

---

## Chapter 6

# The Visegrad Cooperation, Poland, Slovakia, and Austria in the Czech Foreign Policy

*Michal Kořan*

### THE VISEGRAD COOPERATION, POLAND, SLOVAKIA, AND AUSTRIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The analysis for the year 2014 stated that Central Europe acquired a position in the Czech political debate in 2014 that it had not had at least since the 1990s. The year 2015 moved this maximum position a bit higher, but the reasons for this prominence are definitely not encouraging. In 2015, the Czech Central European policy was mainly affected by the increasing political crisis in Central Europe and in Europe in general, by the international political development, by the lingering domestic political debate about the “Czech” Central Europe, and, last but not least, in terms of the execution of power, also by the Czech Republic’s preparation and take-over of the presidency in the Visegrad Group in July 2015. The Czech Republic took over the presidency of the Visegrad Group from Slovakia, perhaps in the most turbulent conditions of the entire history of the region, at least since its joining the EU, but probably since the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The first half of 2015 was still in the spirit of the awe at the aggressive Russian behaviour towards Ukraine and also in the spirit of the continuing uncertainty about the future of Greece and the Eurozone. But at the turn of spring and summer, the European politics – both the Union and national politics – were dramatically hit by the increasing arrival of war refugees and immigrants from the Middle East and Africa. The surprising Russian involvement in the Syrian war and the terrible terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 added fuel to the fire of the increasing mistrust, and the feeling of danger and chaos in the European Union.<sup>1</sup> For reasons still not entirely clear, this chaos and general distrust in policy were most significantly reflected in the political activities in Central Europe. The increasing dissatisfaction with governmental political elites across Europe deepens the attraction of political movements that are populist and extremist.

Exactly in the V4 countries, these streams came directly to the executive branch or very close to it. This can clearly be said about Hungary, but the populist instincts are strongly evident in Slovakia too (especially in connection with the upcoming parliamentary elections in the spring of 2016) and in Poland where, after the presidential and governmental exchanges in autumn of 2015, some anti-union and anti-German accents appeared. The Czech Republic, of course, is not without strong tendencies towards populism and strong political polarization; the coalition government, however, generally defended itself against these temptations, with only a few exceptions.

This internationally-political, European, regional, and internally-political context brought unprecedented visibility for the Czech Central-European policy, even in comparison with 2014, which was also unique in this respect. The visibility and severity of the Central-European agenda were intensified by the ending debate on the “Czech” Central Europe, about which the last version of this publication had informed. The Central-European dilemmas of the year 2015 included, in fact, the existential questions of the Czech foreign policy. One of the main dilemmas was how to grasp the relation with Germany, which was approved by the Government as the concept of the Czech foreign policy (July 2015<sup>2</sup>), and regarded as a “*key partner*”, but was also one of the driving forces behind the migration wave distancing the Visegrad region from a large part of the EU, and especially Germany. The second dilemma that remained unsolved, was related to Poland: how to find the right attitude towards the northern neighbour that is identified as a strategic partner in the new concept, which can be, together with the Czech Republic, regarded as a critical axis of the Visegrad Group and which, after the change of the government in the fall of 2015, began to deviate visibly from the German concept of integration. The third dilemma was related to Hungary and Slovakia: both countries tended to a more nationalist and anti-union rhetoric as well as political attitudes. The Visegrad Group, in consequence of this movement, gradually got into the focus of the European media and politicians, but not in a positive sense. On the contrary, it became an increasingly frequent target of criticism. This criticism was often simplified. The foreign as well as the domestic critical reflections full of indignation, without first devoting more attention to V4, did not distinguish “Visegrad” as a regional group and the individual countries of V4. In any case, the Czech Republic found itself at the head of a group that associated countries alienating Germany (the declared key partner of the Czech diplomacy), an association, which attracted significant negative international attention, but which was also one of the main platforms for the creation of the Czech foreign policy. Over time, it became clear that the Czech Government saw those views of the public that would have liked to see the borders of the Czech Republic as an impervious wall against the refugee wave (but in fact against anything “foreign”), and its attitudes very much agreed with the rest of V4. But the dilemma of the perceived receding of Central Europe from “the West” remained there.

The polarization of the views of the Czech Central-European policy was evident already in 2014, but in this year, there was no politicization. But in 2015, we could witness increased polarization as well as politicization. In 2015, the general political cleavage in Europe deepened, which no longer followed the traditional left-right

spectrum, the society and policy began to be divided according to the line *open/pluralist* versus *closed/defensive* approach to the policy. Due to the above-described development in the region that reflected this division, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia became disproportionately a much more frequent topic of the parliamentary discussions and also of the interpolations. The parliamentary discussions also related to the defence issues of the region and the role of NATO, but almost for the first time since 2007, when we started to follow this dimension, the parliamentary discussions started to deal with the topic of Visegrad to a greater extent. This, of course, was also caused by the Czech Presidency in Visegrad because Prime Minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lubomir Zaorálek, expressed their opinion on this topic. But it turned out that the topic of Central Europe, which had been completely immune against the politicization for many years, almost overnight became a crisp and divisive political issue. As we will see in the next section, this polarization and increased interest were not reflected visibly in the real performance of policy and diplomacy in 2015. The Czech Central-European policy sought for a moderate to balancing policy.

## THE VISEGRAD GROUP IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY

The multiple crises hit Europe and the world already in 2014 when the Czech Republic started to prepare its presidency, and they further escalated in spring and summer of 2015, when Prague took over the presidency. The multiple geopolitical and societal pressures caused significant divergence in the attitudes of the individual V4 countries and in Europe in general. Thanks to the multi-annual preparation of communication and coordination mechanisms, in 2014 it was possible to maintain the political and working dialogues, even on the most sensitive matters, such as defence or Eastern policy. But it cannot be denied that the Visegrad Group got into an extreme “life” situation in 2014. The differences in national policies of individual states, standing face to face with one of the biggest crises (the geopolitical and union one) were so fundamental that they could prevent the future coordination and communication.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the main motto of the Czech Presidency of V4 became “trust”. The slogan “V4 Trust”<sup>4</sup> reflected, on the one hand, the efforts to weaken the centrifugal tendencies in the region and to strengthen trust among the partners (and perhaps also the trust in Visegrad); on the other hand, it reflected the changes in the political understanding of the nature of the Visegrad cooperation of the Czech diplomacy led by ČSSD. The Visegrad Group had to limit its great foreign-policy objectives, which had characterized it in the last few years, and it should focus more on internal cohesion. In the external policy, the confused and dynamic international development and the stagnant external policy of the European Union meant that the comprehensive and robust discussion about the traditional regional foreign-policy priorities (Eastern Europe and the Balkans) in V4 had not started and the Czech Republic had not even strived for it.

Due to the precipitous international development and the rather limited ambitions and expectations from the possibilities of V4, the Czech Presidency programme focused on several areas which had the potential to bring a particular and practical

impact (energy, energy infrastructure, defensive cooperation, and digital and social agenda). The program evidently shows that it had no ambitions to deal with the major European political issues – there could be two reasons: either the leadership of Czernin Palace that had not regarded V4 to be the right platform for such contemplations, which should take place rather in the relation of the Czech Republic – Germany, or it was expected that the split V4 would not have had much to say about the important European issues. Regardless of the declared aims of the presidency, the development in 2015 was completely outside the original assumptions of the creators of the programme, and the Czech Presidency had to react to this development.

The change of the course of the presidency was evident from the very beginning when, at the beginning of September, the Prime Ministers of V4 met in Prague to discuss the escalating problems of some EU countries with the unprecedented increase in the number of the asylum seekers from extra-European countries (mainly from the war-affected Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq or Eritrea). Like in 2014, when V4 had an extraordinary meeting to discuss the migration from Ukraine, the Group found itself mainly under the pressure of Hungary, which was most exposed to the refugee wave in the summer of 2015, and government of which made the issue of immigration the most important issue of the Hungarian policy. In principle, the Visegrad Group agreed upon a defensive position, namely that the solution to the refugee crisis, according to the V4 countries, could only be based on the existing European legislation. There were three messages hidden in this: firstly, the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad countries rejected the *ad hoc* initiative of German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, who, at the end of August, said that Germany would provide a refuge to all war refugees from Syria who were in need; secondly, in this way they clearly defined themselves against the mandatory quotas for the redistribution of refugees that should become part of the EU solution; thirdly, they literally emphasized the responsibility of border countries of the Schengen area for the protection of the external Schengen borders, and in this way they provided political legitimacy to the controversial actions of the Hungarian leadership on the Hungarian-Serbian border, made in order to protect their borders against the refugees.<sup>5</sup> This common statement of the Visegrad Prime Ministers pre-figured the position held by these countries for the rest of the year and for which they got increasing criticism from the so-called “old” Union countries. In the most visible area, the Visegrad Group was under the obvious dominance of the Hungarian Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who, with their very assertive and proactive way, contributed to the initial narrative about the “new Visegrad”, which freed itself from the adolescent dependence on the EU and adoration of everything that emerges from its womb. The new, adult Visegrad is confident, emancipated and, as such, has become a strong and independent actor, able to assert its priorities towards the European Union.

The Czech diplomacy, which most likely does not share this concept, in the course of the year or in the role of the presidency, failed to prevent a similar narrative to be strengthened and to become one of the main prisms, through which Visegrad had been seen by its international partners as well as the interested public within V4. The Visegrad Group and the partners further to the West became gradually lost in the spiral of

mutual blame and ostracism. Nevertheless, the Czech Presidency sought to strengthen or at least maintain the communication line with Germany, which, in Central Europe, became the synonym for the catharsis of problems with the increase of the migration pressure (which in fact affected only Hungary, not Slovakia, the Czech Republic or Poland). Prior to mid-September 2015, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of V4 and of Germany and Luxembourg (the country currently presiding the EU Council) met in Prague. The joint meeting probably did not bring near the opinions because the common statement had not been signed over by all the ministers, only by the ministers of V4.<sup>6</sup> It repeated again the rejection of the mandatory quotas as the principal instrument for the solution of the crisis, and, moreover, it included more topics that co-defined the attitude of the Visegrad Group for the following months. It was mainly about the focus on the so-called Balkan migration route that not only touched the closest Central European region, but it also posed a threat of a latent tension in the Balkans. Besides this, V4 emphasized the need to bring the solution of problems into the countries of origin as well as to transfer the responsibility to other multi-lateral forums (such as the UN or the African Union).

Therefore, we can say that, under the given circumstances, the Czech diplomacy was able to keep the Visegrad Group in a functional and cooperating state during the first half of its presidency (second half of the year 2015). Although it failed to imprint some new significant meaning to Visegrad, which had been one of the options due to the upcoming 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its establishment, but, using a prudent and very ambitious policy, the Czech diplomacy helped to overcome several months, which can be described as critical, without any exaggeration. The Visegrad Group continued in the standard coordination and communication before the European summits, as well as before the meetings of the Council on general issues or the Council for Foreign Affairs. For Czech foreign policy, it is an existential necessity to maintain open and, if possible, cooperative channels of communication with its immediate neighbours. It can also be difficult to identify the boundary beyond which the mutual political differences are so acute that they cannot be overcome without sacrificing some of its own principles. In 2015, Central Europe did not get to this boundary. Conversely, the observation from 2014 is still valid, namely that without the existence of Visegrad, as a softening and moderating platform, we could be witnessing how the national policy, as well as the rhetoric of the individual countries, radically escalated, even towards their regional partners, which did not happen at all. The ability to settle the regional national differences in a very volatile international environment was the key aspect of the Visegrad cooperation in 2015 as well.

The main goal of the presidency was to focus into the region, to enhance the intra-regional cohesion and ideally also the trust. It was not a new theme; in many previous programmes it had occurred in one form or another until the Czech Presidency in 2015–2016 made it a crucial political point. This fact can be appreciated since the regional cohesion in the past was always perceived as a technical or administrative matter, but if we want to achieve any progress, it is necessary to introduce it as a great political issue. One of the particular steps that should have strengthened the regional connection and cohesion was the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on

regional cooperation in the field of innovations and *start-ups* (October 2015). To really develop the potential, hidden behind the term “regional cohesion”, we have to go a long way, and only in retrospect will it be possible to judge whether the Czech Presidency managed to start it at least. According to the independent article,<sup>7</sup> which assessed the Czech Presidency in the middle of it, there are still many areas, which are beyond the financial and technical capabilities of the Visegrad countries, as well as beyond the greater political interest of their leaders. This is particularly true about the transport infrastructure and the highly unsatisfactory state of cross-border interconnection. In 2014, a high working group for transportation infrastructure was established. It is necessary to supplement this initiative by other similar ones and to monitor and evaluate their progress so as the interesting impulses did not get lost in the network of bureaucratic procedures and did not function only due to inertia. The same is true for the cooperation in urban planning, which has been discussed in the long term, but without any significant progress. Another area that the various forums often talk about, but without much impact, is the cooperation in research, development, and innovations, or the interconnection and promotion of small and medium-sized enterprises in the region. There was a shift in the area of parliamentary cooperation, which, during the Slovak Presidency had come to certain formalization, on the level of the Presidents of Parliaments.

Besides this, the cooperation of the particular departments within V4 continued and in some cases also developed. The agenda of the ministries responsible for economy, industry, and trade was very actively developing (in the Czech Republic it was the Ministry of Industry and Trade). Besides the already mentioned digital area, in which there was an unprecedented number of seminars and meetings as well as the support of beginning entrepreneurs (*start-ups*), it was also about the energy sector (see the chapter of Lukáš Tichý on energy in the external relations of the Czech Republic). Robust communication took place also in the portfolio of the departments dealing with regional development and culture. During the Czech Presidency, the departments of finances focused on the issue of tax evasion and tax frauds.

The Czech diplomacy, in its presidency programme, put the cooperation in defence and security in the first places, besides the cohesion. The years 2013 and 2014 had provided a robust political base for this area; the Czech Presidency intended to focus on particular changes.

The migration agenda affected also this form of cooperation; V4 offered assistance to Hungary and Slovenia in the protection of their external borders. In December, also the senior official of the department of defence had an extraordinary meeting about the migration issues (on the invitation and under the patronage of the Czech Minister Stropnický) and they offered assistance also to Macedonia on a provisional basis. The most important long-term issue was understandably the implementation of Visegrad Combat Grouping, whose readiness was planned for the first half of 2016 and which had been discussed at least since 2008. From 12<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> November 2015, the final international certification training events, called Common Challenge 2015, were held at the Polish military training centre Drawsko Pomorskie and at the Centre of Management for Ground Operations in Krakow, within the preparation for the combat group-

ing. Its goal was the final verification of the ability of the common unit in planning and conducting military operations under the command of the EU. *“The joint task force of the V4 countries will have more than 3,700 soldiers. Poland, as the leading country, allocates more than 1,800 soldiers, the Czech Republic 730, Hungary 640, and Slovakia more than 460 soldiers. Poland will provide the major part of combat manoeuvring forces. The Czech Republic is ready to allocate a medical and logistics module, Hungary the engineer units and the civilian-military cooperation unit and Slovakia the protection unit against weapons of mass destruction.”*<sup>8</sup>

There is a question in what form and whether we will manage to keep the common capacities which were difficult to prepare for many years, even after a six-month combat readiness of the grouping. While it is clear that the combat grouping will not be left together in its emergency form, the possibility of maintaining the various national groups as part of modular forces for the EU or even NATO in the case of emergencies has been discussed. But the specific proposal was not specified by the end of 2015. In any case, the Ministers of Defence agreed that in the second half of 2019, V4 should provide its combat grouping again. Other areas of cooperation included the plans to strengthen the aviation cross-border cooperation, the provisions of the Central European Aviation Training Centre, to strengthen the role of the multinational forces North-East in Szczecin, and to create the Visegrad Military Educational Platform (VIGMILEP). Likewise, V4 wanted to actively act in the implementation of the conclusions of the European Council concerning SZBP.

In the last-year analysis, it was found that the year 2014 was the culmination of the multi-annual process of gradual, slow, and often painful process of convergence in the area of defence. It was also estimated that the next years will show whether the plans, which got to a very detailed and practical level, will be implemented in some form or not. In this regard, the year 2015 did not give much hope. With the exception of the implementation of the Visegrad Combat Grouping, there was very little real progress. For example, the ambitions of the parties of joint acquisitions remained unfulfilled from one hundred percent. There are more reasons for this stagnation. Except of the fact that any progress in the field of defence cooperation is traditionally necessary to be evaluated with the patience of the movement of a glacier, it is still true that the completely different perceptions of threat by the individual Visegrad countries also contributes to a different approach to the strengthening of the defence capabilities, and that also limits their own cooperation. And we have to take into account also the unpredictable international security environment, which seems rather be strengthening the nationalization, not the internationalization of the defence, and, last but not least, the fact that Poland, as a major partner and even the driving force of the defence cooperation, basically during the entire year 2015, was living over the presidential and then the parliamentary elections and after that the fundamental changes in all departments, including the Ministry of Defence.

But for the region, it is crucial that the defence remains one of the pillars of cooperation, and this is for two reasons. One of them is the practical necessity of sharing capabilities and experience and improving the interoperability of military forces of the individual countries. The other reason is that the defence cooperation is one of the

most important tools for building the mutual trust. It is highly recommended to start the rigorous evaluation of progress in all areas, which were drawn in 2013 and 2014 by the political leadership. An important test of the political level of defence cooperation will be the consensus or, conversely, the lack of it in the future of NATO. Poland was preparing for the NATO summit in July 2016 in Warsaw and had shown extreme mobilization efforts to make the Central and Eastern European regions active (i.e. the eastern wing of NATO). The Czech Republic carefully showed that it did not necessarily feel like part of this grouping (one of the similar signals was the absence of President Miloš Zeman at the presidential meeting of this informal group in Bucharest in the autumn of 2015).<sup>9</sup> In the past, V4 was the closest format where the positions, before the NATO summits, were coordinated – this was surely true for the negotiations on the new strategic framework for NATO or for the NATO summit in Chicago in 2012. Before the summit in Wales in 2014, V4 had not been coordinated actively and the summit in Warsaw was discussed not in the Visegrad but in a broader regional format. But the Prime Ministers of V4 committed themselves that in spring 2016 they would issue a political declaration which would be targeted at the common position before the Visegrad summit in Warsaw. But it seems that the Polish ambitions in the field of defence cooperation are that not only the Visegrad countries but the countries from the wider region can gradually become closer partners, the countries framed by the Baltic and Black, or even the Adriatic Sea.

If the eastern dimension has been a more prominent foreign-policy agenda for V4 for a long period of time, and this chapter described this in the last version of the publication, then in the years 2014 and 2015 the region of the Western Balkans has become a more dynamic topic. Tomáš Dopita writes more about this dimension in the chapter dealing with the Western Balkans in the Czech foreign policy; anyway, at this point, it should be noted that the Czech Presidency paid – also in connection with the Slovak Presidency – great attention to the Balkans. In November, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of V4 published a common article which was a rare thing. In this article<sup>10</sup>, the authors encouraged the Western-Balkan countries, and one of the main messages was that the current EU crisis, though it was a serious challenge for the whole European integration, would not become a “cause for hesitation” about the expansion of the EU towards the Balkans. Perhaps the most tangible result of the Visegrad action in the Balkan direction was the signing of the agreement establishing the long-prepared Western Balkans Fund, which happened in mid-November in Prague during the traditional meeting of the ministers of V4 and of the Balkans. The Balkan Fund, established in the Albanian Tirana, was inspired by the International Visegrad Fund; at the beginning of its operation, each participating country has to pay 30,000 EUR and then V4 a total of 80,000 EUR. If successful, the Fund will most certainly be one of the most visible successes of the integration and transformation experience sharing between Central Europe and the Balkan region.

The Eastern dimension remained the same as in 2014; it was weakened because of the insecurity within the EU and the parties of the future neighbourhood policy and expansion, and also because of the different opinions of the Visegrad countries on developments in Ukraine and their attitude to Russia. In May 2015, still under the



Slovak Presidency, the traditional meeting of the representatives of the V4 countries with the representatives of the Eastern Partnership took place, together with Romania, Bulgaria, Latvia, and Sweden. It is quite eloquent that the joint statement of V4 almost completely avoided any mention of the situation in Ukraine and was generally an expression of helplessness rather than a pro-active attitude.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, we cannot ignore the fundamental assistance in the form of the reverse flow of gas, which had been agreed by the Visegrad countries during the escalating crisis between Ukraine and Russia. The Czech Presidency programme was in the spirit of that intangibility of the Eastern European policy, which was also described in the chapter of Lucie Najšlová in this publication. All the planned initiatives were basically limited to the energy sector and in the political dimension, they were limited to the activities of the International Visegrad Fund. One of the goals of the Czech Presidency was to prevent the proliferation of the so-called formats of Visegrad-plus. In the past, there were often situations when the meetings were held in the format or with countries that were linked to V4 with only little or no agenda at all, the meetings were rather formalistic “photo-opportunities” and that also undermined the credibility of the external links of V4. The Czech Presidency wanted to focus on the quality of the meeting V4 plus, rather than on quantity. In 2015, under the patronage of the Czech Republic, a traditional meeting about the Balkans was held, the summit in December was visited by British Prime Minister, David Cameron, as part of his efforts to explain the British position in the negotiations on the status of Great Britain in the EU before the June referendum about the so-called Brexit, and, as already mentioned before, the Czech diplomacy tried to achieve the German presence in V4 and the closer communication was maintained with Luxembourg as the presiding country. The ground-breaking summit, after many years of communication on a lower level, took place between V4 and the Republic of Korea, which ended with a very ambitious common statement setting the future forms of communication as well as of cooperation, including global as and regional issues.<sup>12</sup>

In the second half of 2015, based on the initiative of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there was a project, a sort of “auditing” of V4 after 25 years of operation – each Visegrad country nominated two personalities who met in the Panel of the Wise in autumn. Its task was to prepare a report for the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in February 2016, which should also serve as an ideological impulse for the future Visegrad. The result of this initiative will be described in this chapter in the next version of this publication.

## **POLAND IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY**

From the late 1990s until about 2013, the relation with Poland was developing in a continuously improving continuum. For the years 2012 and 2013 it applied that, due to the chronic Czech political crisis and the subsequent exchange of the Czech government in the midst of the election cycle, the asymmetry between Poland, which was very ambitious at that time, and the Czech policy, being blown down by its internal

problems, deepened a lot. This difference was particularly manifested on the Union and alliance levels, but did not interfere in the bilateral relations, which were in fact totally unproblematic; they were mutually supported by good bilateral and regional diplomacy (see the last version of this chapter). Like in the majority of other areas of the Czech foreign policy, it is true about the Czech-Polish bilateral relation that the year 2014 brought many changes. On the one hand, these changes were determined by the expectations of the new foreign policy under the leadership of the coalition ČSSD–ANO–KDU–ČSL, which sent out signals on the reconfiguration of the Central-European policy, namely the will to greater differentiation in regional relations (especially the strengthening of the links with Austria), which could have been interpreted as an attempt to counteract the impact of Poland in Central Europe. The negative input to the Czech-Polish relations was also the fact that since the end of 2013, in response to the policy of Russia towards Ukraine, the asymmetry in the threat perception and in strengthening the defence capabilities of both countries had increased (although the Czech Republic has still been closer to Poland in both cases than Hungary or Slovakia). In terms of real politics and diplomacy, in 2014 there was no “decline” in the significance of Poland. Also in the new governmental concept of the Czech foreign policy from July 2015, Poland maintained its position of a “strategic” partner. But it is also true that, on the political level, the year 2015 brought more negative than positive impulses into the mutual relations. The Polish partner was paralysed for months in the expectations of the presidential and parliamentary elections, and because of this, it was not possible to initiate any major projects. The presidential and parliamentary elections brought a major strengthening of the Polish conservative right wing, and thus the increase of the political distance of the governmental officials on the side of the Czech Republic (led by the Social Democrats) and Poland.

The intensity of the bilateral contact agenda remained unchanged in 2015 and met the high level of relations in the previous years. The peak of this was the third inter-governmental consultations that were held in Prague on 20th April 2015.<sup>13</sup> It was attended by the Prime Ministers and also the Ministers of Defence, the Interior, Transportation and Environment and the Deputy Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Industry and Trade (or Economy on the Polish side) and Agriculture. The main topic of the consultations, on the level of Prime Ministers, was the situation in the EU and also the situation in Ukraine. Although the perception of the Czech and Polish governments differs, the Prime Ministers agreed that the economic sanctions against Russia had to be interlinked with the full implementation of the Minsk agreements and, moreover, that Russia did not behave as a reliable partner and the member of the international community, whose actions, leading to the undermining of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, were radically disapproved. Thus, Russia was blamed for this situation, to a great extent. This must be seen as a strong statement that does not match some influential “anti-sanction” opinions in ČSSD or of the people near President Zeman.

It is certainly a statement which Prime Minister Sobotka used to express his desire for the closeness to the Polish position in order to prove the strategic dimension of Czech-Polish relation. The high trust between the two countries was also illustrated by the fact that Czech Prime Minister Sobotka stood in for Polish Prime Minister

Ewa Kopacz at the November meeting of the EU leaders in Valletta, which she could not attend due to the constitutive meeting of the Polish Sejm (of course, there is the question if Prime Minister Sobotka had the same trust of the new Prime Minister of Poland, Beata Szydło).

The long-term topic that is somewhere between the political and the expert levels is the so-called *borderline debt* of the Czech Republic to Poland. This question was also discussed during the governmental consultations and since 2014 there has been a significant shift – the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs declared resolving this matter, lasting for few decades, as one of his priorities. In the area of economic relations and trade, it is still true that Poland and the Czech Republic are mutually the third most important market for their products, which makes the need for high-quality political relations even more important. Poland is also the biggest investor in the Czech Republic among the countries of post-communist Europe. The further development of trade and cross-border permeability, in general, would be obviously helped by the improvement and expansion of the transportation links, but this is a question that both countries have been addressing for decades, and there is only very slow progress. In the future, the key topic will be the cooperation in the use of the European funding resources, the modernization of the rail links for passenger and freight transportation and the preparation of the connection between the D11 motorways with the speed road S3 on the Polish side in the region of Kladsko. The greater development of more sophisticated and complex forms of cooperation (joint ventures, joint investments etc.) would be helped by political impulses, the promotion of the dialogue among business entities and the projects aimed at small and medium-sized enterprises. The long-term oppressive factor of Czech-Polish relations is the environment. Together with the inter-governmental consultations, a new agreement on cooperation in border waters in the field of water management was signed (it replaces the currently valid convention from 1958), but in the issue of the improvement of the air quality in the region of Silesia, there are no real changes on both national and regional levels in terms of coordination (but both ministries consider this field to be their priority).

In the case of Czech-Polish relations, *energy* is an important point of cooperation as well as of disputes. In April 2013, the representatives of the Polish and Czech Ministry of Trade and Industry, respectively of Economy, signed an important Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation in the field of natural gas with the aim to implement the Polish-Czech project of the interconnection of the gas networks. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding within the intergovernmental consultations of the Czech Republic and Poland, the construction of the second bidirectional Czech-Polish connection (STORK II) was supported, which should allow the transmission of gas between the two countries after the year 2019. The Memorandum was the result of the initiative of ministers of the two countries in April 2014.<sup>14</sup> The Czech party, however, is careful because of the clear rejection of the project Nord Stream II, which is received with resentment in Poland, and in addition to this there is still some tension in the question of the future investments of PKN Orlen and its Unipetrol in the Czech Republic. This topic was comprehensively discussed in the last version of this chapter. In mid-2014, Minister of Finance, Andrej Babiš, said that the Czech govern-

ment was interested in buying the refinery in Kralupy from Unipetrol, owned by the majority stockholder PKN Orlen. In contrast to this, PKN Orlen wanted to join the operator of the oil pipeline MERO and the fuel distributor ČEPRO. Oil processing seems to be unprofitable because of its surplus on the European market and the low margins. In 2015, the occasional gun fights continued when in March 2015 the director of the state company MERO, Stanislav Bruna, publicly warned against the possible disruptions in the oil processing by Unipetrol in the Czech Republic.<sup>15</sup> Finally, no major changes occurred, as expected.

As in 2014, the field of *defence* remained one of the main pillars of the Polish-Czech relations in 2015. The Ministers of Defence, Martin Stropnický and Tomasz Siemoniak, met in Prague in February 2015, when the Polish Minister came to the Czech Republic on a one-day official visit. The Ministers of Defence met again during the inter-governmental consultations in April, but no broader bilateral initiatives were formed; the discussions concentrated mainly on the Visegrad dimension of defensive cooperation. Therefore, the working and political consultations focused mostly on the area where there was real progress, namely the joint training. At the beginning of June, the first Deputy Chief of General Staff, Major General Jiří Baloun, and the Polish Commander of Joint Forces, Lieutenant-General Lech Majewski, met at the headquarters of the General Staff of the Army of the Czech Republic during working negotiations. The negotiations related to the cooperation during training events but also to the possibility of the joint surveillance of airspace. At the beginning of November, the Czech Ministry of Defence signed a new framework agreement with the company PZL-Swidnik on the maintenance support for the fleet of W-3A Sokol helicopters of the weaponry of the Army of the Czech Republic; the contract is valid until 2021 and the total value of the contract is 991 million CZK.<sup>16</sup> An important contribution to the international regional defensive cooperation was the training Noble Jump, which focused on the rapid reaction forces and which was held in Żagań, Poland. The Czech Army was represented there by 150 men and 50 pieces of technology.<sup>17</sup> The fact that the joint training is one of the signs of the Czech-Polish cooperation is well demonstrated also by the fact that the working group for military cooperation (one of the four working groups established in 2013) is the most visible one. Despite these partial – and important – practical results and despite the ongoing intensive dialogue on political and business levels, the Czech-Polish defensive cooperation is still beyond its potential. The reasons remain the same – the asymmetry in the defensive capacities of the two countries, asymmetric threat perception, the completely different structure of the defensive industry in both countries (large, state-owned industrial complexes in Poland; rather smaller, privatized companies in the Czech Republic), the resulting, often conflicting interests of the industrial lobby, non-coordinates planning cycles etc. As in the case of the Visegrad Group, also in the Czech-Polish case, the defensive and security cooperation is important in terms of building trust and mutual strengthening of capacities.

Also in 2015, Poland clearly remains a country with a key strategic potential for the Czech foreign policy, both on a regional and European level. Just like the previous year, also the year 2015 is characterized by the need to understand the Polish in-

tentions and ambitions in Europe, as these intentions are often not evident to us. The cross-border cooperation plays an important role in this effort, as well as the Czech-Polish Forum, and the personnel changes after the arrival of the new management of the Czernin Palace should have brought a new impulse but this has not occurred yet. The non-standard and strategic relations with Poland are still a fragile value – the end of the year 2015 after the accession of the new president and the new government forced many Czech diplomatic representatives to reflect on the role of Poland for the Czech foreign policy.

Some reactions to the post-election developments in Poland were very close to hysteria, and Poland manifested itself – like many other things in the last two years – as a country with a significant polarization potential. So, for the near future, it should apply twice that the Czech diplomacy should be modest and prudent, knowing the needs of Poland as a strong and reliable partner. At the same time, it cannot be blind to the political manifestations which are very close to the nationalistic and anti-liberal-democratic conception of policy which can be monitored in Orbán's Hungary. For the first time in the entire history of annual analyses of the Czech foreign policy towards Central Europe, it is necessary to note at this point that Poland will be one of the most serious and difficult challenges for the Czech diplomacy.

## **SLOVAKIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY**

If the meaning and symbolism of most Czech regional relations (including Hungary) have been gradually changing since 2014, the bilateral ties with Slovakia seem to be an important stabilizing element. Although the importance of Slovakia has had a more important “geo-political” content after the outbreak of the crisis in Ukraine and the new Government of B. Sobotka – among other things, because of the political proximity of the two major ruling parties – was actively looking for the ways how to strengthen the political importance of Slovakia for the Czech Republic. Like in the case of Poland, in 2015 the culmination of these efforts was the (third) joint session of the Czech and Slovak governments in Valtice in May. On the Czech side, the meeting was attended by 16 ministers, besides the Prime Minister, on the Slovak side, there was the Prime Minister, 12 ministers, and two state secretaries. The negotiations took place before the summer escalation of the refugee crisis and were dominated by the issue of the future of SZPB in the political and European fields. In the statement<sup>18</sup>, there is a part dedicated to the situation in Ukraine, which, when compared to the Czech-Polish statement, is a bit more moderate towards Russia and its responsibility for the situation there. During the year, as in other dimensions of the Czech foreign policy, the refugee crisis began to dominate. Together with Slovakia and Hungary, the Czech Republic came out against the system of mandatory quotas for the redistribution of refugees during the voting of the European Council, but the Czech Republic did not join the Slovak complaint against that Union decision (see the chapter of Vít Beneš about the Czech Union policy in this publication). President Zeman showed significant closeness to Slovak Prime Minister, Róbert Fico, in this regard.

As in 2014, the most robust departmental agenda (with a political overreach), applies to defence and energy. In recent years, the *defensive* cooperation with Slovakia has seemed to be more realistic and more vital than in the case of Poland, and particularly because of smaller asymmetry of the defensive capabilities, military ambitions and the greater consensus in the weaponry of both countries. The new element of the political negotiations is the direct participation of the representatives of the supreme military command and control. The greatest progress has been achieved in the cooperation and coordination of the Air Forces of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in order to implement the intention of the joint protection of airspace. During the inter-governmental consultations, the Slovak party confirmed its interest in the rent of the fighters Jas-39 Gripen, much like the Czech Republic. During the year 2015, both parties worked on the difficult harmonization and preparation of the legal framework that will be particularly sensitive, for example in the case of a cross-border intervention against a civil aircraft with a suspicion of abuse because of a terrorist attack.

Intense cooperation is then promoted mainly in training and in particular in logistics. In May, the engineer units trained together in the training called Engineer Rescuers, in September the specialists of the chemical corps of the Air Force of the Army of the Czech Republic participated in the training called Toxic Leak IV in Slovak Zemianske Kostofany, in September the Czech soldiers participated in the largest training ever in the history of modern Slovakia, called Slovak Shield. The interesting result of the joint negotiations of the governments was the commitment to provide political support, such as the cooperation of the air forces and the ground troops. On the political level, both countries agreed on the effort to coordinate their acquisition activities – this will be an easier cooperation than in the case of the entire V4 or Poland, but the specific projects have large obstacles formed by the practical as well as lobby circumstances. The defensive cooperation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia have created an important axis for the emerging platform of the joint training of pilots in the four countries, besides the Czech Republic and Slovakia, there are Hungary and Croatia. At the end of May, this plan was agreed by the Ministers of Defence with the aim to create a comprehensive training and specially designed programmes for flying and ground personnel (Multinational Aviation Training Centre, MATC).<sup>19</sup> The Czech Republic will be the leading country in this project, which not only confirms the growing importance of the Czech Republic in (especially) the military helicopter flying in the region, but also a certain response to the obstacles that stand in the way of the cooperation with Poland, whose absence in the project is immediately apparent (this is actually a format V4 minus Poland plus Croatia).

In the *energy* sector, the project of the European nuclear forum continues, which is used by the Czech Republic and Slovakia, on the Union level, to maintain a dialogue about the peaceful use of nuclear energy. The core represents a significant proportion of their energy mix for both countries. During 2015, the issue of the future completion of the power plant in Jaslovské Bohunice or the sale of Slovenské elektrárne was not solved; these were described in detail in the last version of this chapter. But it is still true that the interconnection of the energy and financial entities between the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the field of strategic energy companies, along with the ongo-

ing interest of the Russian subjects, makes this dimension of relation one of the most sensitive issues (and, at the same time, the least open to the public).

Since its launch at the beginning of the year 2014, the Government of B. Sobotka declared its interest in the strengthening of the ties with *Austria* and it chose, as one of the ways, after the search for a suitable regional platform, the trilateral dialogue between the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Austria. After several months of preparation, the first meeting to this plan took place at the end of January 2015 in the Moravian town of Slavkov (this name was then used for this format “slavkovský”). Especially in the Austrian-Czech relations, the low level of trust and the relatively weaker (in comparison with other neighbours, including Germany) connection among the various sectors on the working level acted as an important obstacle in the long term. In the Czech-Austrian relations, it is true that the two countries did not feel the need for closer cooperation in almost any possible foreign-policy agendas and there was no strong (positive) bilateral topic. The only positive feature in recent years was the relatively calm political level when the two governments managed to keep more or less controversial issues outside the public and political debates. For this reason, in the new trilateral initiative, we can see an added value, especially if we manage to enrich the bilateral relations, to enhance the mutual trust and to gain practical results e.g. in the cross-border cooperation.

To achieve a similar objective, we can choose several ways, one of which could be the gradual establishment of relations on a working level and the enhancement of the mutual trust through the implementation of smaller projects and establishment of multi-level ties. In this case, there is a risk that a similar initiative might cease to exist because of the lack of political support and visibility and might drown in the other sediments of the administrative and bureaucratic work. On the other hand, the advantage is that, without much fuss, we can first show the visible results, and there is no risk of the “disappointment” as in the second scenario, when a similar initiative is launched with the highest political support, which is used on one hand as the best possible political impulse, and on the other hand, requires a very critical monitoring of the practical benefits and results. On the basis of the Czech initiative, the new format chose the second route – the initial meeting was held at the level of Prime Ministers who adopted the so-called Slavkov Declaration. The declaration (Slavkovská deklarace) is a short document with four paragraphs.<sup>20</sup> The declaration refers to the “working plan”<sup>21</sup>, which (again in a very brief format) defines the basic areas of cooperation: transportation, youth employment, energy infrastructure, cross-border cooperation, the social dimension of European integration, and the Western Balkans and the Eastern partnership. When looking at the two documents, we have to think that the form of the Slavkov cooperation partly precedes its content, in other words, that the specific content will be built up on the basis of successive consultations or on the functioning in the working groups, which will be the responsibility of the particular ministries. However, we cannot agree with the *a priori* rejection of this format with reference to the interfering with the Visegrad unity and other regional relations. The so-called “Slavkov format” of cooperation should, in any case, serve as a tool to build trust among the neighbouring countries, but, ideally, to implement specific cross-bor-

der projects or similarly defined neighbourly cooperation. The question remains, how exactly a similar format may contribute to the formulation and shaping of the eastern dimension of Union policy (see the last part of the working program), in which Austria had traditionally engaged in a different spirit than the Czech Republic, e.g. within Visegrad, but, at the same time, it can be a useful way to bring the Austrian partners nearer to this key Union agenda. Even in this regard, it is necessary to keep in mind the volatility of the political perception of Eastern policy and Russia among the particular countries and political representations, which was confirmed by the somewhat surprising statement of Austrian Chancellor, Werner Faymann, during the final press conference in Slavkov where he indirectly condemned the policy sanctions against Russia.<sup>22</sup> During the year 2015, six working groups were created which were based on the areas of cooperation defined in the “working plan”. The first working meeting was held in Prague in June 2015 and was led by the Deputy/State Secretaries of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. In September, the Prime Ministers of the three countries met again in Bratislava, where they discussed the Slavkov plan on the solution of the migration crisis.

The so-called Slavkov format has the potential to deliver a broader regional meaning to the Czech-Slovak relations, but the key issue will be to find a real content for it. The point is that the Czech-Slovak relations, even without this initiative, had a sufficiently strong political and practical background, and if the form of the Slavkov trilateral is not fulfilled, the result may be the opposite effect, namely the condemnation of the whole initiative as an unnecessary one.

## **AUSTRIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY**

The Czech-Austrian neighbourhood has a very considerable potential for the development of social, cultural, and maybe also political relations. The key to it is in the already mentioned gradual building of trust and a multilateral network of relations and in the strengthening of the regional stability. In the past, several initiatives were created that were intended to revive the rigid Czech-Austrian relations, but none of them ended successfully. The above-described Slavkov format may be a similar initiative that will provide the Czech-Austrian relations with a stronger impulse and will help them to come out from their lethargy. In the bilateral contact agenda, the year 2015 followed the increased intensity from 2014, although, in the issue of “Slavkov”, it was obvious that the Austrian partners were rather only looking for its meaning and for the role of the Austrian foreign policy. In any case, thanks to the intensive bilateral political as well as trilateral contacts, the desired effect was achieved, namely that the bilateral agenda was further differentiated, which, at least until 2014, had constantly dealt with the question of Temelín and the so-called Beneš Decrees and the historical agenda in general. This does not mean that the disputes about the use of nuclear energy or the historical issues would disappear. The rejection to the completion of the nuclear power stations Temelín and Dukovany or the disposal site of nuclear waste has remained an irritating element for the Austrian neighbours. These issues were ac-



accompanied by another agenda so there is less time and space for them. Moreover, the format of the bilateral meetings was extended; for the spring of 2016, the first meeting of the Senators and Deputies from the border regions, of the Governors, Ambassadors and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs was planned. These are those moments that may contribute to the socialization across the sectors and among the individual actors and, in consequence of this, may enhance mutual trust. Also, the departmental communication was strengthened, although the realization of similar inter-governmental consultations or a joint session of the government, as in the case of Poland and Slovakia, has no end in sight. There were certain changes on the Austrian political scene – the Austrian liberals, approaching higher election gains, have less need to gain political capital for their traditional topics, which include the historical issues or the issue of the nuclear energy. From all these, the change of the atmosphere is quite evident, which had been there for about ten years – from the conscious political escalation of mutual issues through their muting and freezing up to the search for a cooperative relation. However, everything will depend on the overall political situation in Europe as well as on the political development in Austria itself. We cannot ignore the fact either that Austria has had different (especially economic) interests both in the Balkans and in Eastern Europe in the long term, which are the areas that are for example included in the working program of the Slavkov cooperation.

## REGIONAL TRADE AND ECONOMIC RELATIONS<sup>23</sup>

In 2015, the turnover of the foreign trade of the Czech Republic increased to another record level. The neighbouring countries – Germany, Poland, and Slovakia – have been the largest long-term business partners of the Czech Republic. In 2014 and 2015, these three countries participated in the turnover of the foreign trade with 43% (of which Germany has a share of 29%). The year 2015 brought a significant change when the trade turnover with China came in the third position, which had been occupied by Poland for many years. Although the trade turnover with *Poland* in 2015 increased by 7.3%, with China it was by 26%.

But Poland is still the biggest business partner among the V4 countries. The mutual trade exchange has grown roughly by one-third over the last five years. The trade balance has undergone several changes in the last few years. In 2011, the Czech exporters exported goods for 181 billion CZK to Poland and goods for 176 billion CZK were sold back to the Czech Republic. In the following years, primarily the Polish exports grew; in 2014, it reached a negative balance to the detriment of the Czech Republic, in the amount of 28 billion CZK, and in 2015 it was up to 45 billion CZK. According to the volume of exports in the global competition, the Czech Republic is in the seventh place for Poland, which makes the Czech Republic, despite its small size of its market, an important Polish business partner. At the same time, the almost forty-million Polish market is ruled over by special competition, and the Czech exporters may be surprised by the administrative obstacles in business which are often bigger than the national average in the Czech Republic. The prospective areas of the exports include

energy, petrochemical industry, road and rail vehicles, equipment for the restructuring of the mills and mines, ventilation equipment, pumps, heavy-current equipment, agricultural equipment, other machinery and food – mainly grain, meat, butter, milk, poultry, sugar, tomato sauce, beer and malt.<sup>24</sup>

In 2014 and 2015, there was no truly significant Czech investment in Poland and the more sophisticated forms of economic ties were not deepened further. The largest investors in Poland are still ČEZ, Penta Investments, and Energetický a průmyslový holding, it means the companies that occupy the same position in Slovakia too. In the future, the way how Poland approaches the announced economic revolution will be really important for the mutual trade and mainly for the investments. Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Development, Mateusz Morawiecki, announced the plan for the transformation of the Polish economy in a modern economy, based on innovations and domestic investments. And, at the same time, this should strengthen the state regulation. And even in the past, the Czech investors often encountered resistance against privatization by foreign investors (one of the last cases was the company Energo-Pro, which won the privatization of the system of four hydroelectric power plants, but the Polish Ministry of State Property cancelled the result of this privatization and the announcement of a new privatization is expected). The foreign investors show some suspicion, but the outflow of foreign investments is not expected because Poland is one of the most dynamic and growing economies in Europe.<sup>25</sup>

The Czech Republic is the second largest long-term trading partner for *the Slovak Republic*. In 2009, the sustainable growth (since 2000) in 2009 was disrupted by the economic crisis; in 2014, there was a decline in the mutual trade when the Slovak exports to the Czech Republic and also the Czech exports to Slovakia did not reach the level of the previous year. Compared to 2014, in 2015 the mutual trade increased, by increasing the Slovak exports to the Czech Republic as well as by increasing the Czech exports to Slovakia. In 2015, the growth of the Slovak exports continued further, but the increasing investment activities and rising standard of living contributed to the fact that the growth rate of the imports outpaced the growth rate of the exports. In 2015, the Slovak exports increased by 4.9% annually and the imports increased by 7.5%. In 2015, the Slovak Republic exported goods worth 67,865.2 million EUR. Compared to 2014, the Slovak exports increased by 4.9%. In terms of investment activities, the most active groups are ČEZ and EPH, like in Poland. The transport company Regio Jet and the exporters of transportation equipment (such as Tatra or the bus manufacturer SOR Libchavy) are important players in the Slovak market. Until 2004, Austria was the third most important trading partner of the Czech Republic.

After joining the EU, the Czech exports differentiated, and, despite the fact that the volume of the bilateral trade increased steadily, *Austria* fell in the ranking of the biggest trading partners (at the present, it is in the eighth place, behind Great Britain and Italy). The growth of mutual trade turnover was interrupted only by the economic crisis in 2009 (-16.5% compared to 2008). In this period, the exports reached the historically lowest level (decrease by 15%) and the imports even by 19%. In 2010–2012, the trade exchange started to grow again, but in 2013 the mutual trade exchange decreased by 3.3%. The reason for the decline in trade exchange was mainly the slow

growth of the Czech economy and the generally weak European economy. In 2014, the trade exchange gradually increased by 3.7% (in absolute figures it was 9.2 billion EUR). In 2015, the Austrian exports to the Czech Republic increased, compared to 2014, by +6.3% to approximately 3.8 billion EUR. The total Austrian import from the Czech Republic increased by 2.3% and it was in the amount of 5.8 billion EUR. In the Czech Republic, there are many Austrian companies, the direct Austrian investments have been one of the most important ones for the Czech economy in the long term. At the present, there are approximately 1,800 active Austrian companies in the Czech market and there are more than 4,000 companies with Austrian partners (while in Austria there are only approximately 300 Czech companies), of which 60% is attributable to the investments in banking and insurance. The Czech investments in Austria were negligible, but in recent years their value has increased and more and more Czech companies enter the Austrian market. In 2015, the direct Czech investments in Austria were worth 86 million EUR; in the year-to-year comparison, there was five-fold growth. One of the largest Czech investments in Austria was the capital investment of the company SAZKA Group into the Austrian company Casinos Austria, and thanks to this, the company SAZKA dominated the Austrian lottery market.

## **THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE PUBLIC AND MEDIA SPACE**

Compared to 2014, there was gradual calming of the media and the public chatter that had been unleashed in 2014 because of the declared redefinition of the Czech Central-European policy. This calming was caused, on the one hand, by the fact that the evolutionary changes did not occur in this dimension, and, on the other hand, by the fact that this agenda was overshadowed by the impulses coming from the outside. In an unprecedented extent, the media, think tanks and the concerned public started the discussions about the refugee crisis, and because Central Europe figured in a very prominent place in this discussion over the time, very soon Central Europe and its fate were brought to the attention of the media and the public. In all conscience, we can say that the concept and policy of Central Europe had not been the topic of public discussions, not only since the regular monitoring of this agenda in this publication but probably since the mid-nineties. The polarization and politicization of this topic then also affected the question of how the Czech diplomacy should behave, and what happened was necessary but there was also the harmful simplification of the multi-layered problem in the search for the answer to the question if the Czech Republic had to adhere to its Central-European neighbours, or, the other way round, had to escape from the mental and geographic bond (frequently embodied by the Visegrad Group) and look for stronger bonds in the West. To some extent, this media division was also a political division, but this political division did not follow any of the party lines. To a greater extent than in 2014, it was true that the analytical and think-tank sector entered into the media and public discussion very assertively, and we can

partially say that it established itself as an independent actor, affecting the process of forming the foreign policy towards Central Europe, or at least the formation of its background.

## CONCLUSION

After the fall of Communism, the Czech foreign policy defended the world-view, emphasizing internationalism and multilateralism, the efforts to overcome the national and national frontiers and to expand the concept of “cooperative security”, the mutually shared responsibility, stability, peace, and prosperity. These ideas were also reflected in the conception of the Central-European policy and the Visegrad cooperation. But since the end of 2013, Central Europe had to adapt to the new security and political environment inside and around Europe. For this reason, V4 has to cope with difficult questions about its future in the European Union at the moment. One of the toughest questions is how to achieve the right balance between the trusted and respected defence of the own territory on the one hand and how not to betray the commitments towards cooperative security, openness, and inter-nationalism on the other hand.

The answers to these questions can be found only in such conditions that the current crisis of the trust in policy, in a democratic, open, and pluralist model of society will not drop even deeper than in 2015. After 1989, in (Central) Europe we have accustomed to a linear understanding of the political development: from danger to safety, from non-prosperity to prosperity, from injustice to a legally consistent state, and from the lack of freedom to freedom. Unfortunately, once again the words of the Polish historian, Pitor Wandycz, seem to be true in the late eighties, he developed his thesis that the history of Central Europe was a story of an idealistic struggle for freedom and its equally idealistic rejection.<sup>26</sup> In our region, freedom and emancipation have too many forms and not all of us are able to agree on their importance. While to the west of us, emancipation and freedom are primarily linked to individuals and their life, in our environment, due to the frequently tense struggles for the very survival of the national essence, the emancipation and freedom are mainly linked to the concept of the “nation” and its defence. In the history, Central Europe perceived the so-called West ambivalently. In Central Europe, admiration is mixed with envy, there is an ambivalent relation, including the element of love as well as the element of hate, and it seems that this has not changed recently. We know the uncritical admiration of “the West” when everything that is European is worth some praise and follow-up. The eastern features include laziness and backwardness, let’s get rid of them. In different periods and in different regions, the inferior status perceived like this, evoked feelings of underestimation and the need for compensation among the Central-Europeans. Consequently, they encouraged ideological and political movements glorifying the national history and national exceptionality, the search for the spiritual roots, that had been often in contrast to the self-seeking, fallen and degenerated West.<sup>27</sup> In the last two years, we have been the witnesses of a similar change that started first in Hungary, but in 2014 and 2015, it was also visible in other countries of the region.

Among others, we may connect it with the fact that certain groups of the population have acquired the feeling that the post-revolutionary transformation, which resulted in the membership in the EU, caused more losses than gains.

On the one hand, it is true that the tendency towards populism is very deeply ploughed in the soil of Central Europe; on the other hand, it is also true that some hysterical reactions of “the West”, regarding the development in Poland and Central Europe, are extremely dangerous because, in their thoughtless and simplified form, they help those who support their political identity by the condemnation of the decadent West, such as Viktor Orbán and Vladimir Putin.

In any case, it is clearly showed that the effort to overcome the division of Europe has not been very successful yet. On the contrary, during the year, the multiple divisions within and around Europe were deepened and went across multiple geographic, socio-economic, and political lines. The depressing news in the European mental geography is the fact that one of these strengthening dividing lines is the *east-west* border, which, however, in the course of the year 2015, did not move from the west to the east, as we had seen over the last decade, but rather from the east to the west. In other words, what we had used to call Central Europe, has become the mental East in the minds of many “Western-Europeans” in the last few years.

It is difficult to assess the consequences and the significance of this shift, and, moreover, they relate to the issues lying beyond diplomacy and foreign policy. But they still present a new and very important challenge for the Czech diplomacy. The crucial and immediate task for the Czech policy in Central Europe is the question how to establish a positive and constructive agenda within V4 and with the rest of the EU. Under the current circumstances, this will be extremely difficult because the societies throughout Europe are being increasingly polarized and split. What to do if the tools for the strengthening of the trust in the region (the motto of the Czech Presidency) are not successful and the individual and national egoisms succeed and prevail over the regional and European solidarity? Will it be possible, under these conditions, to talk about Visegrad as a platform for an open dialogue and pragmatic promotion of the common interests? The immediate test on this path will be the definition of our relation to contemporary Poland. What will it mean for us if Poland antagonizes its relationship to Germany and how can we prevent this? We are seemingly in a prestigious but, in fact, a very difficult position when Poland might want from us the understanding of its concept of the region, Europe, and security, and some countries and the EU officials will see us as “the moralists” of Central Europe. The other test will be the way the Czech diplomacy chooses to deal with the return of “the geopolitics” into the Central-European political thinking. By the way, even here, Poland will be an important reference point, since geopolitics had never disappeared from the Polish way of thinking, which, among others, is reflected for example in the revival of the ideas about the so-called “inter-seas” in the Polish foreign policy. The Czech foreign policy stood out for a less geopolitical concept of the European policy because the geopolitical perspectives are usually harmful to the small or middle-sized open countries.

I think that one of the ways of how to deal with these dilemmas is the effort to establish a completely different agenda and to behave reactively and defensively to-

wards the issues that are brought to the European policy by immediate partners. The Czech Central-European diplomacy must strive for the promotion of the positives that Central Europe had given to Europe and the world after the fall of the Iron Curtain, to build on these foundations, and communicate them to other partners. Despite the current disastrous state of the politics (not only) in Central Europe, there is much more in the Central-European message than we can now admit: the stabilization of the traditionally antagonistic region, the transformation of the mutually hostile relations into cooperation within the Visegrad Group, the enormous economic potential for the EU countries led by Germany, and the traditional solidarity with societies and countries which are, in their transformation and integration efforts, in a not very favourable situation (Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans). Even though it is true that Central and Eastern Europe is experiencing the current crisis of policy more deeply and under more considerable pressure than the other EU countries, it is necessary to repeat, again and again, that everything that politically and socially bothers Central Europe is experienced in the rest of Europe as well. The increase of populism, re-nationalisation, the fear of the future, the growing feeling that the political elites have left the masses: this can be seen all over Europe, and the Czech diplomacy may be the one that initiates a dialogue about how to admit these problems, openly and honestly, and how to prevent them.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Kořan, Michal (et al.) (2016): *V4 Trust: the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (2015–2016): Think Visegrad Midterm Review*. February 2016. On-line: [think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Think-Visegrad\\_Czech-V4-Presidency-Mid-term-review.pdf](http://think.visegradfund.org/wp-content/uploads/Think-Visegrad_Czech-V4-Presidency-Mid-term-review.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: *Koncepce zahraniční politiky ČR*, 13. 7. 2015. On-line: [www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni\\_vztahy/analyzy\\_a\\_koncepce/koncepce\\_zahranicni\\_politiky\\_cr.html](http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/analyzy_a_koncepce/koncepce_zahranicni_politiky_cr.html).
- <sup>3</sup> Kořan, Michal (2015): Visegrádská skupina, Polsko, Slovensko a Rakousko v české zahraniční politice. In: Kořan, Michal et al.: *Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2014. Analýza ÚMV*. Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů.
- <sup>4</sup> *V4 Trust – Program for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2015–June 2016)*. On-line: [www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20152016-czech](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20152016-czech).
- <sup>5</sup> *Joint Statement of the Heads of the Visegrad Group Countries*, 4. 9. 2015. On-line: [www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-150904](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-150904).
- <sup>6</sup> *Joint Communiqué of the Visegrad Group Ministers of Foreign Affairs*, 11. 9. 2015. On-line: [www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar).
- <sup>7</sup> Kořan, Michal (et al.) (2016): *V4 Trust: the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (2015–2016): Think Visegrad Midterm Review*, op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup> *Mezinárodní cvičení společně jednotky států V4 Common Challenge 2015*. On-line: [www.army.cz/scripts/modules/diary/action.php?id=4066](http://www.army.cz/scripts/modules/diary/action.php?id=4066).
- <sup>9</sup> Kořan, Michal: *Bukurešťský minisumit, aneb jak se východní křídlo tvářilo, že není východní křídlo*. Natoaktual.cz, 17. 11. 2015. On-line: [www.natoaktual.cz/bukurestsky-minisumit-nato-aneb-jak-se-vychodni-kridlo-tvarilo-ze-vlastne-neni-vychodni-kridlo-izs-na\\_analyzy.aspx?c=A151117\\_175300\\_na\\_analyzy\\_m02](http://www.natoaktual.cz/bukurestsky-minisumit-nato-aneb-jak-se-vychodni-kridlo-tvarilo-ze-vlastne-neni-vychodni-kridlo-izs-na_analyzy.aspx?c=A151117_175300_na_analyzy_m02).

- <sup>10</sup> *We offer you our helping hand on the EU path*, 11. 11. 2015. On-line: [www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4ministers-in-joint](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/v4ministers-in-joint).
- <sup>11</sup> *The Visegrad Group Joint Statement on the Eastern Partnership*, 15. 5. 2015. On-line: [www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/the-visegrad-group-joint](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/the-visegrad-group-joint).
- <sup>12</sup> *Joint Statement On The Occasion of the First Summit of Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group and the President of the Republic of Korea*, 3. 12. 2015. On-line: [www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-on-the](http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-on-the).
- <sup>13</sup> The Government of the Czech Republic: *Společně prohlášení předsedů vlád*, 20. 4. 2015. On-line: [www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Spolecne-prohlaseni-predsedu-vlad.pdf](http://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Spolecne-prohlaseni-predsedu-vlad.pdf).
- <sup>14</sup> The Ministry of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic: *Podpis Memoranda o porozumění mezi ministerstvy ČR a Polska ohledně spolupráce v oblasti zemního plynu*, 24. 4. 2015. On-line: [www.mpo.cz/dokument157568.html](http://www.mpo.cz/dokument157568.html).
- <sup>15</sup> *PKN Orlen zřejmě v Česku přestane zpracovávat ropu, tvrdí šéf Mera*. E15.cz, 27. 3. 2015. On-line: [zpravy.e15.cz/byznys/prumysl-a-energetika/pkn-orlen-zrejme-v-cesku-prestane-zpracovavat-ropu-tvrdi-sef-mera-1175531](http://zpravy.e15.cz/byznys/prumysl-a-energetika/pkn-orlen-zrejme-v-cesku-prestane-zpracovavat-ropu-tvrdi-sef-mera-1175531).
- <sup>16</sup> The Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic: *Ministerstvo podepsalo smlouvu o servisní podpoře vrtulníků Sokol*, 4. 11. 2015. On-line: [www.mocr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/ministerstvo-obrany-podepsalo-smlouvu-o-servisni-podpore-vrtulniku-sokol-116358/](http://www.mocr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/ministerstvo-obrany-podepsalo-smlouvu-o-servisni-podpore-vrtulniku-sokol-116358/).
- <sup>17</sup> The Army of the Czech Republic: *Cvičení Noble Jump ukázalo profesionalitu Sil velmi rychlé reakce NATO*, 19. 6. 2015. On-line: [www.acr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/cviceni-noble-jump-ukazalo-profesionalitu-sil-velmi-rychle-reakce-nato-111694](http://www.acr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/cviceni-noble-jump-ukazalo-profesionalitu-sil-velmi-rychle-reakce-nato-111694).
- <sup>18</sup> The Government of the Czech Republic: *Společně prohlášení předsedů vlád*, 12. 5. 2015. On-line: [www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Spolecne-prohlaseni-predsedu-vlad-CR-a-SR.pdf](http://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Spolecne-prohlaseni-predsedu-vlad-CR-a-SR.pdf).
- <sup>19</sup> The Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic: *Čtyři státy budou společně cvičit piloty vrtulníků*, 25. 6. 2015. On-line: [www.mocr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/cyri-staty-vcetne-cr-budou-spolecne-cvicit-piloty-vrtulniku-112057/](http://www.mocr.army.cz/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/cyri-staty-vcetne-cr-budou-spolecne-cvicit-piloty-vrtulniku-112057/).
- <sup>20</sup> Government of the Czech Republic: *Slavkovská deklarace*. On-line: [www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Slavkovska-deklarace.pdf](http://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/Slavkovska-deklarace.pdf).
- <sup>21</sup> Government of the Czech Republic: *Pracovní plán (Slavkovského formátu)*. On-line: [www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/plan\\_cz.pdf](http://www.vlada.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/plan_cz.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> Government of the Czech Republic: *Videozáznam z tiskové konference setkání předsedů vlád ČR, SR a Rakouska ve Slavkově*, 30. 1. 2015. On-line: [www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/video/video-setkani-predsedu-vlad-cr-sr-a-rakouska-ve-slavkove-126393/](http://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/video/video-setkani-predsedu-vlad-cr-sr-a-rakouska-ve-slavkove-126393/).
- <sup>23</sup> The business and economic information is processed on the basis of the data from the web portal [www.bussinesinfo.cz](http://www.bussinesinfo.cz) – territorial information.
- <sup>24</sup> *Trnitá třetí cesta. Kam Polsko zavede?* BussinesInfo.cz, 4. 5. 2016. On-line: [www.businessinfo.cz/cs/clanky/trnita-treti-cesta-kam-polsko-zavede-77536.html](http://www.businessinfo.cz/cs/clanky/trnita-treti-cesta-kam-polsko-zavede-77536.html).
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> Wandycz, Piotr (1998): *Střední Evropa v dějinách od středověku do současnosti: Cena svobody*. Praha: Academia.
- <sup>27</sup> Kořan, Michal (2014): *Viktor Orbán a kyvadlo*. Natoaktual.cz, 23. 9. 2014. On-line: [www.natoaktual.cz/viktor-orban-a-kyvadlo-0bj/na\\_analyzy.aspx?c=A140923\\_165158\\_na\\_analyzy\\_m02](http://www.natoaktual.cz/viktor-orban-a-kyvadlo-0bj/na_analyzy.aspx?c=A140923_165158_na_analyzy_m02).