
Chapter 4

France and the United Kingdom in the Czech Foreign Policy

MORE EU OR LESS EU?

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Executive Summary: Both France and the United Kingdom (the UK) occupy a stable position in the Czech Republic's foreign relations. Both countries have had asymmetrical and pragmatic relationships with the Czech Republic in the last decade, which were mostly influenced by the multilateral context of European integration. The recent developments on the British political scene and the Brexit process have changed the general atmosphere of the Czech-British relations on the one hand and opened a new space for the changing role of France in the European Union on the other. However, at the end of 2017 it was still unclear how precisely these changes would influence the bilateral relations. Thus a major characteristic of the Czech relations with Great Britain and France in the year 2017 was a strong element of continuity in a changing context, as it was a year of mutual observations and expectations between the three states.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Compared to the previous years, the year 2017 has not brought any new topic that would monopolise or largely influence the Czech-French relations, as was, for example, the case with the completion of the nuclear power plant Temelín and the end of the Czech negotiations with the French company Arreva in the past. The overall context was primarily influenced by the changes on both the French and the Czech political scenes. In France, a new president was elected in the second round of the elections in May 2017: Emmanuel Macron became the eighth president of the French Fifth Republic, defeating the Front National's leader Marine Le Pen. His victory transformed the French political representation and party system, as the parliamentary elections' results confirmed in June 2017. With Macron a new energy and new topics entered the French political arena, which also created new fears and expectations in the EU

member states. Already in his pre-election campaign, Macron opened a debate on EU-related topics and positioned himself as a pro-European leader who would support a stronger France in a strong EU, with an emphasis on deeper co-operation among Eurozone countries.

More specifically, Macron developed his ideas about the future of Europe in his ‘Initiative for Europe Speech’, which he delivered at Sorbonne University in September 2017.¹ In his speech, Macron highlighted the symbolic and geopolitical importance of the European Union: *“I have come to talk to you about Europe [...] and I will not stop talking about it. Because this is where our battle lies, our history, our identity, our horizon, what protects us and give us a future.”*² He also adopted the position of a strong supporter of a deeper integration, a visionary leader who will not accept a framing of EU-related topics as peripheral or harmful for France. It was a signal for both French citizens and all EU countries that France will not abandon its role as a strong EU leader and leave the core of the EU. The speech generated various types of reactions in EU countries – from approval to fear (especially of his federal vision of Europe and the perceived possible weakening of the positions and space for manoeuvre of small EU countries). It also gained a lot of attention in the public and media space.

Meanwhile, the Czech political scene was marked by internal political struggles, the parliamentary elections in October 2017 (without a new government being put together till the end of the year) and the then forthcoming presidential elections. As a result, no major initiatives were taken in terms of foreign policy in general and in the context of the Czech-French relations in particular. Under these circumstances, the year 2017 contrasted with the previous year, which was characterised by an intensive official visits agenda between the two countries and the will of Sobotka’s government to maintain the Czech-French relations at a high level. The top-level visits included the French president François Hollande visiting the Czech Republic in November 2016 and the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka visiting France in March 2016.

In the case of the United Kingdom,³ the conceptual background of the Czech policy towards this country has been laid down by the 2015 Concept of the Czech Republic’s Foreign Policy, which specifically ascribes an important role to the UK, especially in terms of the Common Foreign and Security Policy [CFSP] and the Common Commercial Policy.⁴ Characterised by substantial continuity, the trend from previous years of a practical, pragmatic (rather than strategic), depoliticised, and decentralised Czech-British bilateral co-operation in various areas of mutual interest and at multiple levels of governance continued also into 2017.⁵

In marked contrast to the past (with the potential exception of the second half of 2016), however, the 2017 Czech-British bilateral relations were considerably influenced, if not overshadowed, by the process of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. Indeed, Brexit has become an omnipresent issue of virtually every bilateral meeting and/or interaction between the two states. According to a Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official, the bilateral dimension comprised as little as one per cent of Czech-UK interactions in 2017.⁶ While the exact percentage is irrelevant here – leaving aside the fact that it might be impossible to gauge with any precision – it serves

well to illustrate that the bilateral agenda was widely perceived as heavily sidelined by and inextricably linked to Brexit.⁷ Adding to this was the Brexit-imposed high degree of uncertainty and unpredictability, which also, to an extent, made the bilateral co-operation more difficult than usual.

Owing to Brexit, the importance of bilateral Czech-British ties was reiterated more often than ever before, with the relations being invariably described by both sides as good⁸ or “of the highest quality”.⁹ Similarly, the traditions underpinning them were vigorously highlighted throughout 2017 as well (the UK was, for instance, called “a historic partner of the Czech Republic”,¹⁰ and both countries were referred to as “friends and allies for generations”¹¹).¹²

Overall, there was no element of polarisation in the 2017 Czech-UK bilateral agenda; instead there was a strong cross-party consensus, for instance, on the areas in which the Czech Republic should cultivate its relations within the UK post-Brexit, both within and outside the EU framework – i.e., trade relations; security and defence; and science, research and education.¹³ There was no evidence of major politicisation here either. The only partially politicised¹⁴ and contentious issue pertaining to the mutual relations was the not-guilty verdict of the Old Bailey court which acquitted a Briton named Raymond Sculley in the case of the death of a Czech citizen named Zdeněk Makar. Sculley was suspected of beating Makar to death on the evening of 21 September 2016 but was cleared by a jury of both murder and the alternative charge of manslaughter on 3 April 2017, at the end of an eight-day trial.¹⁵ The case raised substantial emotions in the Czech Republic, with several thousand people having signed a petition calling for justice for Makar,¹⁶ and, as will be seen further on, it generated much diplomatic activity.

Equally importantly, the Czech Republic’s 2017 foreign policy making towards the UK can be characterised as generally neutral and largely reactive – in no small measure due to the emphasis put on the EU’s unity vis-à-vis the withdrawal negotiations. Yet, the degree of Czech reactivity varied across different areas. Another interesting point to stress here is that from the UK’s perspective, the partnership with the Czech Republic gained on importance in 2017 because of Brexit, thereby slightly reducing the asymmetry which had long been a key defining feature of the mutual relations.

FRANCE IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: TOWARDS A NEW ACTION PLAN AGENDA AND EVENTS

Although there was no dominant topic in the Czech-French relations in 2017, we can highlight four phenomena that influenced the field: the preparation of the new Action Plan for the years 2014–2018 (Plan d’action du partenariat stratégique 2018–2022 entre la République française et la République tchèque – 1), the new developments in the new form of regional co-operation known as the Slavkov format (2),¹⁷ the preparation of the 1918 and 1968 anniversary celebrations that were to be held in 2018 (3) and the new intensive exchange and consultation practices between Czech and French ministries (4).¹⁸

The Strategic Partnership

The strategic partnership between the Czech Republic and France, which was signed in 2010 in Prague, represents the main framework of the Czech-French bilateral relations. Specific areas of the co-operation are mentioned and developed in the Action Plans of the Strategic Partnership.¹⁹ The related activities in 2017 were still guided by the 2014–2018 Action Plan. In the meantime, the ministries of both countries, coordinated by the ministries of foreign affairs, have co-operated in drafting the new Action Plan for the 2018–2022 period since autumn 2017. The new document reflects the countries' good will towards each other and the motivation of both countries to cultivate high quality relations in various areas: foreign policy, defence, justice and home affairs, economic and financial co-operation, agriculture and fisheries, environment, transports, energy, employment, social affairs, health, education, and youth, culture and sport. The Action Plan, according to the relevant stakeholders, is a result of a smooth preparatory phase, a common effort of both countries and a proof of the good co-operation between their ministries.

There were no major cleavages or critical moments during the preparation of the document.²⁰ In the long-term context, the Action Plan is situated within the long-term developments of different agendas and does not bring any major changes. One can nevertheless identify the priorities for individual sectors of the co-operation: in foreign policy, the priorities are the multilateral context of the bilateral relations with an emphasis on the EU, and an intensification of consultations on strategic topics; in defence, they are the preparation of the consecutive presidencies of the EU in 2022 in the domain of defence, the continuity in the military engagements of both countries in EU and UN operations, in particular MINUSMA, and French language courses for Czech soldiers; in justice and home affairs, they are cyber security co-operation, and more dialogue on asylum and migration policies; in the economic and financial co-operation, the priority is the preparation for the post-2020 pluriannual budget; and in the areas of energy (especially in the domain of the civil use of nuclear energy), employment, social affairs, health, education, youth, culture and sport, the priorities are the continuous support for bilingual sections, student and academic mobility and the teaching of the French language in the Czech Republic.

The Slavkov Format

The Slavkov format of regional co-operation was launched in January 2015 when the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka met with the Austrian Federal Chancellor Werner Faymann and the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. Their discussion focussed on employment, good neighbourhood policy, and EU policies. In August 2017, in the fourth Slavkov format meeting, the current representatives of the three countries met in Salzburg with Emmanuel Macron²¹ to discuss issues of economic and social convergence, safety and migration.²² The meeting served as an opportunity to bring the Central European countries' positions and the French view on the Posting of Workers Directive closer to each other.

This platform is important for Czech external relations for several different reasons. First, it opens up positive ways of co-operation between the Czech Republic and Austria. Second, when seen from the French perspective, it brings together the credible members of the Visegrad Group and also gives France a chance to interact with Central European countries. At the 2017 Slavkov format meeting, the Czech Prime Minister also invited the newly elected French President for an official visit to the Czech Republic. On the occasion of the visit, the new Action Plan of Strategic Partnership could be signed between the representatives of the two countries, but the visit will only take place if the political context is favourable for a high level meeting.²³

The Expert Level of Czech–French Relations

The fourth main phenomenon in the 2017 Czech–French relations was the new trend consisting of closer co-operation mechanisms between the ministries of both countries. The practice of the two countries' direct consultations, in which the participants were mostly high ranking foreign ministry officials, was very intensive in 2017, especially since September (the topics of the consultations included, for instance, the Middle East and EU affairs). At the same time, the Czech Government Office has developed more contacts with France based on direct experiences in Prague and Paris by sending its officials to the Secrétariat général des affaires européennes – SGAE (four shorter stays in 2017) and receiving a *fonctionnaire détaché* from the French Ministry of Finance (with a longer presence: 2017–2018). These exchanges were very positively evaluated by both sides, generated a greater understanding for the position and institutional culture of *the other* and have already brought positive results.²⁴

The Cultural Element of Czech–French Relations: Still the Essential Dimension

The preparation of the 1918 and 1968 anniversary celebrations to be held in 2018 constituted the third important element of the Czech–French relations in 2017.²⁵ Unfortunately, there has not been a larger pluridisciplinary debate initiative or a conceptual or strategic document analysing the potential of the anniversaries in the context of Czech foreign policy or Czech–French relations. The preparation of the anniversaries has been in the hands of different institutional actors, such as public diplomacy actors, embassies, ministries and various cultural institutions.²⁶ The anniversaries were also mentioned in the Action Plan, but only as a contextual element in the paragraphs devoted to foreign affairs.

In addition to these developments, one important and symbolic aspect of the Czech–French relations deserves more attention – the 100th anniversary of the Czech sections at two French lycées (Lycée Carnot in Dijon, and Lycée Alphonse Daudet in Nîmes). Both sections represent a stable and strong element of the relations.²⁷ Both have become a cultural symbol, and moreover, the two schools generated a large alumni network that is active as a group or in the form of individual actors in the Czech–French relations.²⁸

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KEY ACTORS

No new actor appeared in the official Czech-French relations in 2017. The structure and the formal and informal hierarchies remained the same as in previous years. The main institutional actors were represented by embassies, cultural centres (the Czech Centre in Paris, the Institut français de Prague), the ministries of foreign affairs on both sides, SGAE and the Czech Government Office, and, in the field of the very well functioning economic and business co-operation, both countries' Chambers of Commerce. Neither the Czech nor the French Parliament has represented the driving force in the relationship. In the domain of academic and research co-operation, the Cefres (Centre français des études en sciences sociales) strengthened its role as the main actor and developed new partnerships both in the Czech Republic (especially in the framework of the Plateforme CEFRES²⁹) and in the wider Central European region.

Both countries appointed new ambassadors in 2017: in February Petr Drulák became the Ambassador of the Czech Republic in France, and in March 2017 Roland Galharague became the ambassador of France in the Czech Republic. Both ambassadors actively started building their presence in the local networks, focussing in both cases on the diplomatic presence not only in the respective capitals, but also outside of Paris and Prague. In the public and cultural diplomacy sector, the fact that after the departure of the former director Jean Gaspard Páleníček there was no new director of the Czech Centre in Paris became a media issue in the first half of 2017, and it even mobilised individual actors from the cultural and research milieux, among others.³⁰ Nevertheless, until the end of 2017, the Czech Centre in Paris did not have a permanent director.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

In the Czech Republic, topics related to French politics are not among the main policy themes covered in the Czech public media (here, the relationship is less asymmetrical than in other areas, as Czechia does not appear much in the French media either). However, the year 2017 brought two exceptions to this tendency: first, the two rounds of the French presidential elections (in April and May 2017) gained a lot of attention in the Czech media, maybe a little bit more than the French presidential elections of previous years (this was largely thanks to the fact that Macron was a relative political newcomer with a specific, almost celebrity-like style while his counterpart Marine Le Pen was from the nationalistic party Front National). Second, in September 2017 the Czech media commented on and analysed the above mentioned speech by Macron *Initiative for Europe*.³¹

THE UNITED KINGDOM IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: IN THE SHADOW OF BREXIT AGENDA AND EVENTS

As far as the UK is concerned, the overview of the 2017 agenda and events is best structured along the following four areas: 1) the diplomatic agenda; 2) the European Union agenda; 3) economic co-operation and 4) defence and police co-operation and co-operation in other areas.

The Diplomatic Agenda

Compared to 2016, the intensity of the Czech-UK bilateral diplomacy increased slightly in 2017, to a considerable degree because of Brexit. Interestingly, a larger proportion than usual of the high-level political meetings were held in Prague rather than London. What also stood out in contrast to the past was a higher number of ad-hoc, impromptu visits of British representatives to the Czech Republic – often arranged, rather hastily, at times when the withdrawal negotiations appeared to have hit a stumbling block or ahead of crucial EU summits.³²

On 26 June 2017 the Czech President Miloš Zeman was given an audience by the British Queen Elizabeth II. Despite not being accorded the status of a state visit (and some etiquette missteps by the President notwithstanding), the audience was interpreted by both embassies as a high point of the mutual diplomatic activity in 2017. During his one-day visit to the UK, the Czech President also met the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Boris Johnson and gave medals to several Czech and Slovak veterans who served in the Royal Air Force during the Second World War.³³

Furthermore, the Czech Republic hosted several visits from the UK at the ministerial level in 2017, including those of the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union David Davis (25 July), the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Boris Johnson (25 September) and the Minister of State for Trade and Investment Greg Hands (8 August). Conversely, Czech working visits to the UK were carried out by the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs Michaela Marksová (23 March) and the Minister of Culture Daniel Herman (30 August–1 September).

As noted earlier, much high-level diplomatic activity was generated by the court's verdict over the death of Zdeněk Mazar. Not only did the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka hold a phone talk with the British Prime Minister Theresa May over the issue but the Czech Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek, having described the verdict as "*grossly unjust and a failure of justice*",³⁴ summoned the British ambassador for an explanation. He further discussed the matter with Boris Johnson in Brussels and brought the case up in talks with the Council of Europe Secretary General. On top of that, the Czech MFA handed over a diplomatic note about the issue to the UK and supported the victim's sister in filing a complaint against the verdict at the European Court of Human Rights.³⁵

The European Union Agenda

The European Union continued to provide a crucial context for the Czech-British relations, with the Czech Republic having long regarded the UK as its “*strong and close partner*”³⁶ within the European power game. It is especially, albeit not exclusively, because of this reason that the Czech political representatives frequently echoed the sentiment of regret over the UK’s decision to withdraw from the EU in 2017 as well.³⁷ Essentially, both countries kept on sharing a similar outlook on a range of EU policy areas, including nuclear power, further liberalisation of global trade and the EU Emissions Trading System.³⁸ At the same time, however, in some areas, such as, for instance, the CFSP/CSDP, their previously shared policy approaches started to diverge.³⁹

Crucially, though, there has been one common concern voiced by almost all the interviewees for this chapter across a wide range of Czech ministries and institutions, which is probably best termed as “*the effect of the Brexit-incurred de-Europeanisation of bilateral relations*”. As a country that has long directly benefited from the wealth of British expertise (be it in the area of environmental protection, security, science, or research), the Czech Republic has been concerned about whether, let alone how and when, the thick network of bilateral contacts, exchanges, and consultations, which is nowadays – rather conveniently and somewhat automatically – anchored within the EU institutional and policy-making framework, will be replicated once the UK leaves the bloc.

Economic Co-operation

The UK has long been an important trading and investment partner of the Czech Republic. Based on a year-on-year comparison, the mutual trade exchange between the two countries witnessed an increase in 2017, albeit it was not as substantive as those in previous years. The total mutual trade turnover amounted to CZK 307.656 million in 2017, which was a slight increase from the 301.405 million figure of the year before, making the UK the seventh largest trade partner for the Czech Republic, with a 3.9% share of its foreign trade.

At the same time, the UK was listed as the country’s fifth largest export partner, surpassed only by Germany, Slovakia, Poland, and France. Yet, whereas in absolute terms, both exports and imports to/from the UK rose in 2017 compared to 2016 (from CZK 208.167 to 209.410 million, and from CZK 93,239 to 98,246 million respectively), slight decreases, chiefly because of the weak pound, were registered in relative terms (a drop from a 5.2% to a 5.0% share in the case of exports, and another drop from a 2.6 to a 2.5% share in the case of imports). No less importantly, just like in previous years, the Czech Republic recorded a positive trade balance with the UK in 2017 (albeit with a drop of 3.3 percentage points from its level in 2016).⁴⁰

In 2017, the UK also kept its ranking among the top ten investors in the country.⁴¹ What is interesting to note, however, is the sizeable increase of Czech investments in the UK – in large part due to the purchase of two gas-fired power plants, Langage and South Humber Bank, by Daniel Křetínský’s EPH company for CZK 9.5 billion.⁴²

Defence and Police Co-operation and Co-operation in Other Areas

In line with previous years, both countries nurtured their ties in the security and defence arena, with the mutual co-operation still strongly embedded within the wider multilateral framework of NATO and EU membership. Most profoundly, it was still the BMATT programme (*British Military Advisory and Training Team for Central and Eastern Europe*), established in 2000 and commonly perceived as “*the crown jewel of the bilateral co-operation*”,⁴³ that constituted the main pillar of the mutual collaboration here, as it has been promoting the two countries’ military partnership and assisting with the development of professional armed forces under civil democratic control.⁴⁴ The British side also expressed a specific interest in deepening its co-operation with the elite paratroopers of the 43rd Airborne Battalion stationed in Chrudim.⁴⁵

As far as the two countries’ police co-operation is concerned, in 2017 the UK continued to rank as one of the EU countries with a relatively high record of suspects extradited to the Czech Republic via the European Arrest Warrant.⁴⁶ Additionally, a Czech Police liaison officer post was established in London in April 2017 in an attempt to improve the bilateral ties in police and criminal matters, which were hitherto not satisfactory. It was not long before it started to yield positive results, primarily in terms of streamlining the traditionally lengthy and problematic information exchange.⁴⁷ Besides this, a number of joint criminal investigations, particularly in the human trafficking field, were initiated in 2017.⁴⁸

The UK also represented an increasingly important partner for the Czech Republic in terms of education, science, and research. Interestingly, about six percent of all articles in SCOPUS-indexed journals written by Czech authors involved at least one British co-author.⁴⁹ 2017 was also characterised by a surge of contacts between Czech and British universities,⁵⁰ with the UK remaining one of the most popular Erasmus+ destination for Czech students and teachers alike.⁵¹

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KEY ACTORS

In 2017, no major changes materialised as far as key Czech domestic policy-making actors vis-à-vis the UK were concerned. It was again the Czech Government which assumed the central responsibility for formulating and implementing the Czech policy towards the UK, with a principal role played by the MFA, particularly its Department for Northern and Eastern European States.

Moreover, in order to improve its consular services and promote its economic and social ties with entities in the northern part of the UK, in June 2017 the Czech Government decided to open a new Czech Consulate General in Manchester, staffed by seven people, which was to start functioning in 2018.⁵² Further to this, Brexit was one of the reasons (not the main one, though) behind the slight strengthening of the Czech Embassy’s capacities in London, with a local expert in economic diplomacy being hired in June 2017.⁵³

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

Apart from Brexit, which generally steals a lot of headlines, it was predominantly the June snap General Election, its unexpected results, the formation of Theresa May's new government, and the precarious state of her leadership that attracted Czech media attention in 2017. Other British issues covered by the Czech media included the case of Zdeněk Makar's murder and the four terrorist attacks that the UK suffered from in 2017: the 22 March Westminster attack; the 22 May Manchester Arena bombing; the 3 June London Bridge attack and the 19 June Finsbury Park attack. On a less serious note, also the British royal family – notably the engagement of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle and Kate Middleton's third pregnancy – received substantial media coverage in 2017.

When it comes to the Czech public opinion on the UK, based on the CVVM survey conducted in October 2017, the UK ranked as the fifth most popular country among Czechs, after Slovakia, Sweden, Austria, and Norway, with 66% of Czechs viewing it in a positive light. Yet, 2017 still marked the lowest level of approval ratings for the UK since 2001, when its median popularity reached 69%, and a considerable, 13-point drop in its ratings from the 2015 levels.⁵⁴ This popularity decline has been widely attributed to the result of the British in/out referendum.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, we may state that the year 2017 showed strong and high quality ties and processes on the expert and administrative level of the Czech-French relations. Thanks to the new practices and trends in the domains of direct consultations between Czech and French ministerial representatives, and to the exchanges of experts from both sides creating more socialisation possibilities which could lead to enhancing the empathy and understanding between the two countries, the expert level of the Czech-French relations became even more effective. On the other hand, the political developments have not opened many possibilities for a more solid Czech-French partnership. The year 2017 was an interim year without any stronger political impulses; instead it was a preparatory year in many aspects of the bilateral relations, as it included the preparation of the new Action Plan, and the preparation for the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of 1918.

In the long term, the Strategic Partnership has not been losing its importance; on the contrary, it constitutes the main framework of the Czech-French bilateral co-operation and opens the door to specific steps in priority areas. As mentioned above, the Czech-French relations seem to be characterised mostly by the well-functioning expert and administrative co-operation, which is key for their better mutual understanding. What it lacks, however, is a long-term political vision that would create a space for topics that could be interesting for both partners, even in the asymmetrical setting of the Czech-French relations. The anniversary celebrations in 2018 have a big symbolic potential that can be used in this sense. Unfortunately, though, the political de-

velopments on the Czech side do not look very promising for strategic and long-term thinking and initiatives in the Czech-French partnership.

Moving on to the Czech Republic and the UK, both countries maintained a fundamentally sound and stable relationship during 2017 that ran wide, rather than deep, across many areas of activity, operated at various levels of governance and was broadly devoid of any greater politicisation or polarisation potential. At the same time, however, 2017 was a very peculiar time for the Czech-British bilateral relations as they were heavily influenced, if not overshadowed, by the issue of Brexit and the withdrawal negotiations. Relatedly, hardly any attention in the public debate was paid to the post-Brexit shape of the Czech-UK relations as such. The bilateral relationship thus found itself in a state of hibernation, or even limbo, in 2017, with its further development temporarily put on hold.

Taken together, from the Czech perspective there is a strong case for a close co-operation with the UK along a variety of fronts. The UK will, after all, remain a significant, if somewhat diminished, global actor even after its withdrawal from the EU. Yet, with Brexit set to lay bare the very nature of the Czech-British relations, the lack of any strategic substance within them is about to come sharply into focus. It is therefore essential, now more than ever, to initiate a debate on the further cultivation of the existing ties so that they do not suffer too much in the turbulent post-Brexit times, not least because of the de-Europeanisation process and reduced contacts in Brussels. In April 2017, the British Embassy in Prague came up with an initiative to reinvigorate the bilateral relations with regard to the UK's pending departure from the EU but due to obvious reasons it was not until mid-December 2017, when the Brexit talks moved on to their second phase, that the concept of enhanced relations was revived. The Czech Republic should keep pursuing this direction (carefully, of course, so as not to break ranks with the EU27) and make use of the current Brexit dynamics to build yet closer, broader and deeper links with the UK. Perhaps, it might draw *inter alia* upon the concept of the Enhanced Political Dialogue, which was established between the two countries in December 2010 and which seems rather forgotten these days.

To provide some outlook, in the area of Czech-French relations, the two countries will face (already in the near future) the preparation and reality of the forthcoming EU presidencies. The question is how the two partners will be able to use and take lessons from their last EU presidency experiences from 2008 and 2009. In the context of the Czech-British relations, the biggest challenge will be constituted by whether the relevant actors are able to maintain and cultivate the existing ties between the two countries from both the pre- and post-Brexit era. Finally yet importantly, on the symbolic level, in the case of our partnerships with both the UK and France, the year 2018 will unveil whether the 1918 and 1968 anniversary celebrations will turn out to be a missed opportunity or a moment of reflexion and mutual understanding that can bring new inspiring themes to our foreign policy and public diplomacy.

Endnotes

- ¹ France Diplomatie (2017) *Initiative for Europe, Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the French Republic* [online]. Available from: <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/european-union/events/article/president-macron-s-initiative-for-europe-a-sovereign-united-democratic-europe> (Accessed 10 April 2018).
- ² Ibid, p. 1.
- ³ Monika Brusenbauch Meislová would like to express her sincere thanks to the officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the Ministry of Defence; the Ministry of Environment; the Ministry of Interior; the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports; the Ministry of Culture; the Ministry of Trade and Industry; the British Embassy in the Czech Republic; the Czech Embassy in the United Kingdom; the British Council and the Centre for International Co-operation in Education for their generous availability and valuable insights.
- ⁴ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2015) *Koncepce zahraniční politiky České republiky [The Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy]* [online]. Available from: https://www.mzv.cz/file/1565920/Koncepce_zahranicni_politiky_CR.pdf (Accessed 4 February 2018), p. 12.
- ⁵ Neither the results of the June British General Election, nor those of the October Czech parliamentary elections altered, in any palpable way, the two countries' policies towards one another.
- ⁶ A Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official. Interviewed by: Brusenbauch Meislová, M. (13 March 2018).
- ⁷ That said, there were three components of the Brexit agenda that touched exclusively upon the Czech-British bilateral dimension (even though they were being negotiated by the European Commission on behalf of the European Council of the EU27). These were: 1) the rights of Czech citizens living, working, and studying in the UK and those of British citizens residing in the Czech Republic; 2) Brexit's implications for Czech-British economic and commercial relations and 3) mutual co-operation in the security and defence realm. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2017) Ministr L. Zaorálek jednal s ministrem pro odchod Velké Británie z EU Davisem [Minister L. Zaorálek Met with the UK's Brexit Secretary Davis]. *Bulletin Zahraniční politika České republiky [Bulletin of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic]*. Data, VII–IX/2017, p. 94; Government of the Czech Republic (2016) *Prohlášení předsedů parlamentních politických stran k jednáním o vystoupení Velké Británie z Evropské unie [Joint Statement of the Leaders of Political Parties Represented in the Parliament on the Negotiations on the United Kingdom's Withdrawal from the EU]*, 11 November 2016 [online]. Available from: <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/prohlaseni-predsedu-parlamentnich-politickyh-stran-k-jednanim-o-vystoupeni-velke-britanie-z-evropske-unie-153782/> (Accessed 2 February 2018).
- ⁸ For instance, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2017) Britská velvyslankyně navštívila Zlínský kraj [The British Ambassador Visited the Zlínský Region]. *Bulletin Zahraniční politika České republiky [Bulletin of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic]*. Data, I–III/2017, pp. 124–125.
- ⁹ For instance, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2017) Ministr L. Zaorálek jednal s ministrem pro odchod Velké Británie z EU Davisem [Minister L. Zaorálek Met with the UK's Brexit Secretary Davis]. *Bulletin Zahraniční politika České republiky [Bulletin of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic]*. Data, VII–IX/2017, p. 94.
- ¹⁰ For instance, Government of the Czech Republic (2016) *Prohlášení předsedů parlamentních politických stran k jednáním o vystoupení Velké Británie z Evropské unie [Joint Statement of the Leaders of Political Parties Represented in the Parliament on the Negotiations on the United Kingdom's Withdrawal from the EU]*, 11 November 2016 [online]. Available from: <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/prohlaseni-predsedu-parlamentnich-politickyh-stran-k-jednanim-o-vystoupeni-velke-britanie-z-evropske-unie-153782/> (Accessed 2 February 2018).

- ¹¹ For instance, Government of the United Kingdom (2017) *Obchod Británie s Českem poroste. Britský ministr Greg Hands navštívil Českou republiku, aby jednal o obchodních vztazích [The UK's Trade with the Czech Republic Is About to Grow. The British Minister Greg Hands Visited the Czech Republic to Discuss Business Relations]*, 8 August 2017 [online]. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-greg-hands-visited-prague.cs> (Accessed 15 February 2018).
- ¹² Yet, it is interesting (albeit not surprising) to note that whilst the British side showed a discursive tendency to positively portray Brexit as a new chapter in the mutual relations in an attempt to reassure the Czech Republic that it was not turning its back on it, the Czechs seemed to prefer a negative delimitation, rhetorically emphasising the need to minimise the harmful impacts of Brexit on the mutual relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic (2017) *Britská velvyslankyně v Moravskoslezském kraji jednala o nových obchodních příležitostech [The British Ambassador Discussed New Business Opportunities in the Moravian-Silesian Region]. Bulletin Zahraniční politika České republiky [Bulletin of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic]*. Data, I–III/2017 2017, p. 142; Sobotka, B. (2017) *Dobré sousedské vztahy a mezinárodní partnerství jsou klíčové pro prosperitu a bezpečnost naší země [Good Relations with Our Neighbours and International Partnerships Are Essential for Our Country's Prosperity and Security]*. Government of the Czech Republic, 28 August 2017.
- ¹³ See, for instance, Government of the Czech Republic (2017) *Informace předsedy vlády Bohuslava Sobotky k brexitu na jednání 56. schůze Poslanecké sněmovny dne 12. dubna 2017 [Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka on Brexit at the 56th Chamber of Deputies Meeting on 12 April 2017]*, 12 April 2018 [online]. Available from: <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/projevy/informace-predsedy-vlady-bohuslava-sobotky-k-brexitu-na-jednani-56--schuze-poslanecke-snemovny-dne-12--dubna-2017-155329/> (Accessed 15 February 2018).
- ¹⁴ It was politicised to such an extent that it featured as a topic in the public domain and the media and got mentioned in parliamentary debates but not in the sense of being discussed during the election debates or in political parties' manifestos.
- ¹⁵ Česká televize (2018) *Před rokem britský soud osvobodil muže, který v Londýně ubil Čecha [One Year Ago, the British Court Freed the Man Who Beat a Czech National to Death in London]. Česká televize.cz*, 3 April 2018 [online]. Available from: <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/svet/2439211-pred-rokem-britsky-soud-osvobodil-muze-ktery-v-londyne-ubil-cecha-posledni-slovo-bude> (Accessed 15 February 2018); Česká televize (2017) *Svobodu muži, který v Londýně zabil Čecha, zajistil systém precedentů a nekvalitní video [Freedom for a Man who Killed a Czech National in London Thanks to a System of Precedents and a Poor-Quality video]. Česká televize.cz*, 24 May 2017 [online]. Available from: <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/2128212-svobodu-muzi-ktery-v-londyne-zabil-cecha-zajistil-system-precedentu-a-nekvalitni> (Accessed 15 February 2018).
- ¹⁶ *Novinky.cz* (2017) *Petice požaduje spravedlnost pro Čecha zabitého v Londýně [A Petition Calls for Justice for the Czech National Killed in London]. Novinky.cz*, 5 April 2017 [online]. Available from: <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/434230-petice-pozaduje-spravedlnost-pro-cecha-zabiteho-v-londyne.html-> (Accessed 15 February 2018).
- ¹⁷ The Government of the Czech Republic (2017) *The Prime Ministers of Austria, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia Meet in Slavkov [Austerlitz] to Establish a New Format of Regional Co-operation* [online]. Available from: <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/the-prime-ministers-of-austria--the-czech-republic--and-slovakia-meet-in-slavkov-austerlitz-to-establish-a-new-format-of-regional-cooperation--126356/> (Accessed 3 April 2018).
- ¹⁸ Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs Officials, a Czech Government Office Official, and a French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official. Interviewed by: Tomalová, E. (March and April 2018).
- ¹⁹ The texts of the Action Plans are not for public use; the author would like to thank the interviewees for their comments on the topic.
- ²⁰ Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs Official and a Czech Office of the Government Official. Interviewed by: Tomalová, E. (April 2018).

- ²¹ It was the first time that the Slavkov format countries invited a guest to their meeting (in the so-called Slavkov plus format).
- ²² Czech Government Office (2017) *The Prime Ministers Dealt in the Slavkov Format on Economic and Social Convergence, Safety and Migration* [online]. Available from: <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/the-prime-ministers-dealt-in-the-slavkov-format-on-economic-and-social-convergence--safety-and-migration-159201/> (Accessed 3 April 2018).
- ²³ See, for instance, ČTK (2017) Macron asi přijede na jaře do Prahy a podepíše plán spolupráce [Macron Will Probably Visit Prague and Sign the Plan for Co-operation in the Spring]. *ČeskéNoviny.cz*, 23 August 2017 [online]. Available from: <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/macron-asi-prijede-na-jaře-do-prahy-a-podepise-plan-spoluprace/1519165> (Accessed 1 April 2018).
- ²⁴ A French Ministry of Finance Official. Interviewed by: Tomalová, E. (April 2018).
- ²⁵ On the Czech section in Dijon see Hnilica, J. (2017) *Fenomén Dijon: Století českých maturit ve Francii [The Dijon Phenomenon: A Century of Czech Graduation Exams in France]*. Praha: Karolinum.
- ²⁶ For specific events see Czechandslovakcentury.com (2018) *Celebrate Czech and Slovak Century* [online]. Available from: <https://czechandslovakcentury.com/en> (Accessed 25 March 2018).
- ²⁷ For more information on the Czech sections see, for instance, Institut Francais (n.d.) *České sekce ve Francii (Dijon, Nimes) [Czech Sections in France (Dijon, Nimes)]*. Available from: <https://studium.ifp.cz/cz/skoly/ceske-sekce-v-francii/> (Accessed 30 March 2018).
- ²⁸ For more information on the Czech sections' alumni activities see, for instance, Dijon-nimes.eu (n.d.) *Kdo jsou absolventi sekci [Who Are the Graduates of the Sections?]*. Available from: <http://dijon-nimes.eu/o-ceskych-sekcich-ve-francii/kdo-jsou-absolventi-sekci/> (Accessed 30 March 2018).
- ²⁹ For more information on Plateforme Cefres see Cefres (n.d.) *La Plateforme Cefres*. Available from: <http://www.cefres.cz/fr/la-plateforme-cefres> (Accessed 30 March 2018).
- ³⁰ Hospodářské noviny (2017) Česká centra opakují konkurz na šéfa pobočky v Paříži, vítěz toho prvního se řediteli nelíbil [The Czech Centres Will Issue a New Call for the Post of the Director of the Paris Centre. The Director of the Czech Centres Did Not Like the Winner of the First Round]. *IHNED.cz*, 8 March 2017 [online]. Available from: <https://art.ihned.cz/divadlo/c1-65651920-ceske-centrum-zavesicky-palenicek-pariz> (Accessed 1 April 2018).
- ³¹ See, for instance, Lidové noviny (2017) Exkluzivně: Macronova přelomová vize Evropy [An Exclusive: Macron's Groundbreaking Vision for Europe]. *Lidovky.cz*, 5 October 2017 [online]. Available from: https://www.lidovky.cz/macron-na-sorbonne-lidovky-cz-prinasi-cely-projev-francouzského-prezidenta-1vi-/zpravy-svet.aspx?c=A171004_205855_In_zahranici_mha (Accessed 20 March 2018).
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- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
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