
Chapter 5

The Federal Republic of Germany in the Czech Foreign Policy

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For a long period of time (since 2002), the Czech policy towards Germany has not been divided into as many areas as in 2015.¹ On the one hand, the trend of intense cooperation continued on all the levels of the state administration and in all political departments; it was particularly intense in the border regions. The initiation of the Czech and German strategic dialogue had a special meaning – it was a new and promising instrument of the intensification of the Czech and German cooperation. On the other hand, the so-called refugee crisis tested the Czech and German relations, mainly in the field of political debate, the atmosphere of the whole society and certain particular measures (especially the issues of the quotas for the redistribution of refugees within the EU). There was also a topic that both parties perceived so differently in some aspects that it revealed the less visible differences in some basic coordinates and cultures of the Czech and German societies and policies. The strengthening of the national accents and the cooling down of the relations of the Czech Republic towards the EU, Germany, the establishment and mainstream political groups, and media presented a challenge for the policy and media of both parties. In the context of Central Europe, the Government of Bohuslav Sobotka occupied a central position and thus confirmed its role as a pragmatic and cooperative partner of Germany.

THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Despite the high intensity of contacts and cooperation between the Czech Republic and Germany, the Czech party, with Prime Minister Sobotka at the highest level, came with the proposal to move the Czech and German relations to a higher level already in 2014. The Czech policy and diplomacy expressed their long-term interest in achieving such a level of political contacts with Germany that might be used by the so-called strategic partners – this means the introduction of the so-called governmental consultations (*Regierungskonsultationen*). Since the German policy has a number of strategic partners and governmental consultations (when almost the entire govern-

ments of both parties meet), the promotion to this level of the relations was not realistic. Therefore, the Czech diplomacy focused its effort on giving the relations a new political impulse to the creation of the so-called strategic dialogue. Its aim was to give the Czech and German relations a dimension that would be beyond the solution of the everyday practical agenda.

If the political agreement from 1992 became the document that created political and institutional conditions for the development of intense neighbourly relations, and the declaration from 1997 enabled to solve the political and legal issues from the past, then the strategic dialogue should give a long-term and future-oriented perspective to the mutual relations. It responds not only to the need for further cooperation but also to the need to face together the contemporary and future crises in Europe as well as in the world. It should give a strategic dimension to the existing cooperation; it should strengthen the political dimension of the Czech-German cooperation and anchor it in the society by linking it with the German countries and regions or representatives of the civil society. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared a conceptual material for the strategic anchoring of the Czech-German relation that included reports from all the departments on the achieved level of cooperation and the need for further development. The dialogue was prepared by a work team led by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Petr Drulák, on the Czech side (in close cooperation mainly with the manager of the Department of Central Europe, Tomáš Kafka) and the German ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in Prague, Arndt Freiherr Freytag von Loringhoven. After several rounds of negotiations, on 3. 7. 2015 in Berlin, the document The common statement to the strategic dialogue between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany as the new framework for the Czech-German relations (*Společné prohlášení ke strategickému dialogu mezi Ministerstvem zahraničních věcí ČR a Ministerstvem zahraničních věcí SRN jako novém rámci pro česko-německé vztahy*),² was signed. The dialogue was also ensured by two coordinators, on the German side by Ambassador von Loringhoven and on the Czech side by Minister Drulák.

The framework of the strategic dialogue is flexible and it offered all the departments to come with their plans that go beyond the framework of the already achieved cooperation. On the basis of the interests of the departments, particular work groups were created – “*Foreign and European policy*”, “*Culture, language, and the youth*”, “*Labour market and dual education*”, “*Science and research*”, “*Energy sector, climate, and environment protection*”, “*Transportation*”, “*Safety and health*”, “*Security and defence policy*”, and “*Agriculture*”.

The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both countries, Lubomír Zaorálek and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, perceived the start of the strategic dialogue as a new chapter in the relations between the Czech Republic and Germany.³ They emphasized that this is not a declarative, symbolic policy, but a specific project. Minister Steinmeier said: “*We do not want to sign documents that are only a piece of paper, but we want them to lead to real steps in the future cooperation.*”⁴ The strategic dialogue also has a greater ambition: both parties want to use it to create a model of bilateral cooperation that may be followed by other countries too. Minister Zaorálek said: “*By the strategic dialogue*

we create a model that is important throughout Europe. Today we have to face crises in the east, in the south, in Greece, the migration – it is not enough to meet only in Brussels, but it is important to meet separately, like in Berlin today, and to face these crises together.”⁵ In the dialogues of the diplomats and experts, it was clear that the new form has to convince others with its results. The first test of the dialogue was the refugee crisis where the two parties had a partially different attitude. The flexible form of the dialogue functioned very well in this context – at the end of the year a new work group was created for the issues of migration and integration, led by Chief Advisor of the Prime Minister, Vladimír Špidla, on the Czech side, and by State Minister for European Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Michael Roth, on the German side.

The relations with Germany were, as in the previous years, mainly depoliticized: even the great issues, such as the European Union or security, were not very interesting in the political field; in relation to the Federal Republic of Germany it was not very relevant or strong. The relation to the past was present in the political field only with limitations: the smaller the controversy it caused, the less it influenced the political discussion.

In fact, it was only the relation to Germany in the context of the migration crisis, but partially (and to some extent also as derived) also in the context of the crisis of the Ukrainian Eurozone, that was a significant politicized topic. But the Czech policy was divided mainly by the relation to the refugees from Islamic countries as such; the relation to Germany and its policy was only secondary. The critical view of the German policy related to that stage of its development when the collective (“solidary”) solution of the situation in the central part of Europe was required, when a large number of refugees arrived at the central part of Europe. The gesture of Chancellor Angela Merkel that opened the border for the Syrian refugees, concentrated in Hungary in August, was, in general, regarded as a mistake; the introduction of the automatic quotas for the redistribution of refugees that was, among others, required by Germany, was refused by all parliamentary parties, in fact. Moreover, the pressure of the Federal Republic of Germany for the approval of the quotas by majority voting (a legal, but still politically problematic approach) was perceived as unacceptable by a large part of the Czech policy and the public. After a long period of time, a part of the Czech policy and society saw Germany as a country that abused its power and imposed its view to the solution of the refugee crises on the others, including the Czech Republic – whether due to the misunderstanding of reality or because of its own strategic interests. The role of Germany and personally of Chancellor Merkel was questioned by a significant part of the society, and in some cases the dividing line went across the political parties. The framework of the perception of Germany and its policy was described by the statements of President Miloš Zeman: “*Nobody has invited you*”⁶, and “*this country is ours*”, and he called the movement of the refugees “*an organized invasion*”.⁷

Among the few politicians who supported Germany and personally the Chancellor was Minister for Human Rights and Equal Opportunities, Jiří Dienstbier, who warned the politicians from the main and usually moderate parties against the abuse of the fear of the citizens. A good example for him was “*the bravery of Chancellor [Angela] Merkel*” that, in his opinion, reacted “*consistently and respecting the hu-*

man aspect. [...] She said it was a huge test, a huge burden, but we have to cope with it. [...] She spoke on behalf of the Germans, and I would extend it: on behalf of us, all of us in Europe."⁸

On the contrary, the Deputy Jaroslav Foldyna, in the discussion about the immigration crisis in the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, said: *"Thank God that Merkel does not answer the phone because soon there will be nobody to answer the phone because the way of the German policy in the European Union [...] is awful. It is awful. She shows us something that had not been the reason why we joined the European Union. None of us."*⁹

Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies, the Deputy for ČSSD, Jan Hamáček, avoided the criticism of the German policy, and in the commentary to the outvote of the Czech Republic in the Council of the EU in Berlin he emphasized that *"we are ready to act in accordance with the conclusions of this Council, of course, provided that all the actors fulfil their commitments. This means, including the fact that the so-called hot spots will be established, that the refugees will be registered and that all these things will work."*¹⁰

Minister of the Interior, Milan Chovanec, quite severely criticized the German party when he said that the inconsistent policy of Germany was the greatest problem of the migration crisis.¹¹ He accepted the national accent of the discussion when he said: *"I am a part of the Czech nation and I am proud of it. [...] It was an honour for me to be outvoted in the discussion of the European representatives. [...] We are not against providing help to the Federal Republic of Germany [...] if they want to invite the migrants to their territory."*¹²

Prime Minister Sobotka criticized the German policy only indirectly when he emphasized that *"the national measures that are not coordinated will lead only to the decomposition of the common migration policy, to the limitation of free movement of persons and the Schengen cooperation, and finally also to the disintegration of the whole Schengen system"*, and he called for the European solution.¹³

On the contrary, Minister of Finance and Chairman of the movement ANO, Andrej Babiš, criticized the EU as a bureaucratic body. *"It is unacceptable that somebody in Brussels decides about the migration and about us,"* he told the server Politico; if *"Mom [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel invited these people, she should take them"*.¹⁴

Pavel Bělobrádek, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of KDU-ČSL, said that Angela Merkel, by her gesture and takeover of the refugees, rescued the Balkans, but at the same time he spoke out against the welcoming of the refugees and for the assistance mainly directly in the places of conflicts.¹⁵

The opposition defined itself differently: Petr Fiala, Chairman of ODS, said that: *"We hear threats, political blackmail from Germany if we do not do what Germany wants so our donations [...] will be limited [...]. Germany, on the one hand, had invited all refugees from Syria to its territory, which stimulated the migration wave, and then it cannot cope with it and tries to solve it by forcing other countries to adopt the mandatory quotas."*¹⁶ In contrast, Chairman of TOP 09, Karel Schwarzenberg, said about the gesture of Angela Merkel that there was no alternative to them: *"In fact, she*

*could only accept them [the Syrian refugees – note of VH]. But she tried to show it as a virtue of necessity.*¹⁷ Because the topic of the refugee crisis is discussed not only in the relation with Germany but mainly with the domestic policy, the representatives of another opposition party, KSCM, refuse the German policy as well as the approach of TOP 09; see for example the statement: *“It is a really crazy construction. Angela Merkel invited them. Now they have a problem but, according to TOP 09, it would be smaller, if we took over part of it.”*¹⁸ The Chairman of the party saw Chancellor Merkel as a confused person and he rejected the pressure on the acceptance of the quotas.¹⁹

The distrust in policy was a serious problem in the attitudes of the public. The negative impact was visible in the relation to Germany and the EU. The long-term ignorance of the fact what the EU really means was changing into the rejection of the EU in the Czech Republic, under the influence of the chains of crises and in the situation without political leadership. The affinity to all the EU countries that opened to the refugees and that enforced their redistribution on the basis of quotas, decreased (to Germany from 63% to 50%); on the contrary, the support of the opponents of this procedure increased, especially of Hungary but also of Russia.²⁰ The different opinion was confirmed by the survey in seven selected EU countries.²¹ It showed that the European solution of the acceptance and distribution of the refugees was mostly preferred by the Italians (75%) and by the Germans (68%) that had already accepted masses of refugees; the greatest scepticism was expressed by the Czechs (only 22% supported the European solution), for whom the refugee crisis was only a virtual problem.

There was a great difference in the relation to the Eurosceptic parties: for 7% of the Czechs the vote for the Eurosceptic party was the first, for 15% of them it was the second choice, and the other 17% could virtually imagine they could vote for some Eurosceptic party (a total of 39%). In Germany, 5%, 3% and 7%, a total of only 15% expressed a positive opinion of Eurosceptic parties. In contrast, the fact that Germany was highly trusted – even in the sceptic Czech Republic, where 60% of the enquired people expressed this opinion (20% had very high trust in Germany and 40% of them had high trust), was good for the EU as well as the Czech-German relations.

THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: EVENTS AND AGENDA

The contact agenda

In the contact agenda, the role of the German institutional pluralism and the ability of the Czech Republic to effectively function on all levels of the German policy continued to grow: besides the relation between the Czech Republic and Germany on the federal level, the network of direct relations between the Czech Republic and the German countries also continued to strengthen. It is shown in the brief summary that is limited to the political level of the relations. Unlike 2014, there were no mutual visits on the presidential level, Chancellor Merkel did not visit us (it was agreed for August 2016), but Prime Minister Sobotka went to a working visit to Berlin (4th May) and there he had a speech at the Humboldt University. He said, among other things, that

“the European integration is a happy story,” it is closely related to the development of Germany and it significantly contributed to the fact that *“we perceive Germany as a key partner”*. *Within the united Europe, the Czech-German cooperation is obvious and inevitable.*”²² Prime Minister Sobotka went also on a working visit to Saxony (12th–13th June) where he talked to Saxony Prime Minister, Stanislaw Tillich, as well as Prime Minister of Saxony-Anhalt, Reiner Haseloff. On 4th November, he met Bavarian Prime Minister, Horst Seehofer, in Munich. Within the party line, B. Sobotka took part in the meeting of SPD on 10th–12th December (Berlin). Deputy Prime Minister for Science, Research and Innovations, P. Bělobrádek, talked about the governmental strategies in research, development, and innovations (1st July).

The working visits to Germany on the federal level were made by Minister of Transportation, Dan Ťok (10th February), Minister of Justice, Robert Pelikán (2nd May), Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lubomír Zaorálek (3rd July), Minister of Culture, Daniel Hermann (24th–26th September), and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Michaela Marksová (1st March). On other occasions, the visits of Minister of Industry and Trade, Jan Mládek, Minister of Agriculture, Marian Jurečka, Minister of Transportation, D. Ťok, and Minister M. Marksová were made. Again in Berlin, State Secretary for the EU, Tomáš Prouza, and Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, later the political Secretary of the Cabinet of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, P. Drulák, had some discussions.

The Czech Republic was visited, within working visits, by the federal Minister of the Interior, Thomas de Maiziére (28th April), Minister of Transportation, Alexander Dobrindt (27th–28th August), and the federal Minister of Defence, Ursula von der Leyen (4th June). On 10th December in Prague, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, A. Babiš, met the federal Minister of Finance, Wolfgang Schäuble; Minister of Health Care, Stanislav Němeček, met the federal Minister of Health Care, Hermann Gröhe, in the same week.

There were even more contacts of the Czech Republic with the federal countries, logically mainly with the neighbouring Saxony and Bavaria. Besides the mentioned visits of Prime Minister Sobotka, the federal countries were visited also on different occasions by Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of KDU-ČSL, P. Bělobrádek, Minister of Culture, D. Hermann, Minister of Industry and Trade, J. Mládek, Minister of Transportation, D. Ťok, Minister of Justice, R. Pelikán, and Minister of the Interior, M. Chovanec. On the contrary, the Czech Republic was visited by Prime Minister of Saxony-Anhalt, R. Haseloff, (3rd March), then by Saxony Minister of Economy, Labour and Transportation, Martin Dulig, Bavarian state Minister of Education, Culture, Science and Arts, Ludwig Spaenle, (twice), Saxony Minister of Justice, Sebastian Gemkow.

The contacts on the parliamentary level were very active: Chairman of the Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, Jan Hamáček visited Germany officially on 21st–22nd May and he made three other visits on thematic occasions. Chairman of the Senate, Milan Štěch, (together with former President Václav Klaus) represented the Czech Republic at the funeral of former German President, Richard

von Weizsäcker (11th February). The Bundestag in Berlin was visited by three committees of the Chamber of Deputies – committees on security, health care, and the EU. Prague was then visited by the leader of the German-Czech parliamentary group in Bundestag, the deputy Petra Ernstberger, and the Committee for Federal and European Affairs of the Bavarian Landtag.

The Czech politicians maintained contacts also with their affiliated parties – at the meeting of the party panels in Germany which was visited by Prime Minister B. Sobotka and Minister M. Marksová (meeting of SPD, 10th–12th December), Deputy Prime Minister P. Bělobrádek (party event of CSU, 18th March), Minister of Culture D. Hermann (meeting of CSU, 21st November). Overall, the Czech politicians showed considerable activity, most often they had discussions with their German partners on a political level in Germany, and in the Czech Republic it was Minister of Transportation D. Ťok (nine times) and Minister of Labour and Social Affairs M. Marksová (eight times). The discussions of a working level were even more common; there were regular meetings of working groups and committees.

The European and security policy

In the issue of the stabilization of the Eurozone and the (dis)trust in the willingness of Greece to implement the reforms required by the countries of the Eurozone and ECB, the Czech Government (Prime Minister Sobotka, Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaorálek as well as Minister of Finance Babiš) was in positions visibly close to Germany. The closeness was not limited by the rejection of the active EFSM mechanism: Minister of Finance A. Babiš clearly stated that the problem of Greece is the problem of the Eurozone and should not be solved from the budget of the EU.²³ The Czech Republic thus remained in the position of V4, Great Britain, and other non-member countries of the Eurozone; the German position, unlike the one of the European Commissions, was also quite close to the attitude of the Czech Republic.²⁴

Similarly, the Government of the Czech Republic was close to the German diplomacy in its effort to avert Brexit and solve the Ukrainian crisis and the crisis in the Middle East. But the closeness of the attitudes was not sufficiently transformed into a common agenda – it is still true that the Czech Republic and Germany did not have any common bilateral projects; the Czech party felt an information deficit and had an interest in greater transparency in German policy.

President Zeman, as well as former President Klaus, had a different opinion on more issues; but the German policy learned, already during the presidency of V. Klaus, how to differentiate between the key competence of the Government and the opinions of the President.

So, the deviation of the Czech policy from the attitude of Germany in the case of the refugee crisis meant a larger change. The differences in the attitudes of the Czech and German societies were explained by Minister Zaorálek, among others, also by the period before the year 1989 when the Germans gained experience with living together with other ethnic groups and cultures, and he also used a demographic argument: “*Germany and the Czech Republic are a different story [...]. Germany is a huge*

country that needs 300 thousand immigrants to avoid demographic decline.”²⁵ The German party obviously expected a higher degree of solidarity with its policy (and less populism in the statements of some Czech representatives); the Czech party felt a lack of communication, transparency, and willingness to compromise in the attitude of Germany. The unifying framework was the search for “the European solution”, where both parties had very close positions in almost all questions – besides the question of the mandatory and automatic quotas for the redistribution of refugees that were or would be in the territory of the EU. The Czech Republic was in a completely different situation than Germany and did not have to, for example, establish controls at its borders with Austria like those that Germany had introduced in mid-September.²⁶

In Germany, the Czech Republic got into a bad light less than Hungary, in particular, but Prague was criticized in the German media: the German-wide newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* wrote for example about the detention of refugees behind a barbed-wire fence in the camp Bělá pod Bezdědem and saw the attitude of President Zeman as a populist one.²⁷ The German Minister of the Interior, T. de Maizière, suggested that the EU should limit the payments from the structural funds to those countries that reject the compromise in the distribution of the refugees in the “twenty-eight” – it means also in the Czech Republic.²⁸ The German media followed the polarization of the society: on the one hand the defensive to xenophobic rhetoric, on the other hand, the signature campaign of the Czech scientists against xenophobia supported by 10,000 people and the help of the Czech activists to the refugees in the Balkans. In the context of the EU summit on the redistribution of refugees in October, Chancellor Merkel clearly showed that she did not understand the negative attitude of some countries of Central and Eastern Europe because these countries were “sincere partners”. She called the refugee crisis as the common European challenge. “*I think we will need a lot of discussions so that everyone will understand,*” she added. Prime Minister Sobotka later expressed his conviction “*that the Czech-German relations are such robust and have been carefully built over the past 25 years that the refugee crisis cannot harm them*” but it is necessary “*to strengthen the communication with those countries that enforce this mechanism. This also applies to Germany.*”²⁹ The outvoting of part of the member countries of the EU, including the Czech Republic, in the issue of the redistribution of 120,000 asylum seekers causes “*certain trauma*”, on all sides. “*It did not contribute to the unification of the EU. This voting divided us more.*”³⁰ According to Sobotka, “*it cannot be negated, unfortunately*” that Berlin bears the blame for the high number of migrants coming to Europe: “*Germany has sent out a signal that was heard and seen in a significant part of the Middle East and North Africa. It stimulated illegal migration to Europe.*”³¹

The growing cooperation of the xenophobe groups throughout Europe meant a challenge for the Czech policy. The German Pegida positively adhered to the policy of President Zeman (and Putin); V. Klaus repeatedly supported the emerging populist force in German policy – the national and conservative AfD.

President Zeman, as well as ex-President Klaus, supported (but did not sign) the so-called European Manifest that was prepared by Petr Bystrouň, the Chairman of the Bavarian AfD.

Minister M. Chovanec acclaimed the proposal of France and Germany to significantly strengthen the competences and powers of the European agency Frontex, but the Czech Republic and other Central-European countries of the Visegrad Group had promoted similar steps for several months.³² The refugee crisis had a bilateral dimension also because the German police at the Czech-German border arrested 300 smugglers of people from January to October 2015.³³ In general, the German side acknowledged that the capture of migrants across the Czech-German border was minimal, allowing it to concentrate on the Bavarian-Austrian border. *“I thanked a lot that the Czech side strictly followed the European rules, both the Dublin Convention and the Schengen Code,”* said the Minister of the Interior and Transportation, Joachim Hermann.³⁴ The search for more intensive forms of cooperation in the defensive field continued further: in particular, the visit of the Federal Minister of Defence, U. von der Leyen (4th June) looked like this; the subject matter was still the cooperation within the framework Nation Concept of NATO, further convergence should be contributed by a strategic dialogue and its working group “Security and Defence Policy”. The armed forces cooperate in the field of education within many multinational military structures of NATO and the EU, in international missions and during training and in multinational staffs. The collaboration of the Czech and German soldiers functions within the Battle Groups of the EU, NATO Response Force or Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF).³⁵

Economic cooperation

In 2015, the Federal Republic of Germany was, by far, the most important economic partner of the Czech Republic. Its share in the total external trade of the Czech Republic was 29.5%. Conversely, the Czech Republic occupies the 11th place among the major trading partners of Germany – and is the 12th most important export destination. In the imports to Germany, the Czech Republic stepped out from the 11th place in 2014 to the eighth one, e.g. in front of Great Britain, Austria, Belgium, Russia, and Spain.³⁶ The largest share in the Czech exports to Germany was from Bavaria (29%); Baden-Württemberg (19%), North Rhine-Westphalia (14%), and Saxony (10%).³⁷ The dynamics of development showed the annual increases in the volume of trade: if the total bilateral trade rose by 7.9% (a record of 75.79 billion EUR), then the Czech exports to Germany increased by 7% and the imports by 9% (the positive balance was 2.83 billion, a decrease by 14%).³⁸ In the Czech Republic there were about 3,500–4,000 German companies and Germany had the largest share of foreign direct investment in the Czech Republic (22%, followed by the Netherlands with 17%).³⁹

Among the ten countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Czech Republic occupied the first place in terms of attractiveness for German companies; the German companies were not satisfied mainly with the level of corruption and crime, the level of transparency of public procurement, the tax system, the public administration and access to public/European funds.⁴⁰ Industry 4.0 was a strategic challenge and opportunity for the Czech economy; it is the so-called fourth industrial revolution, especially the introduction of digitization and the internet into the production processes, services, and business models. As stated by the Ambassador, Tomáš J. Podivínský, and the Commercial Counsellor of the Embassy, Tomas Ehler – due to the tight in-

terconnection of the Czech industry and scientific institutions with the German partners – Industry 4.0 gives a range of possibilities to the Czech companies for how to benefit from this process – “*in addition to the transfer of know-how, for example as the subcontractors of products and services or as providers of innovations and development*”; it is mainly about the machine industry, logistics, automotive, electrical and chemical industries, i.e. sectors which cover two-thirds of the Czech exports to Germany.⁴¹ Despite the often discussed need to increase the wages in the Czech Republic, the Czech Republic remained the country of Central Europe with the lowest wage: it amounted to 333 EUR, while in Germany it is 1,473 EUR.⁴²

Energy

The energy sector remained an example that both countries were able to work together and maintain intense relations, even in a situation where they were based on a very different conception of politics. The assumption was the further exchange of opinions and intense contacts, which was also strengthened by the newly launched strategic dialogue. Within it, the Climate and Energy Dialogue was held at the Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic in Prague on 20th October, with the topic “The road to the Energy Union and COP21: how it is seen by Berlin and Prague”. Besides being attended by the organizing ministry, it was also attended by the Ministry of Environment of the Czech Republic and the German institutional partners of both institutions.

The Czech policy could not feel to be forced to change their own energy mix, and stood on the positions that were close to the other V4 countries: Prime Minister Sobotka clearly declared: “*Our concern is that the Energy Union does not limit the possibilities for the energy mix in the Czech Republic and other countries of the Visegrad Four.*”⁴³ As with other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Czech policy was quite critical to the plans of the extension of the gas pipeline Nord Stream. Nord Stream is followed by the German gas pipeline Opal, which has been connected to the gas pipeline Gazela on the Czech border since 2013, which is primarily the link with the south-German transmission system MEGAL. The Czech Republic considered the joining to the letter of Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece addressed to the European Commission, which warned against the risk of the destabilization of Ukraine and the strengthening of the dependence on Russia. But in December the government decided not to sign the letter. The Minister Mládek said that “*the implementation of the project Nord Stream II [...] would have some positives for the Czech Republic. This could mean an increase in the current use of the domestic transmission system, the strengthening of the position of the Czech Republic between the important transit countries, and the minimization of the risk of transferring a large amount of the operating costs of the transmission system into the prices for transport for the domestic customers.*” He also stated that “*the minimum volume of gas transited through Ukraine should be guaranteed in the long term so as to maintain the functionality of this route.*”⁴⁴ The Czech policy, de facto, joined the position of Germany which sees Nord Stream II primarily as an economic project of private companies and, at the same time, it insists on the maintaining of the transit through Ukraine.⁴⁵

Another topic that the Czech policy discussed was the impact of the differences in the energy policy of both countries. Minister of Industry and Trade, Mládek, called on Germany to do more with the impact of the transformation of its energy to the neighbouring countries and to ensure sufficient construction of its own energy networks. But he also stated that, in addition to the problems in the areas of electricity, the neighbourhood with Germany brings also some benefits: the pipeline from Ingolstadt and the pipeline Gazelle provide the Czech Republic with the alternative supply of oil and gas, and technologies and investments also come to the Czech Republic from Germany.⁴⁶

The threat of the critical overload of the Czech transmission system should be technically solved by transformers with a controlled phase shift, the construction of which was begun by the company ČEPS on 2nd June in the power station Hradec u Kadaně. The operation will be launched at the end of the year 2016 and will be coordinated with the transformers on the German side where the company Hertz50 will serve as the operator. The building thus *“represents a significant event in the context of Czech-German relations, respectively in the cooperation in the field of energy and integration with the electricity markets”*.⁴⁷

The interest of the experts and political groups was provoked by the forthcoming sale of lignite mines and the power plant Vattenfall, and the Czech ČEZ and the companies EPH and PPH were interested in it. More generally, it showed that ČEZ renewed its interest in the German market – after the failures in Albania and Bulgaria.

Transportation

The above-mentioned intensity of contacts of the Minister of Transportation, D. Ťok, and the German partners on the federal and state levels, as well as the creation of a working group “Transportation” within the strategic dialogue demonstrated the importance of the long-term oriented development of transportation and connection of the Czech Republic to the EU transport infrastructure. The key interest of the Czech Republic, the construction of a high-speed railway from Berlin through Dresden to Prague, was the subject of the negotiations on the German side, but its support assumed that the federal plan of the prepared infrastructure is adequately modified.⁴⁸ In the first draft of the plan at the end of the year, this railway was not mentioned, which would mean for the Czech Republic a cut-off from the network of high-speed European tracks. The Czech side tried to increase the priority of the corridor Dresden–Prague and of the corridor Munich–Furth i. W.–Domažlice–Prague in the German plan of transport routes into the category “urgent needs” in order to have the construction guaranteed in the foreseeable future.

The Czech side continued in the preparation of the construction of a weir at Děčín; it wanted to contribute to the maintaining of the navigability of the River Elbe throughout the year and thus enable the access of the Czech Republic to the North Sea. The Saxony government respected the decision of the Czech Republic and guaranteed the navigability of the River Elbe on their side.⁴⁹ The Czech and also German environmental organizations continued in the protests against the construction; they consider it to be harmful to the environment and to be uneconomical; only the preparation of the construction has already cost 800 million CZK.

Also, the improvement of the transport links with Germany with the reintroduction of a direct airline between Brno and Munich is significant (15th November).

Social affairs, health, education, culture

The above-mentioned overview of the discussions of the Government officials on the highest political level shows the significant activity of the Czech policy in the implementation of practical relation agenda; the launched strategic dialogue included all the relevant fields in its working groups. However, in 2015, practical issues prevailed; both parties managed the coordination without any major problems.

An example of this was the introduction of the minimum wage in the amount of 8.50 EUR for the work in the territory of Germany. The measure had an impact on many Czech companies, but at the beginning of the year, it was negotiated that it temporarily would not affect the truck drivers who only transit through Germany.⁵⁰ The topic was one of the items on the agenda of Minister Marksová with her counter partner on the federal level – Andrea Nahles (19th March). In other issues, the Czech Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs came to “*the solution of the situation where the German minimum wage excludes transportation services,*” said the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs, Michaela Marksová.⁵¹

In the field of culture, the active exchange continued, the traditional big events were organized, and there was a growing number of small initiatives and exchanges. The Czech Centre in Berlin focused primarily on the presentation of young arts – a category that was in permanent interest in Berlin. It promoted the study of the Czech studies at German universities, it was the second time when young translators were awarded and “The Czech-German Cultural Spring 2017” was prepared. Then the Czech Centre successfully presented mainly Czech documentary films with social themes, focusing on human rights. Throughout the year, various events were held to mark the anniversary of the partnership between Prague and Berlin. There was a series of successful exhibitions such as the Hanover Sprengel Museum and its exhibition one of the most significant photographers of Czech documentary film-making, Viktor Kolář.

The institutionalization of cooperation was strengthened too – on 4th May, during the working visit of the Bavarian state Minister of Education, Culture, Science and Arts, L. Spaenle, the Memorandum of Understanding was signed, which aims to strengthen the cultural exchanges and cooperation and to preserve the cultural heritage of the region.⁵²

Environment

Among the areas where the Czech Republic developed active cooperation in the long term, was again the protection of the environment. During the fourteenth meeting of the Czech-German Commission for the Environment in Berlin (5th November), a working group was established to protect the climate, which will operate under the strategic dialogue (the first meeting then took place in February 2016 in Prague). Its task will mainly be to assist in the financing of the fight against climate change. In addition to the above-mentioned Climate and Energy Dialogue, a series of joint events

was held where there were direct and measurable cross-border effects for the environment in the territory of Germany (e.g. the reduction of air pollution and water pollution in border regions), the German party continued in financing the Czech-German pilot projects of the German Investment Programme for the Environment. Both parties knew how to respond to acute problems, using the institutional mechanisms – see for example the extraordinary session of the Working Group for Air Protection to the odour episodes (3rd June); the regular session was held on 26th and 27th October. The cooperation on the level of the Czech Republic–Bavaria/Saxony was, due to the common border, traditionally more intense than the cooperation on the level of the Czech Republic–Germany.

The internal affairs

The police of both countries still better cooperated in combating cross-border and organized crime. During the year, both parties strengthened the institutional and normative side of cooperation: mainly the signing of new agreements on police cooperation and on the amendment of the Agreement between the Czech Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany on the amendments to the European Convention on Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters (28th April, Prague) contributed to it; in it the Ministers of the Interior of both countries, M. Chovanec and T. de Maizière, opened the possibilities for even closer cooperation, particularly in the border regions, where the police of one country may chase the criminals also in the border zone in the territory of the neighbouring country. The agreement follows the Joint Declaration of Intended Cooperation in the field of public order and security between the Ministry of the Interior and the Saxony state Ministry of the Interior, which was signed in 2014. Half a year later (16th October, in Nuremberg), the Minister Chovanec signed a similar Joint Declaration on Cooperation with the Bavarian Minister of the Interior and Transportation, Hermann. The Czech police was involved, among other things, in the international action against the so-called carousel frauds, which evaded the VAT.⁵³ The amount of methamphetamine, which goes from the Czech Republic to Bavaria and Saxony, slightly decreased as well as property crime decreased a bit in the Bavarian border regions; both countries committed themselves to work together to unify the legislation of the EU in the sale of drugs, which should lead to the prevention of the free sale of drugs which contain pseudoephedrine.⁵⁴

The past

The most important institution that promotes the social and cultural convergence of citizens of both countries was still the Czech-German Future Fund. During the meeting of Prime Minister Sobotka with Chancellor Merkel on 4th May, both parties expressed their mutual interest in the further operation of the Fund. The theme of the Future Fund was the motto “The border connects”. The Fund has supported 610 projects with the amount of 25 million CZK and 1.66 million EUR. Due to the significant differences in the attitudes of both countries to the refugee crisis and the growing xenophobic tendencies, the theme of the year 2016 was “The active citizenship face to face of the challenges of the 21st century”.⁵⁵

A specific opportunity for the new views on the common history was the 600th anniversary of the burning of Jan Hus in Konstanz, during which the town declared its support for him; commemorative events were held with the participation of the representatives of the partner town of Tábor.⁵⁶ The message of Jan Hus was the topic of the annual conference of the Czech-German Discussion Forum, which was held in Konstanz from 23rd to 25th October. The German television channel Arte broadcast a two-part Czech television film about Jan Hus that was seen by over half a million viewers and which was positively reviewed.⁵⁷

During the 66th Sudeten-German Congress in Augsburg, there was no note on the so-called Beneš Decrees. The Congress was not attended by any member of the Czech Government, but the Deputy Prime Minister, P. Bělobrádek, greeted the countrymen through a pre-recorded greeting.⁵⁸ Bavarian Prime Minister, H. Seehoffer, the patron of the Sudete Germans, repeated the viewpoint that *“the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans was and remains a crime against humanity, a huge injustice.”* In his opinion, the Czechs and Germans are on the path to reconciliation and this process cannot be reversed.⁵⁹ Thus he responded to the Declaration of Reconciliation and a Common Future of Brno signed on 19th May, which condemns both the war and the post-war “death march” of the Germans in Brno and offers a gesture of reconciliation.⁶⁰ Overall, the year 2015 confirmed the assessment given by the ambassador T. Podivínský: *“The theme of the past does not play the important role it played a decade ago,”* and both parties tend to focus on the future.⁶¹ The fact that the Sudeten German Association omitted from its statutes the demand to return to their former homeland and the return or compensation of property that had been taken from the Sudeten Germans by the Czechoslovak State in the years 1945–1947 in accordance with the Beneš decrees, has a significant meaning. The amendment to the statutes caused resistance in part of the Association that had to be dealt with the administrative court. The amendment to the statutes was acclaimed by the Government (Minister Zaořálek): *“It may be related to the fact that we had demonstrated many times that this article was a barrier in communication based on greater trust. It is a confirmation that we do not have to be afraid of the future,”* as well as by the opposition (Chairman of ODS, Petr Fiala): *“It is definitely a step in the right direction, it should be positively acclaimed.”*⁶²

The relation was influenced by the fact that the German expellees showed big sympathy with the refugees and actively helped them.

The sub-national level

An important manifestation of the active Czech policy towards the German countries was the initiative of Prime Minister Sobotka to include the two neighbouring countries – Saxony and Bavaria into the strategic dialogue. This initiative of the Czech Republic found a very positive response in both countries and was perceived as the manifestation of a new quality of the Czech policy. The Czech Republic itself moved the relations with these countries to the strategic level. The fact that both Saxony and especially Bavaria segregate themselves in some issues of German policy (recently it was mainly the approach to the refugee crisis and relations with Russia) means that the Czech policy must choose a cautious approach not to “take side with” the inhab-

itants of Dresden and Munich in their relations with Berlin and thus not to endanger its cooperation with the key partner: the federal policy.

The highlight of the activities on the level of relations of the Czech Republic with the federal countries were the working visits of Prime Minister of Saxony-Anhalt, R. Haseloff, in the Czech Republic (3rd March) and of Prime Minister Sobotka in Saxony (12th and 13th June) where he held talks with Prime Minister Tillich and again with Prime Minister Haseloff. Especially Saxony profiles itself as a close partner of the Czech Republic (10% of the Czech exports to Germany goes there). The long common border, the historical closeness, the development of the transportation infrastructure, and the related economic objectives (“the catch-up” of the advanced economies in the field of high technology) defined the agenda of the active cooperation and sharing. Therefore, the parliamentary dimension of the cooperation was being developed, when the Parliamentary Forum for Central and Eastern Europe, the coalition of about one-third of the Saxon Landtag deputies (the representatives of the forum visited Prague in December) showed great initiative. The Saxony Assembly was visited by the members of the Committee for Security of the Chamber of Deputies on 26th March, among others, they were discussing the refugee crisis.

Also, the direct forms of cooperation in the border regions were actively being developed. An example is a progress in the field of health care: on 25th November in Karlovy Vary, the Governors of the Regions of Karlovy Vary, Liberec, and Ústí, Martin Havel, Martin Půta, and Oldřich Bubeníček, together with the Saxony Minister of the Interior, Markus Ulbig signed the agreement on cross-border cooperation of emergency medical services (*Smlouva o přeshraniční spolupráci zdravotnických záchranných služeb*). So, the first implementation document to the framework agreement between the Czech Republic and Germany on cross-border cooperation of emergency medical services from 2013 (*Rámcová smlouva mezi Českou republikou a Spolkovou republikou Německo o přeshraniční spolupráci v oblasti zdravotnické záchranné služby*) was created. The cooperation will require the highest level of communication control centres, driving groups of specific rescuers. The Governor Bubeníček said: “*The agreement follows up the joint cooperation of other elements of the integrated rescue system, police, and fire fighters. [...] If the agreement helps to rescue the health of life of at least one person per year, this agreement has indisputable significance.*”⁶³ A draft of a similar document between the South Bohemian, Plzeň, and Karlovy Vary Regions and Bavaria was expected.

THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: IDENTIFYING AND CHARACTERIZING THE MAIN ACTORS

The preparation of the strategic dialogue really significantly mobilized the conceptual thinking in the relation towards Germany in all governmental institutions. Although the strategic dialogue constitutes only an offer for the departments and there is scepticism too, finally the need “to be there” prevailed and the Czech policy experienced a period of considerable activation of this key session. In the division of responsibili-

ties and roles, regarding the Czech policy towards Germany, no fundamental changes occurred in 2015. But the coordinating role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was strengthened, which resulted in the preparation and subsequent coordination of the Czech-German strategic dialogue (the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, later the Director of the Political Cabinet, P. Drulák). The readability of the Czech policy is complicated by the fact that there were different voices and attitudes in the high-level policy concerning the refugee crisis, its origin, and its relation to Islam. It is questionable whether the different actors did not exceed their competencies with these voices and whether they did not interfere with the foreign-policy line of the state that is given by the Government, in accordance with the Constitution.

The Parliament of the Czech Republic paid greater attention to Germany and the Czech-German relations. All parliamentary debates and meetings of the parliamentary committees concerning the refugee crisis also dealt with Germany and the relation with it (e.g. the 31st meeting of the Chamber of Deputies on 15th September, the 38th meeting of the Committee for European Affairs on 14th October, the meeting of the Senate about the migration policy on 11th November). The crisis polarized the debate similarly to the historical topics before it. The parliamentary diplomacy was mobilized, the three committees of the Chamber of Deputies visited the Bundestag, and there were visits on the level of land assemblies.

The Czech Embassy in Berlin (Ambassador Tomáš J. Podivínský, Deputy Eva Dvořáková, manager of the commercial department Tomáš Ehler), the General Consulates in Dresden and Munich and the Consulate in Düsseldorf played an important role. The strengthening of the economic department was planned in the form of one more employee.

THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: THE PUBLIC AND MEDIA SPACE

The German topic resonated significantly more in the Czech media than in the previous years. It appeared in many traditional contexts, such as the economic issues (the energy policy, the scandal of the Volkswagen Group), the Ukrainian crisis and the efforts of its solution, and the stabilization of the Eurozone and of Greece. In this context, the analytical tone prevailed. The launch of the strategic dialogue drew the attention, which was linked with the expectation of the intensification of relations.⁶⁴ The liberal analysts perceived Germany and its role in solving the conflict in Ukraine as a model for the Czech policy.⁶⁵ The issue of the German exit from nuclear energy was discussed too.⁶⁶

These themes had very different responses, and in particular, the relation to Ukraine and Russia relatively strongly polarized the society. A real change of the view on Germany appeared with the refugee crisis and its concurrence with the growing distrust in the political establishment and the mainstream media – a sort of “trumpization” of the society – which was significant mainly in the tabloid media, some “alternative” Internet platforms such as *Parlamentní listy* and in a part of the social media. Besides

the regular news reporting inputs⁶⁷, the view that Germany with its policy at least strengthened all the European crises (if not caused) was significantly established; the pro-Russian web outputs indirectly, or also openly, were trying to removal of Chancellor Merkel.⁶⁸ There was also a discussion on whether the Czech-German relations were in crisis or not – the discussion was influenced by an anonymous voice from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.⁶⁹ The objective analytical articles about the theme were mainly published in *Respekt* (e.g. the author Thomas Lindner), *Česká pozice* (the author Susan Lizcová), on TV (ČT24), in radio (Český rozhlas – Plus).

CONCLUSION

The topic of the refugee crisis characterizes well the attained level of the Czech-German relations: their depoliticization contributed to the significant development of the dynamic practical, pragmatic cooperation. This is documented by numerous examples in the areas where, on the practical level, the Czech Government implemented, like in 2014, a *proactive and, at the same time, cooperating policy* – which meant that there were no conceptual differences in the approach to certain substantive issues (the energy mix, the minimum wage). The Government of B. Sobotka tried to create a common policy with Germany in a wider European context. But this approach did not automatically ensure the political closeness and cooperation in long-term strategic projects. This has a deeper reason: the Czech policy (in particular the political parties and senior officials) manages but does not politically lead the country and the society; it does not generate long-term programme visions, for which it would be able to gain domestic and international support and legitimacy. In the relations with Germany, this deficit should have been compensated by the strategic dialogue that produces, on the level of individual departments, a form of a platform between the state apparatus and the policy for the intensive and systematic exchange of views, both on strategic issues in the particular areas and on the solution of common problems (see e.g. the working group on internal security, the working group on energy or the additionally formed working group on the issues of migration). The idea of the strategic dialogue is certainly one of the major successes of the Czech diplomacy; the dialogue presented a significant potential in 2015, whose fulfilment will be, due to the overloading of the German political agenda, mainly dependent on the Czech Republic. The creation of the dialogue itself and the inclusion of both neighbouring German countries best demonstrated the effort of the Czech Government to form a common policy in the areas of close interests.

But the refugee crisis showed that there are substantial differences between the two countries in relation to cultural and ethnic otherness, to the state sovereignty and to the international or supranational integration. The Czech policy failed completely, especially in how the theme had been grasped in the Czech political space and as it had been abandoned to the populists. Neither the centrist, pro-European politicians such as Prime Minister Sobotka and Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaorálek, were able to provide clear guidance to the Czech society; other officials even took over the populist

rhetoric and thus indirectly legitimized the xenophobic and anti-European attitudes. The international trust in European solidarity of the Czech Republic was considerably betrayed. The Czech Republic participated in the active resistance to the common policy and procedure of Germany (the issue of quotas), then compensated it with the effort *to participate actively in the European policy* in other areas of the solution of the refugee crisis (protection of the external borders of the EU, the maintenance of the Schengen, assistance offered to the refugees directly in the conflict zones etc.).

A special phenomenon of Czech politics was the support given to the German nationalist groups from the Czech Republic. It shows the rejection of the historical experiences of Europe and the Czech policy itself: the German nationalism always led to a super-power policy and sooner or later was directed against the neighbours, including the Czechs. The serious problem of the Czech policy, also in the relation to Germany, has been the shallow historical memory of the society, the misunderstanding of the importance of an open society and open Europe, and the underestimation of nationalistic tendencies at home and abroad.

The fact that 60% of the Czechs have high or very high trust in Germany suggests that, despite striking differences in opinions, the current situation may not lead to a substantial burden in relations: trust and multilateral cooperation constitute a social capital that still allows coping with the existing opinion as well as political gap. The strategic dialogue and its social dimension should develop the issue of trust and understanding.

Endnotes

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