
Chapter 17

The Development Dimension of the Czech Foreign Policy¹

A WELL-PERFORMED NON-PRIORITY, ONCE AGAIN

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Executive Summary: Following the European Year for Development 2015 and the *transitional* year 2016, 2017 promised to be the year when the Czech development agenda would find a new direction thanks to the introduction of a comprehensive sustainable development framework, new strategic documents, increases in funding and the evolution of the development institutions. Looking back, however, we can safely say it did not happen. While the new framework and strategies have been put in place and the institutions are evolving accordingly, most of the political scene seems to have once again lost interest in the agenda, or even question its utility. Amid growing pragmatism and polarisation, the main question increasingly faced by the Czech development policy is not whether and how it should relate to other dimensions of foreign policy (be it security, migration or business promotion), but rather whether, and to what extent, it will remain one of the country's pursuits and priorities.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The foundations of the Czech development co-operation – formulated in the last decade – have remained unchanged throughout 2017. From a legislative point of view the agenda is based on the 2010 Act n. 151 on Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid, which defines the policies both very broadly and with reference to multiple goals, which were to be specified in subsequent governmental provisions.² This approach is echoed in the 2015 *Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy*,³ which sees development co-operation not only as a goal in itself (with reference to the concept of sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda), but also as an instrument to promote other interests. In particular, the Concept reasserts the traditional expectation that development policy should contribute to the economic co-operation with partner

countries, while also extending its use to include the mitigation of security risks (including those connected with migration).

Multi-functionality has since become a guiding principle of the whole development agenda, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and other ministries have gradually incorporated it into several partial strategies and documents. The *Security Strategy of the Czech Republic*⁴ (adopted in 2015) cites humanitarian and development co-operation as a means of ensuring the country's energy security and promoting global and regional stability. The *Strategy on Migration Policy of the Czech Republic*⁵ (also introduced in 2015) goes even further, calling for *coherency* between the development, humanitarian and migration policies, which its author (the Ministry of the Interior) effectively interprets as using development co-operation to prevent or stop migration to the Czech Republic. Recently, the ministry validated this interpretation, which was first advanced in the 2015 volume of this yearbook,⁶ by publishing a review of its Programme for the Assistance to Refugees in the Regions of Origin and Prevention of Large Migration Flows.⁷ Listing all the completed projects, the review clearly shows that – while appealing to humanitarian goals – the programme functions as a tool to prevent migration by improving the living conditions of refugees in Syria, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, but also by strengthening borders along the so-called Balkan migration route. The two objectives receive roughly the same funding.

Besides security and migration, policy-makers (most notably the MFA) also increasingly see development co-operation as interconnected with the Czech Republic's economic interests abroad. The 2016 version of the *Map of Global Sectoral Opportunities*,⁸ a publication for exporters, included a development subchapter for each of the Czech Republic's development partner countries. While rather generic, these subchapters represent a first indication of the intent to mobilise development co-operation for the promotion of business exchange and trade co-operation. This is an intention that the MFA has since mostly advanced through its events for exporters, but which may in time result in the strategic and even institutional unification of both agendas (e.g. through the centralisation of all pro-export agencies, possibly including the Czech Development Agency, as suggested by Andrej Babiš in December 2017).⁹

New Additions to the Development Framework: The New Consensus on Development, Czech Republic 2030 and the Development Cooperation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2018–2030

In summary, the bases of Czech development policy emerged in the last four years as a combination of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' broad concept and the progressive *ad hoc* formalisation of the partial interests of other ministries. In 2017 this layout seemed set to change, thanks to the introduction of a broader framework of sustainable development and a concurrent proposal of an updated development co-operation strategy to come into effect from 2018 onwards. As for the former of the two processes – referring to the EU's own approach to sustainable development and making it a superordinate concept that would link internal and external development and define a clearer relation between various policies – it did not lead to a success, mainly

because the two documents that were supposed to translate the 2030 Agenda into the EU and Czech policies came short of the original expectations.

The *New European Consensus on Development*¹⁰ – adopted in June 2017 as the EU’s reaction to and reception of the SDGs – limits itself to emphasising the many goals the EU wants to pursue in its development policies. It does not propose an overarching European narrative of development (in the vein of the SDGs), while at the same time being rather generic in regard to the practicalities. Moreover, it introduces to the European development framework some aspects that prove controversial in the Czech development practice – namely the above discussed inclusion of migration prevention as an objective and calls for a broader private sector engagement, with only generic guarantees of benefits to the recipient countries. The latter was already partially put into action with the introduction of the EU External Investment Plan¹¹ and its financing mechanism, the European Sustainable Development Fund,¹² which is expected to trigger €44 billion of private investments from an initial €4.1 billion contribution from the European Commission.

Unlike the New Consensus, the *Strategic Framework Czech Republic 2030*¹³ does a good job of emphasising the Czech commitment to sustainable development and making the interests of the recipient a clear priority (which it requests to be translated into the respective policies). It also renews the 0.33% ODA/GNI target to be reached by 2030. However, the future of the document itself looks somewhat uncertain. Adopted in April 2017 by the Sobotka government, the framework has received little attention after the October parliamentary elections and the whole sustainable development agenda seems to be slipping into the background. In fact, the Council for Sustainable Development is expected to be moved from the Office of the Government to the Ministry of the Environment in early 2018,¹⁴ a move that will likely imply a step back to a narrowly defined sustainability and, indirectly, cause development co-operation to remain a self-standing policy area open to the various stakeholders’ interpretations.

The specificity that the development policy still lacks in the overall framing was obtained on the strategic level, as the government endorsed the *Development Cooperation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2018–2030*.¹⁵ Its proponents from the MFA’s Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Department present the document as stemming from a two-year participative process, although they admit that there were several points of disagreement and thus the resulting document clearly reflects their own (rather than all the stakeholders’) understanding of development policy. While confirming the general course of events, the non-governmental sector representatives (namely the Forum on Development Cooperation) provide a different perspective of the process, which they say concluded so abruptly as to represent an effective breach of its continuity, transparency and participation.

By defining Czech development policy as “*an expression of solidarity, a key instrument of foreign policy, and an investment into the country’s own security*”, the Strategy does not challenge the ambiguity of its priorities. Rather, it confirms the partial departure from the original framework (the Act n. 151/2010 and the 2015 *Concept of the Czech Republic’s Foreign Policy*), which clearly prioritised fighting global in-

equalities over other interests. The new Strategy seems to consider all three aspects equal, thus formalising, rather than confronting, the increasingly instrumental approach to development co-operation. It does, however, set up five concrete priorities for the agenda to follow: “*building stable and democratic institutions [...] sustainable management of natural resources, agriculture and rural development [...] inclusive social development and economic growth*”. These priorities are meant as a translation of nine sustainable development goals.

The priorities are to be promoted in six pre-approved partner countries – a reduction from the previous five priority and five project countries, which themselves were a result of several previous reductions in the number of partners. As within the previous strategy, the partner countries are a combination of non-European LDCs (Cambodia, Ethiopia, and Zambia) and European MICs (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova, and Georgia). Besides updating the goals and partner countries, the approach of the new Strategy is mostly innovative in promoting two new principles: the continuity of humanitarian aid, development co-operation, trade partnerships and sustainable development (in this order), and a strong emphasis on private sector involvement. Both of the ideas can be subsumed under the general scheme of aid-co-operation-investment, which steers the development policy towards a business-oriented model – a move criticised by the Forum on Development Cooperation as possibly driving the agenda away from sustainable development towards Czech self-interest. The proposed model will require the introduction of novel instruments, especially new forms of investment promotion, to accompany the traditional development project format (incl. the probable creation of a new national development bank to facilitate the access to the EFSD financing).

AGENDA AND EVENTS

In 2016 the development agenda underwent a significant discursive evolution: the gradual weakening of the development-migration nexus that dominated across the political spectrum since the 2015 European migration crisis, and the emergence of an understanding of development in terms of its economic potential. We thus called the year 2016 transitional and expected the discourse to become clearer in the following years. The year 2017 seems to corroborate this prediction, although instead of a more distinct discourse characterised by the prevalence of either the ethical, migration and/or economisation theme, both the politicians and the public debate seem to have become less interested in the agenda altogether. One can hardly talk about a new dominant discourse when there is mostly none, since the development agenda has slipped under the radar of mainstream politics. When it does occasionally appear in the political discourse, development co-operation seems to be extremely polarising, with one side opposing it altogether, while the other uses a mix of moral, security and economic arguments to justify its existence.

While migration remained a part of the political debate, the focus has been on a single issue: the Czech refusal of the migrant quotas, both permanent and provi-

sional, which became a *sine qua non* of Czech politics with all the major parties in agreement on the issue. The main argument has therefore shifted from promises of *help on spot* (as observed in the previous years) to calling the quota system dysfunctional. The topic mostly emerged in reference to the developments on the EU level, which included the Czech refusal to participate in the system,¹⁶ the unsuccessful legal challenge of the quotas by Hungary, Poland and Slovakia,¹⁷ the related disagreements of the EU bodies,¹⁸ and the infringement procedures launched against the country by the European Commission.¹⁹ Regardless of these events, however, the position of both of the Czech governments in 2017 (the originally incumbent Sobotka government and the post-election Babiš government) has remained unchanged: the quotas can be refused solely on the basis of them not working, and not by appealing to other foreign activities, such as development co-operation.

As a result, the previously strong migration-development nexus was only touched upon occasionally in 2017 – most notably in relation to the parliamentary elections. Nearly all the parties included a reference to humanitarian and development activities as an instrument to prevent migration in their programmes, with only one subtle difference between the positions of the outgoing government parties and the opposition. While the former (ČSSD,²⁰ ANO,²¹ and KDU-ČSL²²) emphasised the role of development co-operation in resolving the ongoing crisis, the latter (ODS,²³ TOP 09,²⁴ STAN²⁵ and the newly emerging Pirate Party²⁶) assumed a more long-term view and stressed the connections between the development agenda, economic co-operation and the promotion of democracy and human rights. As for the protest parties, the Communist Party²⁷ avoided the topic altogether, while SPD²⁸ declared its support for development co-operation but at the same time used its programme to criticise the supposed lack of transparency of the involved NGOs. The newly formed Babiš government limited itself to declaring, “[*We want*] to reform development programmes so that they will focus on failed countries. The Czech side will aim to solve crises in the country of origin,” while also re-asserting the previous government’s commitment to remain “active in the field of development cooperation and humanitarian aid”.²⁹ By the end of 2017 these intentions have remained somewhat vague, as the new Prime Minister Andrej Babiš only participated in the December EU summit, where the attention was once again centred on the management of migration and quotas. The V4 countries announced a common €35 million contribution to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, which will, however, support Italy’s project for the protection of the Libyan border.³⁰

Besides the migration-development nexus (and the idea of helping on spot), both of the previously observed alternative conceptions – the security and the economic discourse of development – have also resurfaced from time to time. The former appeared in a proposal by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs Cyril Svoboda, who called for the aid provided to Libya to be preconditioned on allowing foreign (EU/UN) military operations there.³¹ The latter was mostly promoted by the implementers of the agenda – the MFA and the Czech Development Agency (CzDA) – who have repeatedly called for an understanding of development as a long-term investment.³²

Finally, the main debate currently faced by the Czech development policy may not concern its framing (as was the case in the past). With a political scene that is becoming increasingly pragmatic and nationalistic, the question is not only what the goals of the development policy should be, but rather whether the agenda is to be promoted at all. In 2017, the voices doubting its importance and calling for less development strengthened. This new discourse can be found behind the parliamentary interpellation advanced by the head of the Communist Party Vojtěch Filip, who criticised the funding of NGOs and expressed doubts about the utility of development projects abroad.³³ While the former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka rejected the critique,³⁴ his government did not agree to continue expanding the agenda's funding after the already approved increases in 2018 and 2019 – reportedly as per agreement with the then Minister of Finance, Andrej Babiš.³⁵ The discourse of *less development* has become even more evident after the parliamentary elections: one of the first discussions held in the new Chamber of Deputies saw SPD's proposal for decreasing the bilateral development co-operation budget by CZK 200 million (more than 20% of the current funding), which would be redistributed as domestic social subsidies.³⁶ While not approved, the proposal shows the probable direction of the evolution of the development agenda, which now risks not only being used as an instrument for purposes other than development, but also seeing its budget decrease. Nevertheless, as the current director of the CzDA puts it, in consideration of the estimated growth of the Czech economy, maintaining the funding at the current levels in terms of % ODA/GNI (i.e. preserving its modest rate of growth) could be considered a success.

The instruments, volume and effectiveness of Czech development co-operation

At the time of writing this chapter the MFA's annual report on development co-operation, usually published in June, is not yet available. However, based on the preliminary data provided by the Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid Department it is possible to observe an increase in the finances allocated to the Czech Republic's ODA. While the overall amount has remained roughly the same, CZK 6.4 billion, there has been a significant increase in the chapters of bilateral ODA and development contributions to the EU (the seeming discrepancy is due to the appreciation of the Czech crown between 2016 and 2017). As in the previous years, the multilateral ODA has amounted to around 70% of the overall budget, whereas the already smaller portion of bilateral ODA also included in-donor refugee costs – a type of expenditure whose eligibility to be considered as ODA has been increasingly debated and restricted by the OECD due to its contributing only indirectly to development co-operation.³⁷ Finally, the value of the currently most popular indicator, the ODA/GNI ratio, has in fact worsened: due to the growth of the Czech economy, it fell from 0.14 to 0.13%.

The humanitarian aid agenda respected the allocated budget of CZK 130 million, most of which was to be gradually allocated amongst more than twenty separate interventions, with the remaining four million to be donated to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund.³⁸ As in the previous years, humanitarian aid was also provided un-

der the programmes of the Ministry of the Interior – specifically the above discussed Programme for the Assistance to Refugees in the Regions of Origin and Prevention of Large Migration Flows with a budget of CZK 178 million,³⁹ which was once again divided among projects in the countries along the main migration routes – and the medical MEDEVAC programme with a budget of CZK 69 million.⁴⁰ Similarly to the previous years, for 2017, it must be noted that while the formal competence for managing humanitarian aid outside of the EU belongs to the MFA, it is in fact the Ministry of the Interior that manages most of the funds.

Of the five independent evaluation reports commissioned by the MFA in 2017, only two of the evaluated projects were development projects – one (published in early 2018) focussing on the social care and inclusive education for children with disabilities in the Takeo province, Cambodia,⁴¹ and the other focussing on the construction of a biomass heating plant in Nemila, Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁴² The projects received an overall positive evaluation, although both evaluations found some problematic aspects in their management. Specifically, the first of the projects had high administrative/management costs, while the second showed signs of lacking forward planning, leading to hard-to-assess environmental results and low sustainability in the long run (due to inadequate preliminary data and an insufficient participation by the locals).

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KEY ACTORS

The President, the Government and the Parliament of the Czech Republic

As discussed above, compared to the heightened interest development co-operation received in the last few years, in 2017 it has slowly but surely disappeared from the Czech political debate. We can mostly attribute this to the weakening of the migration pressures, and the unsuccessful reframing of the issue in terms of sustainable development, as well as the polarisation of the positions, as a part of the political spectrum doubts its overall usefulness. Because of this process, few politicians have engaged with the agenda on the government or parliamentary level. The President Miloš Zeman, while vocal about migrants⁴³ and in agreement with the Communists' and SPD's critique of the non-governmental organisations, which he famously described as leeches,⁴⁴ has only mentioned development co-operation once by referring to the help on spot concept and affirming that the Czech Republic was providing enough development aid.⁴⁵

Similarly, positions on the development agenda remained unvaried and unchallenged in the pre-election Sobotka government. Bohuslav Sobotka himself has only mentioned the agenda once when he said that it was successful,⁴⁶ leaving the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek to be the only member of the government who addressed the agenda repeatedly and in detail. Besides promoting the repeated increases in the development co-operation budget,⁴⁷ Zaorálek reiterated its connection to security,⁴⁸ migration⁴⁹ and the economic co-operation and opening of new markets.⁵⁰

Interestingly, he remained a vocal supporter of development co-operation even after leaving his position after the elections. The Babiš government, on the other hand, having been in office only since 6 December, has not had a chance to address the topic by the end of the year. Babiš himself focussed on migration, while the new Minister of Foreign Affairs Martin Stropnický has not publicly engaged with the agenda at all.

Finally, at the level of the Parliament the main development-related issues were of course the above discussed attacks on the whole agenda and its budget. Interestingly, when voting on the proposed reduction of the development co-operation budget, the Chamber of Deputies did not seem divided along party lines as deputies from very different parties both opposed (ANO, KDU-ČSL, the Czech Pirate Party) and arguably supported the motion by abstaining from the vote (ODS, ČSSD, the Communist Party).⁵¹ Although this is just a subtle indication, it could suggest that the development policy is not considered a party-political topic, but also that the scepticism concerning the usefulness of development co-operation is widespread across the political spectrum.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Council on Development Cooperation and the Czech Development Agency

Considering the general political disinterest, it was mostly its implementers, the MFA and the CzDA, that controlled the development agenda. The Ministry represented the Czech Republic at most development-related events, including those formerly attended by the prime minister, such as the April conference *Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region*.⁵² The positions were mostly consulted within (and with reference to) the Council on Development Cooperation, which met four times.⁵³ The MFA also organised specific events in the context of the preparation of a Czech position for the Abidjan summit (namely the conference *Africa as a Partner* in May and two round tables for the MFA's institutional/external partners in September) and a seminar focussing on the EU funds for external co-operation.⁵⁴

As announced by its former director Michal Kaplan, in 2017 the CzDA began its transformation from a small centralised development agency to a medium-sized decentralised one. As the MFA points out and the current president of the CzDA himself admits, this process is still not complete. In 2017, the Agency has launched several efforts which should yield full results in a short-/medium-term horizon: it has sent its first two employees to serve as development diplomats to Ethiopia and Cambodia (and another two should be sent to other countries soon),⁵⁵ and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the designated national development bank (ČMZRB) and the state export insurer (EGAP) in order to offer its clients a more comprehensive *package* to invest in the partner countries.⁵⁶ It has also been accredited for the delegate co-operation of the EU Commission and has started the process of preparing its first application for it.⁵⁷ The CzDA hopes that these changes will enable it to provide its services more efficiently, while also securing an exponential amount of private and/or European funds.

NGOs, the Private Sector and Local Autonomies

The non-governmental sector was once again mostly represented by the Forum on Development Cooperation (FoRS), which continued its long-term advocacy and reporting activities. The organisation has been an active participant in the preparation of the strategic document *Czech Republic 2030* and the new Development Cooperation Strategy. It has engaged with the members of the Parliament by organising the annual meeting on development co-operation at the Chamber of Deputies in March⁵⁸ and by publicly enquiring about their positions on development cooperation before the parliamentary elections.⁵⁹ The FoRS has also promoted the overall awareness of the agenda by organising several events for the public.⁶⁰ As for its reporting, the 2018 *Aidwatch* report has not been published at the time of writing of this chapter. However, since most of the issues addressed in its 2017 version persist, the FoRS is likely to re-propose its main talking points: increasing the development co-operation budget after 2020, incorporating the agenda in a broader political framework, prioritising the needs of the recipients, etc.⁶¹

Compared to previous years, local autonomies have been less involved in the development agenda in 2017, although some promotional activities as well as a few development projects of the cities themselves did appear.⁶² In the private sector, although it is much less centralised than the non-profit area, the Business Platform for Foreign Development Cooperation (PPZRS) remained the most vocal exponent. It mostly engaged with its entrepreneurial audience through its quarterly bulletin, in which it welcomed the growing inclusion of the private sector in development co-operation, and also presented specific investment opportunities in developing countries.⁶³ In 2017 the Platform did not organise its own events, but it has announced several for 2018 in connection with the possibilities under the new Development Cooperation Strategy.⁶⁴

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

Following the strong themes of 2015 (the European Year of Development) and 2016 (Sustainable Development), the media coverage and presence of the development agenda in the public space in 2017 looked rather bleak. Mainstream media outlets mostly focussed on appealing development projects,⁶⁵ while the development actors themselves were mostly active on Facebook. With the numbers of followers steadily increasing for all the major actors, both the non-governmental organisations' and the CzDA's profiles seem to have improved in quality, presenting contents fitting the use of social networks. Public-space-wise the development agenda gained some notoriety thanks to the controversial campaign by the NGO People in Need consisting of billboards featuring only a few words ("Thank you, Czechs") written in foreign languages and scripts, which were reported as having caused fears and/or being considered a provocation before the unveiling of the meaning of the campaign.⁶⁶

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The above presented analysis of the Czech development policy in 2017 leads us to conclude with two rather disparate findings. While on the management and implementation level the development is constantly evolving, albeit slowly and not without difficulties, a significant portion of the public and politicians has gradually lost interest in it and started challenging its significance for the country. One could argue that this was also the case before the 2015–2016 spike in interest in development co-operation caused by the migration crisis and, to a lesser extent, by the UN's new development framework and its promotion. The 2017 downturn would then simply be a result of the unavoidable exhaustion of the temporary aberration. However, the growing polarisation and pragmatism of the Czech political discourse seem to represent a new kind of challenge for the development agenda. If before the migration crisis development co-operation was not a priority, but at the same time it was not challenged on a larger scale, at the end of 2017 the political scene seemed to be mostly split between those who reverted to seeing the agenda as a non-priority and those who are likely to actively oppose it. Judging from the vote on decreasing the development co-operation budget which took place in late 2017, the latter may comprise a significant number of politicians from across the whole spectrum.

The promise of a *benign politicisation* that would allow the development agenda to become a distinct, if minor, priority of Czech foreign policy through its incorporation into a broader sustainable development narrative, has also remained unfulfilled, as the framework itself faces an uncertain future. Rather, the development co-operation implementers – namely the MFA and the CzDA – have been increasingly appealing to the nexus between Czech development policy and the country's economic interests. Development co-operation and investment opportunities are defined as directly linked in the new *Development Cooperation Strategy of the Czech Republic 2018–2030*, while both the MFA and the CzDA promise to gradually introduce a more business-oriented model of development co-operation. Although criticised by the non-governmental sector, this *alternative pragmatism* seems to have at least some chance of competing with the *less development* discourse: we therefore deem it likely to shape the Czech development policy in the foreseeable future, especially in the light of the results of the 2017 parliamentary and the early 2018 presidential elections, and also the Czechs' long-term views on migration and foreign aid, which all point to a socio-political context unlikely to change. In short, in the upcoming years Czech development co-operation is likely to remain a constantly evolving, well performed non-priority.

Endnotes

- ¹ I would like to thank Václav Bálek, the director, and Hana Volná from the Department of Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid of the MFA for the interview with them (4 April 2018); Pavel Frelich, the director of the Czech Development Agency, for the interview with him (11 April 2018); and Katarína Šrámková, the senior policy officer of the Czech Forum for Development Cooperation, for answering my questions in writing. I would also like to thank the editors of this volume as well as Ondřej Horký-Hlucháň (IIR) and Kamil Píkal (MFA) for their comments on a draft version of this chapter. Any errors or omissions are solely my responsibility.
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