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## Chapter 12

# France in the Czech Foreign Policy

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### FRANCE IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

After the start of Sobotka's Government, it was clear that the Czech-French relations would change. France perceived positively particularly the pro-European orientation of the Czech foreign policy; the good atmosphere of mutual relations was also supported by the party membership of the new Prime Minister when the contacts at the party level with the French socialist party (*Parti socialiste*, PS) supported further areas of bilateral and multilateral relations. This tendency was confirmed during 2014. It was accompanied with greater intensity of visits by leading representatives of both countries: Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and President Miloš Zeman visited France, French Minister for European Affairs Thierry Repentin visited Prague, and Prime Minister Manuel Valls visited Prague in December, which was the climax of the Czech-French cooperation. Both Prime Ministers signed the *Action Plan for 2014–2018* in Prague, which was included in the Strategic Partnership of both countries, and it specified individual cooperation areas of the Czech Republic and France. The year 2015 demonstrated a stronger will of the Czech Republic to cooperate with France than the previous years, particularly within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This change was based mostly on the personal level of higher administration of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and it was supported by the party contacts between ČSSD and the French PS. In 2015, the trend of mutual visits continued at the political and administration level; the shift within the public diplomacy became apparent when both states increased the number of events for the French and Czech general public. The negative atmosphere from former years caused by the circumstances related to the exclusion of AREVA from the public tender for further construction of the nuclear power plant Temelín is forgotten and the post-Temelín bitterness of the Czech-French relations is in the past.

Political events in 2015 did not introduce any significant changes for either party which would affect the relations of both countries. The only change in the situation was represented by the elections in France which took place in December 2015 with the victory of French right-wing parties.<sup>1</sup> The Czech political representation com-

mented the elections within the context of the results from the first round which indicated a possible success of the ultra-right wing National Front.<sup>2</sup>

A significant contextual moment for the relationship between the Czech Republic and France was represented by the attacks on the Paris headquarters of *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and the attacks in Paris in November. Both cases resulted in a wave of solidarity from the Czech Republic. In January 2015, Czech Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lubomír Zaorálek, visited Paris and paid tribute to the victims by marching through Paris.<sup>3</sup> After the January and November attacks, many commemoration events took place outside the French Embassy in Prague, including the signing of condolence books.

In regard to the conceptual position of the Czech foreign policy, it is necessary to mention the adoption of the new concept<sup>4</sup> approved by the Czech Government on 13. 7. 2015, which related to the former conceptual document from 2011.<sup>5</sup> The relations with France are mentioned in the fifth part (Territorial focus of the Czech foreign policy, Euro-Atlantic area), very briefly: “*The Czech Republic shall further develop the strategic partnership focused on the area of economy, power engineering, defence and security, education, and culture.*”<sup>6</sup> The concept provides the same space to France and, for example, Great Britain (the same section) and it does not reflect the shift in the perception of France and the atmosphere of mutual relationships which is apparent from the meetings of the leaders of both countries. In comparison with the concept from 2011, we can state that the new document extends the explicit definition of the areas of cooperation and directly refers to the strategic partnership.

## **FRANCE IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: AGENDA AND EVENTS**

In 2015, the trend of increased intensity of mutual visits continued. In January, Chief of the General Staff of the Czech Army, Petr Pavel, visited France and met the Chief of the Defence Staff in France, Pierre de Villiers. The meeting confirmed that the defence area is one of the basic components of bilateral and multilateral cooperation of the Czech Republic and France as specified by the Action plan for strategic partnership of both countries. De Villiers described “*The Czech Republic as the key strategic country in the future Europe*”.<sup>7</sup> Additionally to the topics related to the bilateral cooperation (such as the training of the helicopter staff of the Czech Army in the area of French Pyrenees, language and professional education, cooperation within the foreign operations, studies of the Czech Army members at the Military School in Paris, and the cooperation amongst the Army Historical Institutes and archives), the visit was set within the context of accepting the function of the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee in June by General Pavel.

Another significant visit was the journey of the State Secretary for European Affairs, Tomáš Prouza, to Paris in April 2015, where he met his French counterpart – State Secretary for European Affairs, Harlem Désir.<sup>8</sup> The meeting related to the bilateral (specific projects of bilateral cooperation within the Action plan for strategic

partnership) and multilateral (particularly in the area of power engineering and the topics related to the June meeting of the European Council). Prouza also met the General Director for the European Union at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pierre Lévy.<sup>9</sup>

In 2015, reciprocal visits of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from both countries took place. L. Zaorálek (in addition to the mentioned visits to pay tribute to the January attacks) visited France at the beginning of June.

The primary goal of his visit was the participation at the ministerial level meeting of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD); nevertheless, during his stay in Paris, he had an opportunity to meet the French Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development, Laurent Fabius.<sup>10</sup> The bilateral meetings again included the Action plan for strategic partnership of both countries and particularly the area of power engineering. Special attention was focused on the migration-related matters, and according to L. Zaorálek both agreed that: *“It is necessary to express solidarity with the states in South Europe; however, we do not agree with obligatory quotas for immigrants.”*<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, both ministers negotiated the preparation of the climate conference convened in Paris in December 2015. The conference on the climate change – COP 21 represented one of the main diplomatic topics of the year for France.<sup>12</sup>

Laurent Fabius reciprocated the visit in August. Fabius attended the annual meeting of Czech ambassadors and with his speech<sup>13</sup> he highlighted the quality of the Czech-French relationships in the economic area. It includes the best functioning area of mutual cooperation, where France remains in the 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> place within the mutual business exchange, and almost 500 French companies operate in the Czech Republic. He also appreciated the European focus of Sobotka’s government and the role of the Czech Republic within Central Europe and the Visegrád Group. Fabius focused the major part of the speech on the French interpretation of the current international relationships and crisis, named the threats and topics which France considered to be crucial (terrorism, Russian-Ukrainian crisis, Israel-Palestine conflict), and placed emphasis on the review of the global multilateral scope (particularly the UN reform and the expansion of the Security Council). One of the topics of the speech included the upcoming (above mentioned) climate conference COP 21 in Paris. Finally, Fabius appreciated the approach of the Czech Republic with respect to the migration issue. Within the general context of the current French foreign policy, we can state that in his Prague speech, Fabius mentioned its basic topics and values crucial for France (multilateralism, international standards in the area of environment, and the generally normative role of the EU). The Czech-French relationships were not discussed as a priority. During the press conference after the meeting, Fabius stated that the *“Czech Republic belonged to the group of friends of France”* and confirmed the positive atmosphere of the Czech-French relationships, and the closure of related controversial topics, particularly Temelín and the role of the Czech Republic in the European Union. During his Prague stay, Minister Fabius also met Prime Minister Sobotka and Minister Zaorálek.<sup>14</sup> Both meetings were dominated by topics related to terrorism and

migration. Identically to other visits, the leitmotiv was the Action plan for strategic partnership which confirmed the future crucial areas of cooperation would be power engineering and defence.

A controversial reaction of the public and the Czech political scene followed the visit of President of French National Front, Marine Le Pen, in Prague at the beginning of May 2015. Le Pen arrived at the Czech Republic to “*participate at the conference for European peace and prosperity for European Union convened by non-parliament party Občanská konzervativní strana (OKS) formed by former ODS Member of Parliament Jiří Janeček, which was a partner party to the National Front*”.<sup>15</sup> She also met the former President of the Czech Republic, Václav Klaus.

### ***The symbolic level of Czech-French relations and historical diplomacy***

A specific position in bilateral relationships is represented by the symbolic acts of foreign policy which commemorate personalities and significant places. In 2015, this category included, for example, the visit of the Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly Laurence Dumont in Terezín, and the unveiling of Mitterrand’s bust in Prague.

The visit of Prime Minister Sobotka in June in Darney had a symbolical value due to the occasion of the 97<sup>th</sup> anniversary of accepting the entitlements of the Czech and Slovak people to their own state by France, and the Day of the Armed Forces of the Czech Republic.<sup>16</sup> Darney represents a memorial place within the collective Czechoslovak memory. In June 1918, the soldiers of the Czechoslovak Riflemen Brigade swore on and accepted the military flag from French President Raymond Poincaré. Edvard Beneš participated in the ceremony. From the historical point of view, the crucial significance of this event is based on the acknowledgement of the right of the Czechs and the Slovaks to their independent state by France. In 2002, the importance of this act was also confirmed by Václav Havel, who designated 30th June as the Day of the Armed Forces of the Czech Republic.

Symbolical and cultural significance was also demonstrated by the participation of L. Dumont, the Deputy Chairman of the French National Assembly, in the memorial act convened in Terezín on the occasion of the Auschwitz liberation.<sup>17</sup> Dumont placed a wreath on the memorial plate of French poet Robert Desnos, who died in 1945 in Terezín.

François Mitterrand represents one of the key personalities of modern Czech/Czechoslovak-French relations. Breakfast with the dissent representatives which was attended by Mitterrand on 9. 12. 1988 at the French Embassy in Prague, is significant for bilateral relations of both countries and for the Czech history in general. It is interpreted as one of the milestones in the relations of the Czech Republic and France, as a positive impulse, an example of bravery and respect. This event was commemorated by the work of sculptor Jan Zelenka; President Miloš Zeman, French Ambassador in the Czech Republic, and Slovak Ambassador participated at the unveiling. The bust was created by the Jazz Section and it is installed in the gardens under the Prague Castle.

***Action plan of strategic partnership***

In 2015, there was no significantly dominant topic of the Czech-French relationships. As indicated by frequent mutual visits, both parties understand the basic framework of this relation to be the Action plan for strategic partnership.<sup>18</sup> It is clear that the main emphasis is placed on the area of power engineering and defence where the cooperation is under continual development; at the same time, the well-functioning sphere includes the economic, cultural, and educational cooperation. In 2015, the development of specific cooperation topics was overshadowed by the international and intrapolitical context,<sup>19</sup> particularly by the solution of the migration issue, fight against terrorism, and the terrorist attacks in Paris in January and November 2015. As a consequence, we can state that the cooperation sectors continued the Czech-French relationships based on long lasting relations with the Czech and French public.

***Cultural dimension in the Czech-French relations and cooperation in the area of education***

Even though the Czech public diplomacy (refer to the chapter on *Cultural Dimension of the Czech Foreign Policy* in this book) does not highlight the education dimension, it is still represented in the Czech-French relations due to the long-lasting tradition reaching back to the period of the first Czechoslovak Republic.

In 2015, several significant symbolic anniversaries were celebrated. In April, the 95<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Czech section of the Lyceum Carnot in Dijon was celebrated. This boy section was found in 1920, three years before the Girl section at the Lyceum in Saint-Germain-en-Laye and four years before the third section in Nîmes. The educational activity was interrupted during the Communist era and restored in 1990.<sup>20</sup>

In June 2015, another anniversary was celebrated on the Czech side.<sup>21</sup> It was the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the French-Czech bilingual sections in the Czech Republic. Nowadays, in the Czech Republic, there is a bilingual Czech-French section in Jan Neruda Grammar School in Prague, Matyáš Lerch Grammar School in Brno, Slavonic Grammar School in Olomouc, and Pierre de Coubertin Grammar School in Tábor. The mentioned programs offer the A-level examination according to the French standards. They represent one of the main pillars of Czech-French cooperation in the area of secondary education<sup>22</sup> and significantly contribute to extending education of the French language in the Czech Republic.

An important event within the education dimension of the Czech-French relations is the Day of the Charles University in Prague convened in May 2015 at the Czech Embassy in Paris.<sup>23</sup> It was a unique possibility to present university education in the Czech Republic and Czech-French university cooperation. The Charles University was represented by Rector Tomáš Zima, members of the council and representatives of the faculties, several dozen representatives from French partner universities, French offices, academic employees and graduates from Charles University living in France.<sup>24</sup> The meeting resulted from a joint initiative of the Charles University and the Embassy in Paris, and it was not a part of the unified promotion of the Czech university education.

In 2015, the important aspect within the area of science diplomacy and the cooperation within research was the commencement of the platform CEFRES, with the opening ceremony in October 2015 at the French Embassy in Prague.<sup>25</sup> The CEFRES platform unifies the Charles University, Academy of Science of the Czech Republic, and Centre national de la recherche scientifique – CNRS. The agreement on its foundation was signed in November 2014. Its focus covers the social-science and humanistic fields, and it is focused on the science cooperation within the whole Central European sector.

In 2015, the cultural relationships of both states included many traditional events organised by the French Institute (*Institut français de Prague*, IFP) in the Czech Republic and by the Czech Centre in Paris. The main events again included the French Film Festival, French participation at the International Film Festival in Karlovy Vary (cinematography still represents one of the main pillars of the French state support in the export of culture), Day of French-Czech Partnership, and the Open Day at the French Embassy in Prague. We can state that the number of events convened outside the building of the cultural centre is growing adequately to the current trends of public diplomacy.

The Czech Centre in Paris has its place on the cultural map of Paris and it can attract the audience even without a long-lasting relationship to the Czech culture; they can be attracted by a specific cultural offer. The most successful events of the Czech Centre in Paris include the Jazz Fridays founded by the retiring Director of the Czech Centre, former General Director of the Czech Centres, and former Director of the Czech Centre in Sophia, Bulgaria, Michael Wellner-Pospíšil – a recognised person of Czech-French cultural relationships. The matter of further management of the Czech Centre in Paris and its future focus and the cooperation outline are still open.

## CONCLUSION

The year 2015, within the context of the Czech-French relations, can be perceived as a positive period with a predominantly pleasant atmosphere of mutual relations at the administration and political level; the will to cooperate was bilateral (the shift is noticeable particularly on the Czech side), and there was no controversial topic such as Temelín to cause a misunderstanding or disagreement. The bilateral relations took place within the restricted sectors of cooperation defined by the Action Plan for strategic partnership of both countries. The implementation of the specific projects and new topics in 2015 were overshadowed by the international political context (particularly the matter of terrorism and migration), which dominated the foreign policies of both states.

The main question for the following period depends on the development of the international situation, specifically the definition of power distribution in the European Union and the matters of internal and external security. In 2017, France shall face the presidential election which may interrupt the existing good mood in the Czech-French

relations, which are strongly based on the close relationship with the leaders of both countries. Within this context, the key question for the coming period relates to the perception of the cooperation with France in the Czech foreign policy, and particularly the position of the Czech Republic in the EU as a French partner, and the interpretation of its role in the Central European region.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> On the basis of the results of the second round of the regional elections, the right won in eight regions, the left preserved its leadership of seven regions and the National Front did not win any region. On-line: [www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Regionales/elecresult-regionales-2015/\(path\)/regionales-2015/index.html](http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/Elections/Les-resultats/Regionales/elecresult-regionales-2015/(path)/regionales-2015/index.html).
- <sup>2</sup> Refer to lidovky.cz. On-line: [www.lidovky.cz/vzestup-nacionalistu-ve-francii-je-podle-zaoralka-varovani-pro-evropu-i-cesko-1hu-/zpravy-domov.asp?c=A151207\\_143611\\_in\\_domov\\_ELE](http://www.lidovky.cz/vzestup-nacionalistu-ve-francii-je-podle-zaoralka-varovani-pro-evropu-i-cesko-1hu-/zpravy-domov.asp?c=A151207_143611_in_domov_ELE).
- <sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske\\_vztahy/navstevy/premier\\_sobotka\\_a\\_ministr\\_zahranicnich.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske_vztahy/navstevy/premier_sobotka_a_ministr_zahranicnich.html).
- <sup>4</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Koncepce zahraniční politiky ČR*. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/file/1565920/Koncepce\\_zahranicni\\_politiky\\_CR.pdf](http://www.mzv.cz/file/1565920/Koncepce_zahranicni_politiky_CR.pdf).
- <sup>5</sup> Here France is mentioned in section 4. 2. 2. (European permanent members of the UN Security Council) as follows: “*In compliance with the strategic partnership, ČR will deepen the co-operation and mutual understanding with France especially in the area of energy, defence and industry*” (p. 15).
- <sup>6</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Koncepce zahraniční politiky České republiky*, op. cit., p. 12.
- <sup>7</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Náčelník generálního štábu Armády ČR navštívil Francii*. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske\\_vztahy/navstevy/nacelnik-generalniho-stabu-armady-cr.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske_vztahy/navstevy/nacelnik-generalniho-stabu-armady-cr.html).
- <sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Návštěva státního tajemníka Tomáše Prouzy v Paříži*. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske\\_vztahy/navstevy/navsteva-statniho-tajemnika-pro-evropske.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske_vztahy/navstevy/navsteva-statniho-tajemnika-pro-evropske.html).
- <sup>9</sup> Between 2010–2013, Pierre Lévy worked as the ambassador of France in the Czech Republic. Considering his function, this relation is positively reflected in the current Czech-French relationships.
- <sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Ministr zahraničních věcí Lubomír Zaorálek navštívil Francii*. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske\\_vztahy/navstevy/ministr\\_zahranicnich-veci\\_lubomir\\_1.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske_vztahy/navstevy/ministr_zahranicnich-veci_lubomir_1.html).
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> It was historically the largest international conference hosted in Paris. The success of the conference with the aim of the UN to conclude the obligation and the agreement on climate for the first time in the history was perceived by France as a diplomatic success and the confirmation of its role on the international field.
- <sup>13</sup> *Návštěva ministra zahraničních věcí a mezinárodního rozvoje Laurenta Fabiuse v Praze (23.–24. 8. 2015)*. On-line: [www.france.cz/Navsteva-ministra-zahranicnich-veci-a-mezinarodniho-rozvoje-Laurenta-Fabiuse-v](http://www.france.cz/Navsteva-ministra-zahranicnich-veci-a-mezinarodniho-rozvoje-Laurenta-Fabiuse-v).
- <sup>14</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Premiér jednal s francouzským ministrem zahraničí o strategickém partnerství a migrační krizi*. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske\\_vztahy/navstevy/ministr\\_zaoralek\\_prijal\\_ministra.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko-francouzske_vztahy/navstevy/ministr_zaoralek_prijal_ministra.html).

- <sup>15</sup> Lidovky.cz. On-line: [www.lidovky.cz/le-penova-resila-s-klaussem-budoucnost-evropy-a-chce-ho-ve-francii-pxj-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A150506\\_160418\\_in\\_domov\\_ELE](http://www.lidovky.cz/le-penova-resila-s-klaussem-budoucnost-evropy-a-chce-ho-ve-francii-pxj-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A150506_160418_in_domov_ELE).
- <sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Premiér České republiky Bohuslav Sobotka se zúčastnil oslav v Darney*. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko\\_francouzske\\_vztahy/vyroci/x2015\\_06\\_27\\_premier\\_cr\\_sobotka\\_se\\_zucastnil.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/cesko_francouzske_vztahy/vyroci/x2015_06_27_premier_cr_sobotka_se_zucastnil.html).
- <sup>17</sup> On-line: [www.france.cz/Pietni-akt-v-Terezine](http://www.france.cz/Pietni-akt-v-Terezine).
- <sup>18</sup> *Akční plán francouzsko-českého strategického partnerství pro období 2014–2018*. Document is not accessible to public.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Marek Toman, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2. 6. 2015.
- <sup>20</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/kultura\\_a\\_skolstvi\\_1/skolstvi/aktuality/cesky\\_den\\_v\\_dijonu\\_a\\_oslava\\_95\\_vyroci.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/kultura_a_skolstvi_1/skolstvi/aktuality/cesky_den_v_dijonu_a_oslava_95_vyroci.html).
- <sup>21</sup> On-line: [www.france.cz/Oslavy-25-vyroci-bilingvnich-sekci-11-cervna-2015](http://www.france.cz/Oslavy-25-vyroci-bilingvnich-sekci-11-cervna-2015).
- <sup>22</sup> On-line: [www.ifp.cz/Sections-bilingues-franco-tcheques,630](http://www.ifp.cz/Sections-bilingues-franco-tcheques,630).
- <sup>23</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: [www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/kultura\\_a\\_skolstvi\\_1/skolstvi/aktuality/ambasada\\_hostila\\_den\\_univerzity\\_karlovy.html](http://www.mzv.cz/paris/cz/kultura_a_skolstvi_1/skolstvi/aktuality/ambasada_hostila_den_univerzity_karlovy.html).
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> On-line: [www.france.cz/Slavnostni-predstaveni-Platformy-CEFRES-7-rijna-2015](http://www.france.cz/Slavnostni-predstaveni-Platformy-CEFRES-7-rijna-2015).