
Chapter 16

Latin America in the Czech Foreign Policy

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LATIN AMERICA IN CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT¹

The new *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic* from July 2015 depicts Latin America as “*an area geographically distant but dynamically developing and culturally and geographically close*”.² The geographic distance is also a major factor for mutual relationships between the Czech Republic and the region of Latin America, which can be described as low-profile in the long-term. On the political level, this remote region without (safe for exceptions) closer historical links is relatively of small interest for a country of the size of the Czech Republic. Several years ago, it could even appear that the Czech Republic was withdrawing from Latin America when some missions of the Czech Republic in that region were closed. By reopening of the Embassy in Bogota this trend was stopped; however, instead of its reversal, we can speak about stabilization of the situation nowadays, when other missions of the Czech Republic are not threatened in that area with high probability now.

Despite the aforesaid, the interests of the Czech Republic in the region of Latin America remain primarily economic, when a number of growing markets in the area entice the Czech export. Politically, for example, the issue of Cuba was interesting historically, but nowadays it has been much less visible with respect to the general warming up of relations.

LATIN AMERICA IN CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: AGENDA AND EVENTS

Representation of the Czech Republic in Latin America

In February 2015, Czech Ambassador Miloš Sklenka handed over the credential letters to the President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos.³ Therefore, he replaced the chargé d'affaires, Imrich Klement, who headed the mission from its reopening in November 2013, whereby he completed the process of restoration of the Czech Embassy in Colombia lasting over two years. During 2015, the office in Bogota was staffed.

The original plan also included the reciprocal opening of the Colombian Embassy in Prague, about which the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the Czech side in April 2015. However, it did not happen in the said year because the Colombian government had to realize fairly considerable budget cuts.⁴ They are related especially to the decline of crude oil prices in the world markets because export of this raw material is a vital source of income for Colombia.

In 2015, discussions between the government and rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) continued in Colombia. With respect to the approaching end of the long-term internal conflict in the country, the Czech Republic offered its experience from the transition period, specifically in the area of restitutions. Therefore, the Embassy contributed to the organization of the seminar in October 2015, within which the Czech experts shared their restitution experience. It concerned especially experts from the Land Office and judges.⁵

After the repeated extension of the Latin missions of the Czech Republic with Colombia, their number should remain stabilized now. Although the Czech Republic still owns the building of the former Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela, with respect to the internal situation in the country, which has a tendency to further deterioration, it is not possible to expect activities resulting in any greater Czech presence. The same applies to the Embassy in Costa Rica that was closed down previously. However, other closures should not threaten, as it results for example from the conclusions of the meeting of President Miloš Zeman, Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek, Minister of Defence Martin Stropnický and Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic Milan Štěch about functioning of economic diplomacy from June 2015. The actors have agreed that the times do not favour closing the Embassies and, on the contrary, that the government should strengthen the diplomatic missions in the positions of economic, agricultural and scientific-technical diplomats in the countries with increasing economic opportunities. According to the statement of Prime Minister Sobotka, these regions also include Latin America.⁶

Mutual meetings of Czech and Latin politicians

In 2015, the most important event for contacts of the Czech Republic with Latin America was the EU–CELAC Summit, which took place on 9–10 June in Brussels. After the summit in Santiago in 2013, it was the second meeting in the format of 28 member states of the European Union on one side and 33 member states of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) on the other side.

A day before the summit, Prime Minister B. Sobotka had a working lunch with all ambassadors of the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean Region as a preparation in Prague, in which he assured the diplomats that the Czech Republic was prepared to deepen the relations with countries in the region.⁷ In the actual summit, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic met the President of Colombia, Juan Manuel Santos, when the main topic of the discussion was especially strengthening of the economic co-operation between both countries.⁸

The output of the summit was the adoption of two documents – political declaration of the Partnership for the Next Generation about shared values of both regions and a more extensive Brussels declaration. The Declaration confirms the will of both regions to keep deepening mutual co-operation in various areas, such as the fight against organized crime, issues of climate changes or development co-operation. The Government of the Czech Republic welcomed the adoption of both documents and they should become, according to it, the basic guidance of the movement of mutual relations of EU and CELAC in the upcoming years.⁹

The year 2015 was supposed to be the year of the first visit of President M. Zeman to Latin America. Colombia was at play, which had been already considered in the previous year, but also Brazil, Mexico or, as the case may be, Peru or Costa Rica.¹⁰ However, President Zeman did not visit any of the countries in Latin America in 2015, especially due to the problematic finding of the term with his Latin counterparts.

In June 2015, Minister of Industry and Trade Jan Mládek visited Mexico. On the way, he was accompanied by the eleven-member delegation of the Confederation of Industry of the Czech Republic and the six-member technological mission organized by the CzechInvest Agency.¹¹

In October and November 2015, two business missions to Cuba took place at once. It concerned the first events of this type in the period after the Cold War. The first of them was led by the Deputy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs Martin Tlapa and the second one by the Deputy to the Minister of Industry and Trade Vladimír Bártl. Nowadays both sides have been striving for strengthening mutual trade, which was relatively strong historically. However, the chronic insolvency of Cuba has been a hindrance.¹² In the same way, certain political bonding has also increased, as it will be specified below.

The opening of the markets should also be facilitated by the mission of the Deputy to the Minister of Industry and Trade Eduard Muřický, who visited Ecuador and Bolivia in April 2015 in the company of entrepreneurs. It concerned especially the subjects from the area of energetics, transport infrastructure and mechanical engineering.¹³

As for the Parliamentary diplomacy, in May the Foreign Committee of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic saw a delegation of the Commission for Foreign Relations of the Senate of the United Mexican States led by the Chairperson of the said Commission Gabriela Cuevas Barron.¹⁴ At the turn of November and December, the delegation of the Foreign Committee of the Parliament of the Czech Republic headed by Karel Schwarzenberg visited Chile, when a double taxation treaty was signed during the journey.¹⁵

In May, G. C. Barron also had an official meeting with the Vice-Chairman of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic Zdeněk Škromach and the Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security of the Senate of the Parliament of the Czech Republic František Bublan. In October 2015, the Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the National Congress of the Republic of Chile Marco Antonio Núñez Lozano was welcomed to the Senate by its Chairman M. Štěch.

The senators of the Committee on National Economy, Agriculture and Transport together with the Vice-Chairman of the Senate, Z. Škromach, travelled to Colombia and Panama in June 2015.

Cuba in the Czech foreign policy

In the last years, the Czech Republic started withdrawing from its “hard” position to Cuba, which was focused primarily on the criticism of human rights on the island. In 2014, it supported the opening of the Euro-Cuban dialogue and especially in 2015 it started taking steps to warm up the relations with Cuba. For example, the above-mentioned mission lead by the Deputy to the Minister of Foreign Affairs M. Tlapa was called to establish political dialogue and work on the improvement of mutual relations. As the deputy himself said: *“even we had to say how exactly to focus the policy on Cuba so that we would not only have one dominant topic, which would not be left by us, which was the civil society and human rights. We want to expand the spectrum of activities with activities of cultural, educational and business nature.”*¹⁶

The fact that the initiative of warming up of mutual relations was successful is obvious already now. It has even reached the stage that in 2016 the Czech Republic and Cuba should promote their missions to the level of Ambassadors. It would concern an important political step because the missions have been on the level of chargé d'affaires since 1993. For example, the Latino expert Josef Opatrný supposes that even if the promotion of the missions represents a very important step, *“normalization will not go so quickly with respect to the fact that there are certain resentiments here”*.¹⁷

Debt which is owed by Cuba to the Czech Republic is a specific issue of the Czech-Cuban relations. It concerns liabilities at the value of 7 billion CZK, which have not been repaid in the long-term. With respect to improving relations, capitalization of the debt is possible according to Deputy Tlapa, when the Czech firms would participate in projects in Cuba, by which a part of the debt could be written off.¹⁸ Slovakia, which “inherited” a part of the Cuban debt during the split of the federation, came with a similar solution already in 2015 as the first country of Central Europe.¹⁹

Economic relations between the Czech Republic and Latin America

Nowadays numerous countries of Latin America represent interesting and developing markets. From the economic standpoint, however, the area is rather heterogeneous. While some states, especially those joined in the Pacific Alliance (Mexico, Colombia, Peru, and Chile), have fairly open economies, in the case of two important economies of Mercosur, Brazil, and Argentina, considerable hindrances to entering the market prevail.

By far the most important market in the region for the Czech Republic is Mexico. In 2015, this country accounted for over 47% of the total export from the Czech Republic to Latin America, which meant 662 million USD in absolute figures.²⁰ According to the Mexican methodology, import from the Czech Republic is even higher because it includes not only direct import but also reexport of the Czech goods through other, especially European countries. Minister of Industry and Trade J. Mládek evaluated

the position of Mexico after his visit in June 2015 as follows: “*Mexico is a prospective and strategic partner for us not only thanks to the size of its market but also due to the connection to other countries, for example of the Pacific Alliance: Colombia, Chile, Peru or NAFTA. I was assured that ongoing economic reforms in Mexico were opportunities for further deepening of the co-operation and increasing of the Czech presence in the Mexican market.*”²¹

As already mentioned above, Mexico is a part of the Pacific Alliance, the most progressive trade block in the region of Latin America. The states participating in this integration have altogether over 200 million inhabitants, therefore a bit more than one-third of the population of Latin America, and their economic growth has been above-standard in the last years. Specifically, in 2015 the GDP growth of the Alliance was 3.8%, while the average economic growth of Latin America as a whole was only 1.7%.²² In the first half of 2015, a discussion took place here about submitting an application for the observer status at the Pacific Alliance and in June 2015 the Government decided that the application would be submitted.²³ The application was submitted at the end of 2015. Even before that, in October the Forum of the CR–Pacific Alliance was organized in Prague with the participation of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic and missions of the states of the Pacific Alliance. The conditions for investments, business opportunities generally and specific sectors were presented to over one hundred Czech subjects.²⁴

In the long-term, the Czech Republic is one of the advocates of the continuation and in the ideal case even completion of the negotiations about free trade zone between the European Union and the Mercosur states.²⁵ However, the negotiations, which have taken place for an extended period and one of the crucial controversial areas of which is the liberalization in the agricultural area,²⁶ reached a standstill for a majority of 2015. As late as in the second half of the year, it started appearing that there could be progress in the negotiations in 2016. Nevertheless, the situation is still rather complicated because the biggest economy of Mercosur (Brazil) has faced a rather complicated situation and was in recession in 2015.

In the following years, interesting changes can be expected in Argentina, which has belonged to rather closed economies in the region till now. At the end of 2015, Mauricio Macri was elected the president; he finished the relatively long period of “Kirchnerism” in the country. One of the main points of Macri’s policy is a far more open approach to market and trade.²⁷ Access to the Argentinian market could be probably easier in the future, as well as the actual functioning there. It could make the country much more interesting for foreign investments. In this context, cancellation of the branch of the CzechTrade agency in Argentina seems rather unfortunate. The office in Buenos Aires allegedly did not have adequate results and that is why the place has not been staffed since the end of 2015. The Argentinian market should be served in the future from the office in São Paulo, Brazil, which resulted in a negative response of the specific Czech exporters focused on this country but also the Confederation of Industry or the Chamber of Commerce.²⁸

The drug issue and Latin America

The drug issue represents a fixed star in the relations of Latin America and developed countries because the states like Colombia, Peru or Bolivia are producers of cocaine, which goes to the rich countries. The director of the National Drug Headquarters of the Czech Republic, Jakub Frydrych, pointed out in April 2015 that the Czech Republic played an important role in smuggling cocaine and smugglers had their background here.²⁹ The head of the Customs Drug Unit of the General Directorate of Customs called the Czech Republic to be an intersection of paths for smuggling drugs.³⁰ Therefore, it is not surprising either that in 2015 there were several cases when Czech citizens were also involved in the drug trade.

In terms of the media the most fortunate case was the finding of more than 117 kilograms of cocaine in one store of the Lidl chain. It concerns historically the biggest finding of cocaine in the Czech Republic when the value of the drug in the market would reach several hundred million crowns.³¹ In August 2015, the Police in co-operation with Europol caught a group of eight Czechs, who participated in functioning of the international organization importing cocaine from Latin America to Europe.³²

Strategy for Latin America?

In the first half of 2015, the document *Strategy of Relations of the Czech Republic with Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean Region for the Years 2015–2018* was approved. It concerns a conceptual document, which was asked for in the long-term by many subjects ranging from state institutions via expert public up to the business sector.

This document tries to cover the region of Latin America with its specifics and to identify the specific main interests and priorities of the Czech Republic in the area. On the economic level, they include more robust economic co-operation, creation of investment opportunities and support of interest of Czech business subjects in the region.³³ On the political level, it concerns support of democracy, rule of the law and human rights, which should contribute to a stable environment in the states of Latin America.

The strategy also counts on active addressing of the issues of Latin America within the structures of the European Union. Cuba was specified as an example of such involvement directly in the strategy, with respect to which the Czech objectives have been increasingly achieved in co-operation with other states according to the text.³⁴

The document includes both the plan of the main activities towards the region and the objectives, which should be achieved in mutual relations. According to the set-up of the current system, there should be an annual check of the achievement of the tasks resulting from the strategy, and it will surely be interesting to watch if it is fulfilled. The strategy should be updated in regular annual intervals too.

CZECH FOREIGN POLICY TO LATIN AMERICA IN MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

In the Czech media, Latin America generally appears rather scarcely, which corresponds to its low importance from the perspective of foreign policy and remoteness. A clear exception from this general trend was the deepening crisis in Venezuela in 2015, which, on the contrary, was monitored by the Czech media fairly intensively across their whole spectrum. So much coverage was not provided to any Latin events for a long time. The depth of the crisis and especially some spectacular steps of the Venezuelan government headed by President Nicolás Maduro, such as nationalization of the chain of supermarkets due to the accumulation of supplies, could be understood as a cause of the interest.³⁵ Considerable attention was attracted by the Venezuelan Parliamentary elections in December 2015 because the opposition coalition of the Democratic Unity Roundtable (MUD) won and it could concern the first step to ending more than fifteen years of the Chavistic rule over the country.³⁶ The second topic enjoying greater attention was the development of the peace talks between the government and FARC in Colombia. During 2015, they did not manage to achieve an agreement and considerable number of media covered the reasons that hindered the termination of the conflict lasting for decades.³⁷

CONCLUSIONS

Latin America as a region does not represent a too politicized area within the Czech foreign policy. The political importance of the area for the Czech Republic is generally low, which is a long-term trend and it cannot be expected too much that this approach should change in the future. On the contrary, the issue of Cuba with probably the highest level of politicizing, the issue of human rights and civil society, went through certain de-politicizing depending on the attitudes of other European states promoting a more open dialogue with the island. Even in the case of the Czech Republic, warming up of relations was obvious in 2015, although it did not mean that human rights would totally recede into the background. Along with reduced politicizing, the polarization potential of the Cuban issue was also less apparent; in the past it was more obvious.

Nowadays the most dynamic item of mutual relations has been the economic cooperation, which forms *“the focal point of the concentrated efforts”*³⁸ according to the governmental strategy. Within the efforts for strengthening economic diplomacy, Latin America is one of the interesting regions, where there is absolutely a potential for increasing the market share, which is about 1% of all the exports. While for example for neighbouring Austria, Latin America accounts for nearly 5%.

The interest in Latin America from the side of the Czech business subjects has been increasing, which surprised even the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic according to the words of its representatives. As an example, the participation

of entrepreneurs in the Forum of the CR–Pacific Alliance can be mentioned. Economic relations could also be enhanced if the Czech firms would get to Latin America more directly. Nowadays it has often taken place through the system of reexports especially through the states of Western Europe, which understandably has an impact on margins of the Czech plants.

For the future form of mutual relations with the region, internal political development in the countries of Latin America seems to be of major importance. However, we were often persuaded in the past that it was hardly predictable and, furthermore, the area was rather heterogeneous in this respect. A proof is for example the current political-economic crisis in Brazil. Nowadays the states of the Pacific Alliance, which enjoy a higher economic growth and political stability, generally seem to be the countries with a bigger perspective for the development of the co-operation.

Endnotes

- ¹ In this place, the author would like to thank Ing. Zdeněk Kubánek from the Section of American States of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and Mgr. Matyáš Pelant from the Department of Americas of the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic for valuable consultations.
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- ³⁸ *Strategie vztahů České republiky se zeměmi Latinské Ameriky a Karibiku na léta 2015–2018*, p. 10.