
Chapter 5

The Czech Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans and Turkey

BETWEEN OFFENSIVE RHETORIC AND INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

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Executive Summary: Similarly to the previous years, in 2017 most of the Czech foreign political actors kept to the strategic notion that they support the efforts of Serbia, other Western Balkan countries and Turkey to integrate with the European Union as a means of ensuring stability, the democratic rule of law and prosperity in Southeastern Europe.² However, in regard to this matter, the Czech actors themselves were divided between those tending towards a rhetorically offensive foreign policy and those striving to co-operate in the institutional structures of the EU, NATO, and other international organisations. The Czech foreign policy towards the Balkans and Turkey also had to cope with problems stemming from the geopolitical rivalry of the EU (or the West) with Russia, instability in the Middle East, migration, the unfolding of the authoritative turn in Turkey, terrorism, the faltering of the EU integration and enlargement process, and the multiple sore points reminiscent of the Yugoslav wars. The South-East dimension, nonetheless, remained an essential aspect of the Czech foreign policy. Besides, this area has recently attracted rising volumes of Czech investments, and the mutual trade with it has been steadily growing.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Recently, the Czech foreign policy towards the Balkans and Turkey has been strategically anchored in the Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy published in August 2015 (see the Yearbooks for 2015 and 2016).³ This document puts South-eastern Europe among the main priorities, and it highlights the Czech support for the integration of Serbia, other Western Balkan countries and Turkey with the EU. The results of the parliamentary elections in October 2017 and of the presidential elec-

tions in January 2018 could bring some changes to this overall setting. Nonetheless, in 2017 the Czech foreign policy was still conducted by the government of ČSSD, ANO, and KDU-ČSL; President Zeman, and the Chamber of Deputies elected in 2013. As in 2016, in their 2017 policy towards the Balkans and Turkey, the Czech representatives dealt with the remaining security issues in the Balkans, the geopolitical and economic influence of Russia, migration, EU integration and enlargement, and trade and investment-related issues.

Regarding the security in the Balkans, the situation remained in a standby mode with NATO increasing its control over the region with the accession of Montenegro in June. The change of government in Macedonia in summer 2017 also meant a noticeable advance of the pro-Western forces in the region. Out of all the Balkan countries, only Serbia maintained a position open to military co-operation with both the West and the East. In contrast, in the case of Turkey, as a result of its domestic situation, and its rapprochement with Russia, as well as its clashes with the Kurdish militia on the Syrian battlegrounds, Turkey's relations with the rest of NATO came under pressure in 2017.

The politics of the EU regarding the Balkans and Turkey remained driven by concerns about the future of the Western Balkan states, migration, and the domestic situation in Turkey. The enlargement process saw minor progress, but it also remained plagued by many political problems. The April 2017 referendum on the Turkish presidential system and the related changes to the Turkish constitution were observed closely throughout the EU, and the increasingly nationalistic and anti-EU rhetoric in Turkey, as well as attempts to mobilise the Turkish diaspora abroad, led to severe rows between Turkey and the EU member states. Furthermore, the continuation of the purges in Turkey that started already in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016 caused further criticism from the EU, leading to questions on whether the accession process is sustainable or even appropriate in the given circumstances. Nevertheless, Turkey was admittedly seen as a partner in controlling migration by the EU. In 2017 the number of migrants using the old Balkan route decreased and the discussions focused more on the quota system than on the alarmist migration wave narrative present in the previous years.

AGENDA AND EVENTS

Political Disputes and International Security

In 2017, the Czech Republic continued its subtle involvement in the security issues linked with the Balkans and Turkey. The Czech Army did not participate extensively in the ongoing efforts to improve the interoperability and effectivity of NATO's forces in its eastern flank, which also involves the armies of Bulgaria and Romania.⁴ However, the Czech Republic remained supportive of NATO's KFOR mission in Kosovo as well as of NATO's further enlargement to the Balkans, especially to Montenegro (acceded in June 2017), Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia. When it came to the possibility of a Serbian accession to NATO, the Czech government applied a realistic

policy of not expecting any NATO integration enthusiasm in the Serbian politics and especially the Serbian society. The Czech Republic also kept attaching great importance to the partnership and co-operation with Turkey as the principal security factor in the Middle East and an important one in the Balkans. On top of this, the Czech Republic acted reactively to at least two conflictual issues linked with the Balkans: the Serbia-Kosovo dispute and the threat of Islamic terrorism.

From the Czech perspective, currently the most outstanding of the Balkan disputes is the one between Serbia and Kosovo. Throughout the last nearly two decades the representatives of the Czech Republic developed a highly ambiguous approach towards this issue, as they were split between the supporters and deniers of Kosovo's independence.⁵ As in the previous years, in 2017, the role of Kosovo's supporters was played mainly by the officials at the Czech MFA. On 23 January the Deputy Ministers Jakub Dürř and Martin Tlapa welcomed their counterpart from Kosovo Emanuel Demaj in Prague, and Minister Lubomír Zaorálek met with the Kosovar Foreign Minister Enver Hoxhaj on the margins of the Munich Security Conference on 17 February.⁶ However, the Czech interaction with Serbia took place at a much higher level. Minister Zaorálek visited Belgrade on 4 February and talked with the then-President Tomislav Nikolić, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić.⁷ Furthermore, various mutual visits of Czech and Serbian Deputy Ministers were conducted. The central role among the Czech deniers of Kosovo's independence was played by President Miloš Zeman, who repeatedly characterised Kosovo as illegitimate in his interviews and speeches.⁸ He also kept linking the way Kosovo acquired its independence with the Russian Federation's annexation of Crimea in a way that legitimised the annexation but not Kosovo's independence.⁹ On top of this, anti-Kosovo Members of Parliament continued to politicise and block the ratification of the Czech-Kosovo treaty on double taxation, which was concluded back in 2013 under the auspices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰ Thus in 2017, similarly to the previous years, the Serbia-Kosovo dispute took place right in the midst of the Czech foreign policy, and Kosovo was mostly on the losing side in the Czech view. It needs to be noted, though, that the Czech MFA continued to support the lately stalled Serbia-Kosovo dialogue on normalisation of relations mediated in the framework of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans.

Following the December 2016 parliamentary elections in FYROM, Macedonia stayed in the focus of Czech foreign policymakers since the developments in the country continued to be characterised by severe political, ethnic and social polarisations. The Russian interference in the country and the support of Nikola Gruevski's allies in the EU such as Viktor Orbán or the Czech President Zeman proved to be of lesser importance, and Czech foreign policy completely accepted the changes following the establishment of Zoran Zaev's government and its efforts to calm down the inter-ethnic tensions and speed up the country's EU and NATO integrations. A notable exception to the general improvement of Macedonia's relations with its neighbours seemed to be the deterioration of its ties with Serbia. The Macedonian support for Kosovo's membership in UNESCO resulted in the unprecedented short-term complete withdrawal of the whole Serbian diplomatic mission from Skopje in late August.¹¹ The govern-

ment, MFA, and President of the Czech Republic did not officially express any strong opinion on any of these issues.

The Greek foreign relations and, in particular, Greece's conflicted position vis-à-vis the EU and some of the most influential member states were still mostly determined by the debt crisis and its socio-economic consequences in 2017. The Czech Republic does not have much influence over these issues since it is only a small stakeholder in the IMF and it is not a member of the Eurozone. Nonetheless, President Zeman repeatedly stressed that Czechs "*shouldn't be paying Greek debts*", and therefore the Czech Republic should not accede to the Eurozone without Greece leaving it.¹² Some right-wing parties and politicians shared this offensive rhetoric of the President, which created certain long-lasting tensions between the two countries. On the other hand, on 16–17 May the Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Kotzias returned a visit to Zaorálek, who went to Athens the previous year. They discussed the future of the EU and migration-related issues, and their talks were held in a co-operative atmosphere.¹³

As hinted above, the year 2017 was also marked by a visible Czech reaction to the danger of Islamic terrorism coming from the Balkans. This reaction was established mainly by President Zeman, who repeatedly referred to the alleged presence of paramilitary training camps and the influence of radical Islamism in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁴ In this way, President Zeman shared the opinion of Croatia's President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. Moreover, the presidents of the V4 countries also made a joint statement along the same lines.¹⁵ The representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, namely the then presiding member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina Bakir Izetbegović and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Crnadak, reacted to the allegations by stating that there is no evidence for them.¹⁶ Be it as it may, by politicising the threat of Islamic terrorism in the Balkans the Czech President got involved in the fragile relations between the three nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where Bosniaks have often been accused of radical-Islamic tendencies by their Serb and Croat counterparts. On the other hand, the threat of Islamic terrorism and other forms of extremism in the other Balkan countries and the extensive export of weapons from the Balkans to the Middle-Eastern conflict zones remained beyond the scope of the Czech policy makers.

Regarding the relations with Turkey, as written already in CFP 2016, in 2016, two Czech citizens were arrested in Turkey for their alleged support of Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) units.¹⁷ As the case continued in 2017, there have been ceaseless efforts to use the Czech Republic's good relations with Turkey to mediate the extradition of the two Czech citizens. In the end, the Czech Republic had to adapt to Turkey's stance when in August 2017 both Czechs were sentenced to six years in prison, to be served in Turkey.¹⁸ At present, the last appeal in their case is being processed.¹⁹ Another point of contention with Turkey where a part of the Czech politicians adopted a rather pro-active stance took place in April 2017, when the Czech Chamber of Deputies adopted a declaration that mentions the Armenian genocide.²⁰ Furthermore, on the eve of the anniversary of the tragedy the Czech President, who had already used the term "genocide" for it before,²¹ wrote a letter of sympathy to the Armenian diaspora in the Czech Republic, labelling the killings of Armenians "one of the worst atroci-

ties” of modern times.²² Thus, this part of the Czech political scene pushed forward its agenda rather offensively. At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept up its co-operative attitude by trying to appease the Turkish side. While these acts incited a deeply disturbed reaction from the Turkish side, no official note was delivered, and the good mutual relations were reaffirmed.²³ Furthermore, the Czech Republic also reacted to the political situation in Turkey by co-operating with its partners in the Council of Europe. Namely, under the Czech Presidency the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe awarded the Václav Havel Award to Murat Arslan, “*a former Rapporteur of the Turkish Constitutional Court and [the former] President of the now dissolved Association for the Union of Judges and Prosecutors (YARSAV)*”.²⁴

EU Politics

In the Czech Republic, the Balkans and Turkey have often been debated in the context of the EU and its politics. In 2017, this manifested particularly in the context of the troubled process of the EU integration in the Balkans, the increasingly difficult EU-Turkey relations, and the resistance to the immigration through the Balkan route.

Generally speaking, the Czech Republic has been supporting the EU integration in the Balkans, including further integration of the states that are already members of the Union. In co-operation with its Visegrad partners, Czechia has been pro-active in attempts to make it so that Croatia, Romania, and Bulgaria would be admitted into the Schengen Area. As seen from Prague the admission of these three Balkan countries into the area should enable further free movement of goods and people. This progress in integration would also be welcomed by the more than one million Czech tourists who are heading to the Adriatic and the Black Sea coasts every year. In late 2017, the diplomatic activity of Czech representatives visiting Sofia, including the MFA Deputy Minister Jakub Dürr, the Minister of Industry and Trade Jiří Havlíček and other senior government officials, was mostly driven by the upcoming Bulgarian presidency of the EU Council.²⁵ Next to “security, stability, [and] solidarity”, the keywords of the Bulgarian EU Presidency, Czech and Bulgarian representatives also discussed migration and the future distribution of the EU funds.²⁶

The Czech Republic remained among the main supporters of the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans, but there were different shades to this Czech support. On the one hand, the MFA argued that the involvement of the EU in the Western Balkans should increase, and that the EU should reassure the Western Balkan countries of their EU perspective.²⁷ On several occasions, Czech MFA officials met and held discussions with representatives of the Western Balkan countries.²⁸ Also, in co-operation with other Eastern European EU members (except for Croatia) Prague has been proactively and even enthusiastically advocating Serbia’s integration into the EU.

On the other hand, President Zeman refused to recognise both Kosovo and Turkey as legitimate potential members of the EU.²⁹ He adopted offensive positions in pronouncing that Turkey is culturally different from other EU member states, and thus while it is a member of NATO it should not become a part of the EU. Zeman also criticised Turkey regarding its alleged fascist tendencies, Erdogan’s threats of sending migrants to the EU and the divergence from Atatürk’s secularism and Islamisation.³⁰

The main issues of 2017 were the contested Turkish referendum on the change to the presidential system and changes to the constitution, and the continuous purges of the opposition. These issues incited critique across the Czech political spectrum.³¹ Furthermore, President Erdogan's mentioning of the possible reintroduction of the death penalty in Turkey was also criticised in the Czech Republic. The otherwise conciliatory Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek called the death penalty the red line that shall not be crossed.³² Nevertheless, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept up its co-operative approach in supporting the dialogue with Turkey. Moreover, in 2017, the possible upgrade of the EU-Turkey custom union has been further discussed. While there were critical voices, allegedly including that of Chancellor Angela Merkel, in regard to the situation in Turkey, others viewed the upgrade of the union as a way to keep Turkey on the track towards reforms.³³ The Czech Republic resisted the negative voices and further supported the idea of the broadening and deepening of the customs union with Turkey.³⁴

It is worth noting that in 2017 the MFA and the government proactively contributed to the launching of the Western Balkans Fund. The idea to use the template of the Visegrad Fund in the Western Balkans can be traced back to the V4 ministerial meeting in 2009. After a long-term process of inter-regional negotiations, the Western Balkans Fund was officially launched on 5 September 2017. The six Western Balkan countries themselves fund it, each paying thirty thousand euros each year to be re-distributed by the fund to the civil society actors in the region to boost regional co-operation, advance integration into the EU, and improve inter-personal contacts.³⁵ Regarding the issue of immigration, it is well-known that the Czech Republic, together with the other V4 countries, is openly against the EU re-distribution quotas on asylum seekers. Perhaps a bit less known fact, though, is that the Czech Republic has made some steps to explore other possible solutions to the problem of the future immigrant waves. These steps have been particularly about establishing links with other Central or Eastern European and Balkan countries and envisioning a backup plan for what should be done if immigration via the Balkan corridor gets out of hand again in the future. The institutional umbrella for these activities has been the Central European Defence Cooperation, which gathers together the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia and Croatia. In the Czech Republic, this kind of activity has been pursued mainly by the Ministries of Interior and Defence.³⁶ This activity can be understood as a pro-active attempt to create a common policy that would resist not only immigration but also the efforts of many other EU member states to establish the asylum-seekers re-distribution mechanism in the EU.

Economic Relations

In 2017, the Czech exports of goods to the Balkans and Turkey made up about 3.5% and 1.2% of the Czech Republic's overall export performance, respectively.³⁷ Thus, compared to other European territories the Balkans represented markets of lesser importance for the Czech Republic. Nonetheless, in the last years we have generally seen a steady growth of Czech exports to the Balkan countries (with few exceptions, notably Bulgaria).³⁸ Although in 2017 the export of goods to Turkey was stagnating

compared to 2016,³⁹ overall the mutual business has been growing in the last years.⁴⁰ Czechia has a positive balance in the trade with the Balkans and Turkey,⁴¹ and it is also relatively important source of foreign direct investment in the Balkans.

The Czech economic diplomacy was very active in the region. Trade-related issues have also been a top priority during President Zeman's visits to the Balkans. Similarly, the government and the MFA were trying to support the Czech economic activities in the region. As examples we can mention that one of the six Czech diplomats specialising in issues of agriculture is stationed in Serbia,⁴² that the Czech Development Agency runs a programme for the private sector that operates in several Western Balkan countries, among other countries (the B2B Programme),⁴³ or that the Ministry of Industry and Trade runs the Aid for Trade programme, which, in 2017, realised projects in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.⁴⁴ While the investment activities were spread all over the region, in 2017 their recipients were especially Romania,⁴⁵ Turkey,⁴⁶ Slovenia⁴⁷ and Serbia.⁴⁸ Another interesting co-operation took shape in Greece, where several Hellenic cities initiated co-operation with Czech spa resorts to share experiences with the spa industry.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, despite many successes, the intensification of Czech economic ties with the Balkans and Turkey has also brought a range of serious problems. Some of these problems were related to mistakes made during the previous expansion; others stemmed from the unpredictability of the Balkan and Turkish politics and markets. A good example of the Balkan market economies' volatility is the crisis of the food industry giant Agrokor endangering the stability of the agriculture industry and retail in Croatia and beyond. Yet, for Czech investors the troubles related to Agrokor rather bring opportunities for somewhat risky, but potentially favourable acquisitions.⁵⁰

In 2017, the Czech firms ČEZ and EnergoPro continued to face severe complications in Bulgaria, where the local antitrust authority investigated their electricity distribution companies.⁵¹ The affairs there (previously elaborated on in ČZP 2016)⁵² damaged the image of the Czech Republic among the Bulgarian public and influenced not only the Prague-Sofia relations but also the domestic politics in Bulgaria.⁵³ The Minister of Industry and Trade Jiří Havlíček discussed the problems Czech companies face with the Bulgarian Minister of Economy during his visit to Sofia.⁵⁴ As a result of the previous losses, ČEZ announced that it planned a general withdrawal from the Balkans.⁵⁵ It incurred further financial losses due to the declining value of the Turkish lira.⁵⁶ Additionally, in 2017, ČEZ was investigated in Albania on the grounds of an older corruption case, and also two former managers of ČEZ were accused of damaging the shareholders' interests.⁵⁷ Another problem occurred with the investment of the Czechoslovak Group (CSG) of Jaroslav Strnad in Serbia,⁵⁸ as reports of alleged connections of the CSG with a local money laundering scheme in Macedonia and Serbia may bring damaging consequences for the Czech reputation in the region.⁵⁹ Yet another issue seems to be the failure of Škoda Praha's plan to construct the Pljevlja II power plant in Montenegro.⁶⁰

Moreover, the unfinished project of the Yunus Emre power plant in Turkey has a considerable potential to disturb the good relations between the Czech Republic and Turkey. To briefly sum up the troubling history of the project, the Vítkovice Machin-

ery Group was the main supplier of the project for the Turkish partner – Naksan Holding – and the construction was financed by a Czech Export Bank (CEB) loan (for the Turkish side), and also insured by another Czech company, the Export Guarantee and Insurance Corporation (EGAP).⁶¹ Yet, after the first technical problems, further difficulties followed when Naksan Holding was ‘nationalised’ during the purges after the attempted coup in 2016 and so the return of the loan was uncertain.⁶²

In 2017, due to the continuing problems with the finishing and selling of the power plant, CEB asked EGAP for payment, out of which the Czech state budget shall cover 1,9 billion CZK in 2018.⁶³ In the same year, the negotiations between the Czech Republic and Turkey concerning the project continued and the situation was intensely discussed within the Czech government.⁶⁴ Eventually, the Czech and Turkish sides agreed to sell the unfinished power plant.⁶⁵ Currently, it is still inoperable and a potential buyer is still yet to be found.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, despite the troubles of some of the Czech entrepreneurs, the economic potential of the region is considerable and in 2017 the interest of Czech companies in both the Balkan and Turkish markets continued.

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTIC OF KEY ACTORS

In 2017, we can observe two primary modes of actorness in the Czech foreign policy towards the Balkans and Turkey: the offensive and the co-operative. President Zeman appeared to be the most offensive actor with his rhetoric that was often brash or even aggressive regarding Kosovo, migration, Islam, the changes in Turkey, and Greece’s debt crisis, as well as other issues. President Zeman’s rhetoric has a number of followers among some of the main Czech political parties, primarily in the right-wing populist SPD,⁶⁷ but partially also in the Communist (KSČM) and Social-Democratic (ČSSD) parties.⁶⁸ On the other hand, the most co-operative actors were those seated in the MFA and other ministries, who negotiated between the inside and the outside of the state on a daily basis.

Even if they were mostly reactive, some of the Czech state actors were able to come forth with their own initiatives, especially Minister Zorálek and other public officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In this respect, an important part of the Czech international actorness was the V4 framework for co-operation. In economic relations, the primary role in the ongoing proactive expansion was played by private companies. The companies themselves often handled multiple problems that accompanied the economic expansion, but we have also seen reactions to it from the government and foreign service, with the most outstanding case of this sort in 2017 being the Yunus Emre project in Turkey. As for matters of international security, the Czech governmental actors maintained their modest but continuous involvement in the Euro-Atlantic security institutions’ activities in the Balkans, in which they accepted the policy drafted by the representatives of major Western states.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

In 2017, the Czech media reporting on the Balkans addressed similar topics as the Czech foreign political actors, but the tone of the media was much more pessimistic than that of the official representatives. Politicians and civil servants tended to represent this area, or at least some of its parts, as an obvious component of the European project that should become more integrated with the EU. The media, on the other hand, were often blunt about the fact that the project of EU integration is in question and that the EU enlargement to the Western Balkans is faltering.⁶⁹ This change in the overall framework of representation of the Balkans is what makes the year 2017 markedly different from the previous years. Otherwise, among the most covered issues in relation to the Balkans were the corruption and crime in the countries, migration, their local political conflicts, the enlargement agenda, and economic issues.

Additionally, regarding Turkey the media presented pessimistic scenarios, stressing the move of Turkey away from the EU.⁷⁰ The primary covered topics concerning Turkey were the referendum that granted significant powers to President Erdogan, and also the massive purges that had already started after the attempted coup in 2016.⁷¹ Furthermore, Erdogan's disputes with several different EU member states⁷² and the USA⁷³ were a fruitful topic for the news. Also, the attempts to influence the Turkish diaspora before the referendum were covered in a way that fit the Czech sceptical narrative on migration.⁷⁴ Turkey's authoritarian turn⁷⁵ and violations of human rights,⁷⁶ and other related topics were taken up by both analytical articles and tabloids, which depicted Erdogan as a mighty authoritarian ruler.⁷⁷ Another re-appearing issue was the tension within the Turkey-NATO relations,⁷⁸ as Turkey's NATO membership has been so far considered as one of the country's primary assets. Increased attention was also dedicated to the EU-Turkey migration deal and Erdogan's threats to breach it.⁷⁹ The other covered topics pertaining to Turkey included Turkish activities in Syria and business-related issues.

It is also worth noting that there were two influential coalitions of political actors and media outlets when it came to the Balkans and Turkey in the Czech media and political space. On the one hand, the offensive actors, such as President Zeman, were usually given much space in the web-based news source *Parlamentní listy* and other similar platforms. On the other hand, the Czech co-operation on the Balkan and Turkish security, political, and economic issues was primarily reported on by the public media agency ČTK, whose news was usually circulated by all the mainstream Czech newspapers.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2017, the Czech Republic kept up its co-operative approach towards Southeastern Europe. The Czech Republic also participated only lukewarmly in NATO's efforts to secure its eastern Balkan borders, but it continued to attach a high political value

to the partnership with Turkey as an important NATO member state.⁸⁰ The double-tracked approach towards Kosovo continued when the Czech MFA kept co-operating with Kosovo at the diplomatic level, but the President and an influential faction in the Chamber of Deputies continued to actively resist steps towards the *de facto* recognition of Kosovo's statehood. Furthermore, the President rhetorically resisted the alleged spread of Islamic terrorism in Bosnia and Herzegovina but did not address any other similar issues in the region. This stance aligned his position with that of Croatia's President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. President Zeman also criticised Turkey on several occasions. The MFA, however, made sure that the relations with Turkey remained co-operative, despite the failure of the attempts to mediate in the case of the two arrested Czech citizens in Turkey. On the other hand, the Czech presidency in the Council of Europe co-operated with its partners to highlight the problems of human right standards in Turkey.

The co-operative approach was visible also in the EU politics concerning the Balkans and Turkey, but the Czech Republic was forced to adapt to numerous problematic issues. These issues included especially the faltering of the process of EU enlargement to this territory, but also the ongoing failure to integrate Croatia, Bulgaria and Romania into the Schengen Area. When it came to migration, the Czech Republic attempted to resist the re-distribution quotas for asylum seekers in the EU by pro-actively seeking to create an alternative policy among the Central European states. The issue of the EU-Turkey migration deal was also followed closely, especially at times of heightened tensions between the EU and Turkey. Arguably the most successful and promising aspect of the Czech foreign policy towards Southeastern Europe was the start of the operation of the Western Balkans Fund, which is a result of a long-term pro-active initiative in the framework of the V4. The fund aims to enhance locally owned regional and trans-border co-operation and facilitate integration in the Western Balkans.

Regarding economic relations, in 2017 the Turkish and Balkan markets provided the Czech economic actors with interesting economic opportunities. Nonetheless, strengthening the economic co-operation with them has brought multiple challenges in terms of the macroeconomic and political (in)stability as well as the rule of law. But despite political problems, the year 2017 did not see a change in the Czech support of the upgrade of the EU customs union with Turkey. In general, for anyone who wishes to address the Czech foreign policy towards the Balkans and Turkey in a meaningful and productive way, it might be useful to recognise that the Czech foreign policy towards this region has been internally fragmented and often double-tracked or inconsistent. This quality, which comes primarily but not exclusively from the division of the foreign political powers in the constitution of the Czech Republic, means that it can be confusing or even counterproductive to approach the Czech Republic as a single unitary actor. Instead, those wishing to influence the Czech foreign policy towards the Balkans and Turkey should first try to understand the distribution of power and interests in the context they would like to address. A closer understanding of the idiosyncrasies of this segment of the Czech foreign policy can make the intervention easier and more successful.

Endnotes

- ¹ We would like to sincerely thank My Hanh Nguyen for her help with conducting background research and Alexander Starun for his help with the list of references.
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- network in Romania. Kopecký, P. and ČTK (2017) Fortuna kupuje Hattrick. Stane se sázkovým lídrem v Rumunsku [Fortuna Buys Hattrick. It Will Become the Betting Leader in Romania]. *Deník.cz*, 23 February 2017 [online]. Available from: <https://www.denik.cz/ekonomika/fortuna-posiluje-pozice-v-rumunsku-expanduje-take-do-chorvatska-a-spanelska-20170223.html> (Accessed 13 April 2018); ČTK (2017) Fortuna posiluje v Rumunsku. Koupila sázkové firmy za 1,22 miliardy [Fortuna Is Strengthening Its Presence in Romania. It Bought Several Betting Companies for 1.22 Billion CZK]. *Novinky.cz*, 1 September 2017 [online]. Available from: <https://www.novinky.cz/ekonomika/448001-fortuna-posiluje-v-rumunsku-koupila-sazkove-firmy-za-1-22-miliardy.html> (Accessed 13 April 2018); ČTK (2017) Dr. Max koupil 600 lékáren v Rumunsku a stal se jedničkou na trhu [Dr. Max Bought 600 Pharmacies in Romania and Became No.1 on the Market]. *ČeskéNoviny.cz*, 21 December 2017 [online]. Available from: <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/dr-max-koupil-600-lekaren-v-rumunsku-a-stal-se-jednickou-na-trhu/1565091> (Accessed 13 April 2018).
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