a brisk pace. This is realpolitik. We will be left with the bitter aftertaste of this horribly devotional trip to Taiwan and Black Peter in our hands.”

— **Jiří Ovčáček**  
1 September 2020

At the end of 2020, after the visit of Senate President Miloš Vystrčil to Taiwan that received significant attention in the media and by politicians across the spectrum, the topic of China receded into the background of public debate. Bilateral relations with China have virtually frozen. All bilateral contacts at a higher diplomatic level have ceased apart from President Zeman's participation in the virtual summit of the 17+1 (16+1) initiative. A resumption of communication came only with a phone call between Chinese President Xi Jinping and President Zeman in July 2021.

For China, the primary aim of the 17+1 (16+1) summit in February 2021 was to prove that cooperation in this format is still viable and will continue. The summit was hosted for the first time by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which automatically raised its diplomatic profile. However, it was not a success for China. Six of the participating countries were represented 'only' by cabinet ministers at the summit, the highest rate of absence of top political leaders since the format's inception. Marking another first, due to the lack of a consensus, there were no final 'guidelines' passed at the summit, instead being replaced this time by the Beijing List of Activities for next year.

President Zeman's brief speech at the summit was influenced by a considerably out-of-date conception of the Belt and Road Initiative, when he spoke of the involvement of Czech companies in the project, including the construction of high-speed railways between China and Europe. Experience has shown the Belt and Road Initiative to be less about specific projects and more of a PR exercise of Chinese foreign policy. In contrast to the construction of new infrastructure (not to mention the unrealistic high-speed rail), there is the real potential for cooperation, for instance, in the growing flows of goods between China and Europe. Here, however, Poland plays the primary role due to its geographical position.

In the context of the shortage of vaccines against covid-19 in the spring of 2021, the prospect of using Chinese vaccines in the Czech Republic was on the horizon. In March 2021, President Zeman petitioned the Chinese president for a supply of Sino-pharm vaccines at the behest of Prime Minister Babiš. According to the president's spokesman Ovčáček, the Chinese side immediately agreed to their provision. However, China itself did not confirm this information. In the end, no concrete agreement was reached and, according to the available information, no formal negotiations ever took place. The issue of the use of "eastern" vaccines eventually receded into the background with sufficient supplies under the common EU scheme. The Czech Republic also got actively involved in "vaccine diplomacy" when in July 2021 the government decided to provide Taiwan with 30,000 doses of surplus vaccines against covid-19 (Lithuania and Slovakia had also donated vaccines to Taiwan).

In the area of economic relations, the long-term slow-down in cooperation continued. In July 2021, the Chinese state-owned company CITIC sold its majority stake in Jaromír Soukup's Médea Group. In March 2021, the Chinese company CGN was excluded from the chance to apply for a tender for the Dukovany nuclear power plant. However, all indications are that the company had no real interest in the tender, and its participation was more of a formality. This is also why the decision to rule it out was

politically acceptable, especially given that, before the Vrbětice case was exposed, the participation of the Russian firm Rosatom was still expected. In the case of the exclusion of CGN, Minister Havlíček made his arguments in terms of the security risks, but also in terms of insufficient references from foreign projects.

Regarding the involvement of Chinese companies in strategic projects, no specific suppliers have yet been excluded from the building of 5G networks and the government has adopted a wait-and-see approach. However, in the context of US sanctions against Huawei and the general uncertainty about the future shape of regulatory frameworks, Huawei has naturally become a less attractive partner. A further result of this was the decision of the telecommunications company CETIN in October 2020 to choose Ericsson over Huawei in an internal tender.

The Czech Republic's position on the further curtailment of Hong Kong's autonomy by Beijing after the passing of the National Security Law in June 2020 was at times inconsistent. In October 2020, the Czech Republic did not sign up to the joint statement of 39 countries at the UN expressing grave concern about the situation in Hong Kong and Xinjiang. The reason, according to the media, was the lack of consent of Prime Minister Babiš and President Zeman who were keen to avoid further straining of relations with China after Vystrčil's visit to Taiwan. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has, though, in other cases, repeatedly expressed concerns over violations of China's commitments in Hong Kong. Despite calls from Brussels, the Czech Republic did not suspend its extradition treaty with Hong Kong, making it, along with Portugal, the only European countries not to do so. The government argued that the treaty was set up in such a way that it could not be misused for political purposes. The suspension of the treaty was, though, to be first and foremost a symbolic act. On the other hand, the Czech Republic did decide, in accordance with EU procedure, to implement the extension of the arms embargo on China to Hong Kong.

On the issues of human rights, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Tibet, the Czech parliament has traditionally played an important role. In March 2021, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies adopted a resolution calling on the government to speak out on the "gross human rights violations" in Xinjiang. The Senate subsequently, in a resolution of June 2021, spoke about the "genocide" of the Chinese regime and called for a political boycott of the Beijing Olympics. The Senate also approved a resolution calling for support for Taiwan to join the World Health Organization (WHO) and on the government to suspend the extradition treaty with Hong Kong. As usual, these steps led to sharp, public rebukes from the Chinese embassy.

The stagnation of Czech-Chinese relations was in contrast to the dynamic development of EU-China relations. At the end of 2020, conclusion in principle of negotiations on a Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) was announced. Even though the deliberations were concluded in line with the timetable, for many it came as a surprise after a period of increasing tensions between China and the EU. The driving force of the negotiations was the German presidency and Chancellor Angela Merkel herself. Criticism reverberated from some Member States, such as Poland, that

they had not been sufficiently consulted on the finalization of the negotiations. The EU also ignored calls from the incoming Biden administration to coordinate its approach to Beijing with the US.

Czech officials did not take an active part in the debate on the CAI, at least publicly. Therefore, there was a distinct lack of public debate about what this groundbreaking agreement would actually bring to Czechia. Following a series of tit-for-tat sanctions between the EU and China in March 2021 over human rights violations in Xinjiang the fate of the CAI is unclear, especially with the European Parliament making negotiations on the CAI conditional on China's lifting of the sanctions, which in all probability China will not do.

At the same time, the EU has adopted or plans to implement a number of so-called autonomous instruments which should respond to imbalances in Sino-European economic relations, regardless of Beijing's willingness to meet its commitments. One of them is the FDI screening mechanism which came into effect in the Czech national legislation in May 2021.

The Biden administration in the United States continued the trend set by the Trump administration in most areas of policy toward China. Greater emphasis has begun to be placed on closer coordination with allies, including European countries. However, many EU countries, and especially France and Germany, do not share the same views on China and still refuse to perceive China as primarily a geopolitical rival.



We can expect the continuity of the current trajectory of Czech-Chinese relations in the pre-election period, that is to say, a state of "hibernation". In the event of the opposition's triumph in the elections and the successful formation of a new government, China and foreign policy in general may become one of the main sticking points between the government and the president. The president may try to actively sabotage any more assertive government policy towards Beijing, or at least implement his own autonomous agenda. Zeman's planned China trip in 2022, if it goes ahead, will certainly be controversial.

The main issues will continue to be human rights in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, relations with Taiwan and China's involvement in strategic sectors of the economy. The new government may approve the formal exclusion of Huawei and other Chinese companies from providing components for the construction of 5G infrastructure and also limit their involvement in other sensitive industries. We can also expect more active contacts with Taiwan in the context of a more flexible interpretation of the Czech One China Policy. The Taiwanese agenda is also likely to be more reflected at European level, given the possibility of negotiating a trade agreement between the EU and Taiwan.

There are voices coming from the current opposition about the need for a tougher policy towards China, often as part of a reassessment of the approach towards



the “Eastern Powers” including Russia. A government that will be actively critical of China may accelerate some ongoing trends in other areas. In 2021, for example, the Vysočina region of the Czech Republic ended relations with the Chinese province of Hubei, citing the absence of tangible cooperation. We can expect a similar reappraisal of relations, which were originally marked by dynamic growth at the beginning of the last decade, from other regions or cities. The same trends can be predicted too, for example, in academic cooperation with Chinese partners, where Czech universities are increasingly conscious of possible security and ethical risks. Similar trends can be observed in other Western countries.

The continuing participation of the Czech Republic in the 17+1 format (16+1) is questionable. Representatives from the Pirates have called for an end to Czech participation, and that in the form of a coordinated “exit” with other EU Member States who participate in the format. The fate of the format itself is unclear after the de facto departure of Lithuania. Other countries are indicating that, while continuing to participate in the format, they will attach less importance to it in the context of relations with China and will prioritize the European and bilateral dimensions of ties.

From China's point of view, the importance of the Czech Republic in the format is on a downward trend. For example, the list of activities from the last summit lacks any mention of the annual Chinese Investment Forum, which took place in Prague under the auspices of the initiative. In the original version circulating before the summit, this event was still to be found. The forum did not take place in 2019, allegedly in connection with the deteriorating relations in an atmosphere of controversy over the Prague - Beijing partnership. In most of the original priority areas from the point of view of the Czech Republic (civil aviation, healthcare, export of agricultural products), the cooperation has still not brought the desired results.

Within the format, China relies mainly on the support of Hungary and Serbia as the closest bilateral partners. A recent trend in the context of the declining enthusiasm of some of the participating countries is also the Chinese emphasis on Poland, as evidenced by the intense diplomatic contacts between the two countries in early 2021. Beijing is hoping that a positive outlook on mutual cooperation from Poland can lead to a domino effect in neighboring countries.

The Czech policy towards China will be significantly shaped by the development of the European approach. Parliamentary elections take place in Germany in September, and their outcome will be a key determinant of the future course of European policy towards China. Several Central and Eastern European countries are calling for the use of the “27+1” format in the approach to Beijing. The question is whether Germany will go along with this plan, as despite rhetorical support for a common strategy, Berlin does not hesitate to approach China unilaterally or in a Franco-German tandem. The summit in this expanded format, to be held in Leipzig in the summer of 2020, was canceled due to the pandemic and plans to replace it have not yet been revived. The German Greens, who have a chance to fundamentally influence post-election developments, have promised to reorient German policy towards China away from the

dominance of economic interests. The Greens have also declared that German policy will be more Europeanized under their direction.

The possible change in the German strategy towards Beijing, including a reassessment of efforts to deepen economic interdependence with China, deserves greater interest in the Czech Republic as well. In the Czech debate, attention is paid mainly to the direct economic ties to China, which are often marginalized. In reality though, Germany plays an important mediation role in the Czech exposure to the Chinese economy, for example as the final exporter of Czech intermediate goods. Structural changes in the German economy, for which China is a key export market, could thus have a significant impact on the Czech economy.

In the future, European policy towards China should be more embedded in a broader approach to the Indo-Pacific region. In April 2021, the European Council approved conclusions on the Union's Indo-Pacific strategy. The document should outline a course for strengthening Europe's presence in this geopolitically important region. The aim is to contribute to regional stability and security, strengthen economic relations and promote human rights, democracy and relations with partners with shared values. In this context, it will also be important for the Czech Republic to further develop relations with democratic states in the region, such as South Korea, Japan or India.

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## Context

- Continued reassessment of the European approach to China.
- Continuity of American policy towards China even with the Biden administration.
- China's growing assertiveness in the face of criticism for human rights violations in Xinjiang, restrictions on Hong Kong's autonomy.

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## Present

- “Hibernation” of Czech-Chinese diplomatic and economic relations.
- Growing prominence of issues of conflict - Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tibet, human rights, Taiwan.
- Rethinking the benefits of cooperation with China in various areas, including relations at the level of regional government.

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## Recommendations

- The new government should carry out an audit of Czech foreign policy towards China and update the Czech strategy in the context of the new geopolitical reality.
- The Czech Republic should reevaluate the importance of continued involvement in the China-CEE cooperation, for example by undertaking a comprehensive audit of the benefits of the format.
- The Czech approach to China should be embedded in a broader approach to the Indo-Pacific region, following the example of the Allies’ strategic conceptions.
- The Czech Republic should take a consistent critical stance on the issue of breaches of human rights and international obligations by China and raise these issues at all levels of mutual relations.

# Middle East

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Karolína Lahučká  
Filip Sommer

“We keep our promises. The Czech Republic will have a full-fledged diplomatic mission in Jerusalem. This represents another milestone in our cooperation and demonstrates our awareness of the importance of this great city.”

— **Andrej Babiš**

11 March 2021

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“The state of Israel is facing an outrageous, barbaric attack. I want to express support and solidarity for the State of Israel, which has a clear and inalienable right to defend itself. That’s why I will be hanging the Israeli flag on Czernin Palace.”

— **Jakub Kulhánek**

14 May 2021

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“For 2021, the Czech Republic promises additional aid to the value of 7 million euros for Syria and its neighboring countries.”

— **Tomáš Petříček**

29 March 2021

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“The Czech Republic supports the Berlin Process, UN mediation and all other steps that will help to kick-start political dialogue. It also welcomes the August ceasefire agreement. Through Operation IRINI, the EU is also engaged in enforcing the arms embargo imposed by the UN Security Council.”

— **Tomáš Petříček**

21 September 2020

Due to its location in Europe's neighborhood, the Middle East is an important region for the Czech Republic and the EU in many ways. However, Czech foreign policy towards the region has long been based more on reactions to specific conflicts and developments in the region than on a clear and strategic concept that can be actively promoted. In addition, it often deviates from the approach of the EU, adding further confusion to an already inconsistent picture. Most of the region continues to struggle with instability and long-standing conflicts, which also have a major impact on European security. Furthermore, the Middle East was significantly affected by the covid-19 pandemic throughout the year, worsening the situation not only from a humanitarian point of view.

The Czech Republic continues its strong pro-Israel orientation, which has also been strengthened by vaccination policy. In February, Israel sent a symbolic gift of vaccines, with the promise of more. In March, Czechia opened a diplomatic office in Jerusalem, where the Prime Minister recalled the country's opposition to the investigation of war crimes in the Palestinian territories before the ICC, which provoked great criticism from Arab states. During Babiš's visit, Israel also invited the Czech Republic to join in the development of a new vaccine. With the resumption of the Palestinian-Israeli fighting in May, the Czech political elite openly sided with Israel, going against the majority in the EU, which is striving for a more balanced position on both sides. The statements of senior Czech politicians completely fail to mention a peaceful solution to this latest escalation or to illuminate the immediate and short-term causes of the conflict. Vocal support for Israel from the Czech Ambassador to Kuwait did not further the local interests of the Czech Republic, particularly at the time of the controversial bombing of Gaza.

The question of the opening of embassies and the establishment of strategic relations in Muscat and Doha, the importance of which will increase again after the end of the blockade of Qatar, also has not moved forward. In relation to Saudi Arabia, the Czech Republic has failed to make sufficient use of the vacuum created by the deterioration of relations between the Kingdom and other European countries, notably Germany, and to take advantage of new opportunities not only in economics but also in science, research or the deepening of cultural cooperation. If the Czech Republic decides to continue to clearly support the pro-Israeli wing in the Middle East, then Saudi Arabia, but also other Gulf countries, present themselves as natural partners. Furthermore, in recent months, Saudi Arabia has begun to negotiate directly with Iran, which only highlights the Biden administration's bid for a new Iranian deal. Relations with all actors in this situation are thus crucial for the Czech Republic looking to the future and, with smart diplomacy, should also be advantageous.

In Syria, attention has shifted toward the fight against the economic and humanitarian crises which deepened in the time of the pandemic, further adding to the country's problems and making society more dependent on foreign aid. In line with EU policy, the Czech Republic is actively involved in humanitarian projects in the field of health care and reconstruction of affected regions. Support has been sent, for

example, to a hospital in Latakia and to medical facilities in Damascus and Aleppo. The EU's attention was also fixed on May's presidential election, which the West described as neither free nor legitimate.

Iraq continues to be convulsed by anti-government protests that have been going on since October 2019. However, the Czech Republic has not supported the efforts calling for the combating of corruption, foreign (mainly Iranian) influence in the country and sectarian political divisions. The Czech Republic is mainly involved in the capacity of operations against ISIS. Since 2014, it has been supporting the global coalition in the fight against this terrorist organization, in particular through specialist training teams. Since February 2021, Czechia has had 6 personnel posted on the ground in the structures of the OIR and NATO missions in Iraq. However, the approved mandate provides for the deployment of up to 80 service men and women. Apart from military action though, there are virtually non-existent relations with Iraq, which is striking given the history of relations between the two countries.

Rather understandably, the Czech Republic is reticent about getting involved in the paralyzed political situation in Lebanon. However, there is room for more Czech engagement both on the issue of indirect negotiations with Israel on the shape of the maritime border and on the issue of the reconstruction of Beirut after last year's devastating explosion in the port. Relations with Jordan, which especially under the previous government was perceived as a key partner of the Czech Republic in the Middle East, did not fundamentally move forward and thus suggest a subdued Czech interest, which lacks a long-term vision.

Relations with Turkey have been affected above all by Turkish activities in its own neighborhood - in the Caucasus, the Eastern Mediterranean or in Syria - which have caused a crisis in relations with the EU. Since December, it has been discussing the possibility of introducing new sanctions against Turkey. Running counter to this, the change in Turkish rhetoric towards the EU in the spring of 2021 triggered a renewed debate on the strengthening of mutual relations, which the Czech Republic is also striving for on a bilateral level, especially through economic diplomacy. Good relations between the Czech Republic and Turkey at the diplomatic and intelligence levels were also demonstrated by the release of two Czechs imprisoned for terrorism following long term negotiations in the summer of 2020. Cooperation with Turkey is also linked to the situation in Libya, where Turkey is actively engaged militarily in support of the interim government, which was formed under the auspices of the United Nations, with the aim of leading the country into the December elections. Unfortunately, the EU did not follow up on the efforts it made last year and did not actively participate in negotiations on further developments in the country.

In the context of the current turbulent developments in Afghanistan, the National Security Council proceeded to withdraw Czech diplomats from the Kabul Embassy. In addition, it decided to accept Afghan interpreters who had assisted the Czech army, and who themselves requested the evacuation.



In the coming period, Czech foreign policy should come up with a coherent vision and establish the main priorities that it will pursue towards the Middle East region over the next few years. In the same way, it should actively campaign for the formation of a consistent strategy towards the region at EU level, otherwise the Middle East will remain under the influence of third powers. With a view to the conflicts and humanitarian crises in the region, the Czech Republic should opt for a level-headed strategy of actively promoting the human rights agenda, which often recedes into the background of economic and sectional interests.

Czech foreign policy should strive for a lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on support of the two-state solution, which is missing from speeches given by Czech representatives in support of Israel. A unilateral solution will not bring long-term peace here, the problems on both sides must be acknowledged and an objective approach sought. This stance is needed not only in the context of a unified EU position, which the Czech Republic should follow, but also in diplomatic relations with the Arab states, in which the question of Palestine is again growing in importance.

The Czech Republic should advocate for the EU to have a more robust position towards further developments in Syria with pressure on the political transformation of the country post elections, in accordance with the UN resolution, on which the possibility of greater financial assistance from the EU for the reconstruction of Syria also depends. The Czech Republic should actively use its embassy in Damascus to support European oversight of the supply of humanitarian aid to the country and to support the process of domestic prosecutions of EU citizens who played a part in terrorism and human rights violations in Syria. Czechia should also, within the framework of the EU, support the process of fair, independent and democratic elections in Iraq and Libya, as the only possible path to sovereign and independent states, and actively seek to exert pressure for the international monitoring of these elections under a UN mandate.

The EU should also build on the current positive development of its relations with Turkey and encourage it to cooperate more effectively, accompanied by the withdrawal of troops from Syria. Positive steps towards Turkey should be promoted by Czech diplomacy, with an emphasis on respect for human rights and the rule of law, because only through dialogue, not compulsion, can relations with Turkey be changed. With regard to its position on migration, the Czech Republic should actively participate in a constructive debate on implementing the migration agreement and supporting the stabilization of Syria. It should also establish a more active and strategic policy towards developments in Libya, whose stability is crucial for EU security, including with regard to migration, for example through greater involvement in mediation negotiations on the peace process or the December elections. An active policy here could also help to address the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Libya and Turkey form the main opposition to European plans.



With a view to the upcoming parliamentary elections, support for the stabilization of the political situation in Iraq will be important as well. Within NATO, Czech soldiers should continue to be involved in the fight against terrorism, which also significantly affects political events in the EU. In the context of the latest developments in Afghanistan, the Czech Republic should take a clear position within NATO and other allies towards the new Taliban government, which should serve as a counterweight to the positions of Russia and China. The Czech Republic should then proactively advocate for respect for human rights in Afghanistan, especially those of women and girls. The difficult political situation in Lebanon needs to be approached with caution. Support should be rendered primarily to the Lebanese army, which is a major counterweight to Hezbollah, and whose cohesion is being undermined by the country's unprecedented economic crisis. Likewise, the Czech Republic should support the stabilization of society in strategically important Jordan.

In view of the ongoing multilateral negotiations with Iran, Czech economic diplomatic efforts should be ready to establish intensive relations with this country in the event of the relaxation of international sanctions, as this is a very lucrative market. The Czech Republic should balance these relations with an increase in technological cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and finally reflect the geopolitical reality by enhancing diplomatic relations with rising Qatar and Oman. At the same time, the Czech Republic should pay increased attention to the Red Sea region, which is beginning to profile itself as a key emerging security and economic region.

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## Context

- A short-term resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and a change in Israel's political leadership.
- The end of the Qatari diplomatic crisis and the beginning of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Persian Gulf.
- Growing economic crisis in the region, exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic (Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, etc.).

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## Present

- Absence of a strategic policy towards the Arab states with regard to the strongly pro-Israel attitude of Czech diplomacy.
  - Lack of a coherent policy towards most countries in the region with no long-term vision (Jordan, Iraq, Gulf countries and North Africa.).
  - Support for the development of relations between the Czech Republic, and the EU as a whole, with Turkey in the context of the easing of tensions between the two parties after last year's crisis.
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## Recommendations

- The Czech Republic should actively support free and fair elections under the supervision of the UN (Syria, Libya, Iraq) and other political transformations of countries in the region.
- With regard to Czech membership in the EU and NATO more emphasis needs to be placed on maintaining objectivity and balancing the human rights agenda and economic interests in the Middle East.
- The Czech Republic should follow the traditional line on humanitarian policy in the region and focus primarily on countries afflicted by conflict and deepening economic crises.
- Czech diplomacy, not only economic, should envisage longer-term strategies and be prepared for changes and new challenges in the region (Iran, Gulf States, Turkey, etc.).



# Africa

The background of the entire page is a solid dark blue. Overlaid on this background is a light blue, abstract topographic map of the African continent. The map is composed of various wavy, concentric lines that represent the continent's geographical features, such as the Nile river basin, the Great Rift Valley, and the coastal outlines. The lines are of varying thickness and follow the general shape of the continent.

“Our assistance and our presence are key to the stabilization and improvement of the economic situation in Mali. We are also helping our own security, and our European mission makes sense to me. However, if it fails, efforts to establish an aggressive Islam, which, in my opinion, a large part of the population of Mali do not particularly desire, may prevail.”

— **František Ridzák**  
27 January 2021

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“When we add to this our active participation in Operation Takuba, which forms part of the Barkhane mission, then the Army of the Czech Republic really has a very positive ring to it among our partners, and the Czech Republic - not just the army - has benefited from this incredibly in terms of prestige. So I evaluate it very positively.”

— **František Ridzák**  
7 February 2021

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“Stability in the Sahel is very important for Europe. That is why we are part of the international forces in Mali, and our soldiers are putting in some excellent work there. Last year, we commanded the units of the entire EU training mission, and in 2022 we would like to again.”

— **Lubomír Metnar**  
1 April 2021

Similarly to the rest of the world, developments in sub-Saharan Africa over the past year have been affected by the covid-19 pandemic. However, the original assumption that the continent's population would be hit harder by the pandemic than other regions has not materialized and in terms of the numbers of infected, most sub-Saharan African countries have not witnessed disproportionately high figures albeit with the caveat that methods of data collection and evaluation may have had a bearing on this situation. However, the subsequent economic consequences, which will be of a longer-term nature, may have an even greater impact. At the same time, national leaders of sub-Saharan states did not respond in a unified way. The situation varied from utter downplay (e.g. Tanzania) to vigilance towards maintaining most economic activities (e.g. Ethiopia, Cameroon) to attempts to take advantage of the situation to reinforce undemocratic tendencies (e.g. Kenya, Nigeria). Five main reasons can be put forward for why the epidemic on the continent has not affected lives to the same extent as on other continents: early response, majority support for imposed restrictions, young population, favorable climate and overall experience of pandemics of a similar magnitude.

Although it is possible to assess the direct impact of the pandemic on the continent as low, it can be expected that indirect effects will be felt in the coming years. The vaccination policies of the great powers and support for health care by the countries of the global north have generally gone unnoticed among the ordinary people of the continent. High vaccination coverage is one of the priorities of cooperation from the EU's point of view, whilst some of the continent's political elites have used European aid to their own economic advantage. At present, the overall vaccination coverage of the countries is at a very low level, and in some countries, as of June 2021, the vaccination campaign had not yet started. By contrast, in January, Guinea (Conakry) became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to start vaccinating using the Sputnik vaccine.

A number of significant conflicts occurred or continued in the region. Of particular note are the conflicts with Islamists in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, the separatist movement of Tigray province and the Ethiopian government's military response, the volatile situation in the Sahel, particularly Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali, and the escalation of election violence in Côte d'Ivoire, the Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. As with most regions of the world, GDP growth slowed in sub-Saharan Africa last year, albeit very unevenly, and Ethiopia and Guinea (Conakry), for example, managed to maintain GDP growth above 5%. The largest economic cooling on the continent occurred in the region of Southern Africa (South Africa, Botswana and Namibia). Oil-dependent countries (Angola, Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo and Equatorial Guinea) have also been hit harder by the economic consequences, but their economic development has been declining since 2016. The covid-19 pandemic has also been a major blow to economies dependent on expats and the remittances sent by them. Regular economic injections from the diaspora traveling home during the holidays (Christmas, Ramadan) were also lower than in previous years.

From the point of view of the Czech Republic's relations to the territory, the pandemic came at the least opportune time just as the Czech government had decided to

become more active in the region. Minister Petříček's visit to Ethiopia in the autumn of 2019 was to have been an important impetus, as was the planned introduction of a direct flight between Prague and Addis Ababa. Unfortunately, this development was rather derailed by very unpleasant external factors. The planned prioritization of the Sahel then, despite a number of recent partial successes, could not be successfully communicated to the public, and the Czech media tended to focus its gaze on other topics. Despite the political preference for other topics, the agenda is gradually stabilizing as one of the priorities, which was demonstrated by the appointment of a special envoy for the Sahel in September 2020. The activities of the Czech army can be considered as a success, after having taken the lead of an international mission for the first time in Mali, namely the EUTM. In this context, the importance of the role of the newly established (October 2019) embassy in Mali has also been confirmed. Unfortunately, due to the unstable situation in Mali, the process is still only halfway there, and while there is an embassy in Bamako, its representative is still „only“ the head of mission (i.e. not an ambassador) accredited for Mali but not for the neighboring Sahel G5 states. This should change with the rotation of the ambassadors accredited to Abuja, Accra and Dakar, under whose remit the G5 Sahel states currently fall.

Last year, the Czech Republic was relatively successful in building a good reputation for its efforts to see the Sahel prioritized on the international scene. This was seen too in the efforts to fill the position of Special Representative for the Sahel within the European External Action Service, which the Czech Republic only narrowly missed out on. Unfortunately, while the administrative apparatus is performing relatively well in this field, there is a lack of more visible support from the highest constitutional officials - the president and the prime minister. Fortunately, fears that the Sahel would be dropped as a priority with the departure of Foreign Minister Petříček have not materialized and Minister Kulháněk has also taken up the topic, which gives hope that Czech activities could further develop over the long term. Despite the coup d'état in Mali, the mission led by the Army of the Czech Republic was assessed by partners as successful, mainly due to the territorial decentralization of training. Furthermore, Czech activities in the Takuba Task Force began under the auspices of Operation Barkhane, which is dedicated to counter-terrorism activities. On the other hand, this emphasis on the military may be counterproductive in the long run, as is being shown in the current negotiations on a new agreement in Mali. There is thus a need to develop existing projects which support civil society, and which have the potential to contribute to long-term stabilization, as envisaged in previously approved programs. Unfortunately, with the onset of the pandemic, the decision was made to allocate funds to other projects in countries with resident representation across the continent. This somewhat diluted the established priorities and (at least initially) once more raised the unspoken question of whether the stabilization of the Sahel will be a real priority for the Czech Republic, one which has a chance to flourish in the long run.

In the shadow of the pandemic, the issue of relations between the EU and the African states - the so-called post-Cotonou agreement - was addressed last year. In De

cember, the European Council approved the wording of an agreement that is currently in the legislative process, which is due to be completed by November this year. The agreement anticipates a partnership approach that should balance out the long-term dominance of the European side over the agenda and the economic resources. At the same time, greater and more equal involvement of African partners is envisaged. This represents an opportunity for the Czech Republic, as African countries can then direct their attention towards cooperation and dialogue with individual EU countries.



In spite of some positive signs in the context of the prioritization of the Sahel, Czech foreign policy is still only halfway there. In the coming years, it will be essential to evaluate the first short-term plans for the Sahel, and also to carry out a critical evaluation of our medium- and long-term capabilities. This is, after all, an area that is undergoing significant demographic, climatic and identity changes.

In the coming years, therefore, no let up can be expected - quite the contrary. Once again, it will be necessary to attract the attention of top political leaders to the region. At lower levels, the training of specialists in the Sahel region will be crucial for the Czech Republic, including language skills and familiarity with the area, for example through university cooperation. Another priority should be an attempt to diversify economic diplomacy throughout Africa so that the agenda is not dominated by the need to support the Czech defense industry. For example, the current pandemic has shown that healthcare is a relatively promising area of cooperation on the continent for the Czech private sector and research institutions.

In view of the pandemic, the development of diplomatic representation in the form of open honorary consulates over recent years has also paid off for the Czech Republic. Despite the varying quality and the reliance on the personality of the consul, they are becoming an important mechanism in the development of mutual relations. In this context, it is even more important to welcome and support the initiative to search for local graduates of schools in the former Czechoslovakia. Greater involvement of the diaspora, universities and the non-profit sector will be absolutely key to our continuing work on the continent.

With the increased activity at the European level and the redefinition of mutual relations, the space has opened for the Czech Republic to continue the established trajectory. The increased activity of Czech diplomacy comes at a time when even states in Africa are starting to choose their partners much more carefully. This situation has the potential for the Czech Republic to achieve beneficial and long-term results at a minimum cost.



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## Context

- Different responses and impacts of the covid-19 epidemic on individual African states.
- Growing emancipation of individual states of Africa and the African Union, selection of priority partners.
- Demographic changes and the resulting redefinition of current social relations.

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## Present

- Sahel as a priority area for the activities of the Czech Republic.
- Prioritization of military operations and stagnation of other projects and activities in the Sahel.
- Continuation of negotiations on a new EU-Africa relationship.

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## Recommendation

- The Czech Republic should involve its highest representatives in activities in the territory.
- The Czech Republic should continue to diversify cooperation into other sectors in addition to the defense industry and the security sector.
- The Czech Republic should involve academia, the diaspora and the non-profit sector in strategic cooperation.

**3SI** — Three Seas Initiative

**AMO** — Association for International Affairs

**AMOS** — Agency for International Defense Cooperation

**BIS** — Security Information Service

**CAI** — Comprehensive Agreement on Investment

**CDU/CSU** — Christian Democratic Union of Germany/ Christian Social Union in Bavaria

**CGN** — China General Nuclear Power Group

**COP26** — 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties

**CSG** — Czechoslovak Group

**CZG** — Česká zbrojovka Group

**ČSSD** — Czech Social Democratic Party

**DMA** — Digital Markets Act

**DPRK** — Democratic People's Republic of Korea

**DSA** — Digital Services Act

**EaP** — Eastern Partnership

**EDA** — European Defence Agency

**EDAP** — European Democracy Action Plan

**EDF** — European Defence Fund

**EEA** — European Economic Area

**EGAP** — Export Guarantee and Insurance Corporation

**EMA** — European Medicines Agency

**EU** — European Union

**EU ETS** — EU Emissions Trading System

**EUTM** — European Union Training Mission

**FDI** — Foreign Direct Investment

**GAFA** — Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon

**GDP** — Gross Domestic Product

**GDPR** — General Data Protection Regulation

**GRU** — Organization of the Main Intelligence Administration

**ICC** — International Criminal Court

**ISIS** — Islamic State

**KDU-ČSL** — Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party

**KSČM** — Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia

**MFA** — Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
**MFF** — Multiannual Financial Framework  
**MIT** — Ministry of Industry and Trade  
**MoE** — Ministry of the Environment  
**MoF** — Ministry of Finance  
**MPs** — Members of Parliament  
**MRD** — Ministry of Regional Development  
**NATO** — North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
**NGO** — Non-governmental organization  
**NRP** — National Recovery Plan  
**ODS** — Civic Democratic Party  
**OECD** — Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
**OIR** — Operation Inherent Resolve  
**OSCE** — Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
**PA** — Paris Agreement  
**PESCO** — Permanent Structured Cooperation  
**RES** — Renewable energy sources  
**RFE/RL** — Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty  
**RRF** — Recovery and Resilience Facility  
**S&D** — Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats  
**SIPRI** — Stockholm International Peace Research Institute  
**SPD** — Freedom and Direct Democracy (chapter “Czech arms exports”)  
**SPD** — Social Democratic Party of Germany (chapter “Germany”)  
**SURE** — European instrument for temporary Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency  
**UK** — United Kingdom  
**UN** — United Nations  
**UNEP** — United Nations Environment Program  
**USA** — United States of America  
**V4** — Visegrad Group  
**WHO** — World Health Organization  
**WTO** — World Trade Organization

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