
Chapter 6

The Eastern Partnership States in the Czech Foreign Policy

THE YEAR OF DIMINISHING INTEREST

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Executive Summary: In 2017, the Czech foreign policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries continued in the trends of the preceding years. Nevertheless, both the Czech parliamentary elections and the pre-election campaigns for the 2018 presidential elections seriously limited the interest of Czech politicians in the problems of foreign policy. As in previous years, the Czech Republic conducted its foreign policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries through three basic channels: the EU, bilateral relations and the civil society sector. On the EU level, the Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels was the main event of the year regarding the EaP, with the Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka taking part in it. In the bilateral relations, Moldova's Prime Minister Pavel Filip visited Prague, while unlike in the previous years, the Prime Minister did not pay a visit to any of the EaP countries (this was the case with both the original Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka and his successor Andrej Babiš). Moreover, Miloš Zeman also did not carry out any official visit to the EaP countries during the year. As a result, the main burden of the EaP policies was, as in the previous years, laid on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Eastern Partnership countries were not the targets of any special interest of the Czech politicians in 2017. The activities towards the Eastern Partnership countries were carried out, as in the previous years, mainly through three channels – the European Union institutions, the Czech state and NGOs. Plainly said, even though the Czech officials did not pursue a policy towards the EaP countries bilaterally, it did not mean that such a policy was avoided entirely. Efforts to hold the Eastern Partnership

together by having different approaches to different countries were still present and became a significant feature of the EU policies towards the Eastern Partnership countries in 2017. Nevertheless, it must be also added that in regard to the EaP, the Czech Republic joined initiatives of other states rather than bringing new ones to the fore. Such a conclusion represents a continuation of the trends from previous years, when the lack of political interest in the Eastern Partnership in the Czech Republic caused passivity in regard to the EaP programme.

The EU policies towards the EaP are still burdened with a lack of agreement among the EU member states. In general, the results of the EaP were regarded as modest in 2017. This was best seen in a comparison of the concluding remarks of the EaP Summit, which was held in Brussels in November 2017. Besides declarations of sharing the common interest in developing democracy, human rights and the rule of law, the participating countries concluded that they would welcome twenty deliverable and practical goals connected with the EaP that can be reached by 2020. These practical goals had been clustered in the four spheres defined during the preceding Riga summit in 2015: economic development and market opportunities; strengthening institutions and good governance; connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; and mobility and people-to-people contacts. In addition, the joint declaration of the EaP Summit stressed the following: the importance of good governance; the need for better and safer transport links; the importance of energy security; the need to further support independent media and expose disinformation; and leaders' engagement to foster mobility and empower the youth.¹ All of these goals are logical and hard to challenge, but their practical fulfilment remains under question.

Armenia signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) during this summit. The CEPA should help the country to co-operate with the EU while retaining its membership in the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union.² Progress has been also made with two other countries that do not have an Association Agreement with the EU – Azerbaijan and Belarus. This can be regarded as a success. Nonetheless, the political context remains complicated for these countries due to their internal political conditions. Still, since the promotion of relations with the states that do not plan to sign an Association Agreement in the near future was one of the aims of the Czech diplomacy, the progress with the two countries can also be regarded as a success in that respect.

Meanwhile, internal developments in the EaP countries continued to impact the programme itself. The EU member states marked the slow reforms in some of the countries, such as Moldova, Ukraine or Georgia.³ There was even a move in the opposite direction in Azerbaijan, where the president's wife Mehriban Aliyeva was appointed the Vice-President. However, even the tightening of the regime did not prevent an improvement of Azerbaijan's relations with the EU.⁴ In Armenia, the protests against the current president Serzh Sargsyan continued. The situation itself was tense and surrounded with accusations of the use of excessive police force. Nevertheless, the main feature was the president's efforts to shift Armenia from a presidential to a parliamentary republic with Sargsyan as the Prime Minister.

In Moldova the continuing crisis between the President Igor Dodon, who favours closer integration with the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Union and Russia itself, and the government, which is in favour of closer ties with the European Union, limited the possibilities of larger initiatives. These internal clashes do not play an important role in the countries' bilateral relations with the Czech Republic, or, more precisely, they did not provoke any substantial reaction on the part of the Czech diplomacy. As for Belarus, it continued in its at least partial closing with the European Union. It eased the conditions of demands for citizens of eighty countries, including the Czech Republic, for trips to the country with a length of stay lower than five days. According to the statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus the country expected a reciprocal step. Nevertheless, the relaxation of the visa regime was primarily a part of Belarus' row with Russia.

The Association Agreement and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area with Ukraine came fully into force in September 2017. However, despite these positive trends, the situation in Ukraine remained impacted by the continuing fighting in Donbass and the annexation of Crimea. Furthermore, President Poroshenko and his circle came under criticism due to the slow reforms in the country.⁵ The accusations intensified after official power exerted pressure on a special anti-corruption office in some politically sensitive cases. Furthermore, the new law on the establishment of a special anti-corruption law provoked criticism from international organisations due to their fear that the resulting anti-corruption court might lack independence.⁶ On the other hand, such a conclusion should not hinder the fact that Ukraine made an enormous step forward in terms of reforms in the previous years.⁷

A visa-free regime with Georgia and Ukraine was passed by the European Parliament in March 2017. It belongs to the most important *carrots* in the Eastern Partnership policy.⁸ As a result, the citizens of these two countries holding biometric passports, together with Moldovans, who received the status in 2014, can travel to European countries without a visa. Despite this step being unquestionably positive, its practical impact might be only limited, as the Ukrainians' possibilities of travelling remain seriously limited by the difficult situation of the Ukrainian economy. Such a step is therefore rather symbolic than substantial, as additionally, it does not include the right to work in the Schengen countries.

One of the most typical examples of the strictly utilitarian perception of the Eastern Partnership countries in the Czech society was President Zeman's idea that the Czech Republic should import more workers from these countries, namely from Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine.⁹ This approach was upheld by the chief of the Chamber of Commerce Vladimír Dlouhý. As such, in many cases, the topic of Czech foreign policy and the relations with these states is not really a topic, but rather a projection of Czech internal politics abroad. In this case, the main focus was given to the support of Czech producers, who had been struggling with a lack of workers and therefore the EaP policy had a domestic policy use. However, the policy of importing workers from abroad received criticism as well, as most of the already imported workers were occupied in the lowest and the worst paid professions.¹⁰

AGENDA AND EVENTS

In April, the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament recognised the massacres of Armenians in 1915 as a genocide and equated them with the crimes against Jews or the Roma people. This recognition followed the previous similar statements of President Miloš Zeman. In his newest statement on the issue, he further condemned the genocide as one of the worst crimes in modern history. The Turkish protest in reaction to this was met with relative calm on the Czech side, as expected. And unsurprisingly, the statement was welcomed in Yerevan.¹¹ The recognition of the Armenian genocide by the Chamber of Deputies was nonetheless later relativised by the press statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which the ministry acknowledged the high sensitivity of the matter for Turkey, and claimed that the task of evaluating history belonged only to historians. As a result, the official position of the Czech Republic on the issue remained unchanged.

In the case of Azerbaijan, Czech diplomacy followed a policy of the maximum that is possible, especially in political matters. Still, two scandals related to Azerbaijan came to the surface in 2017. In the first one, the shadow financing of certain Czech politicians by the Azerbaijani regime was revealed. The Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Jan Hamáček from the Social Democratic Party was among the most prominent politicians suspected of being involved in the scandal, but the list of the recipients of the Azerbaijani funds was not revealed.¹² The second scandal was the case of the delivery of Czech cannons for the Azerbaijani army, which was, nevertheless, executed through private channels. However, neither of these two scandals had any profound impact on the relations between the Czech Republic and Azerbaijan.

Milan Štěch, the Speaker of the Upper Chamber of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, was the highest ranking Czech official who visited the EaP countries, in this case namely Armenia, in 2017. Štěch was received by the President of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan and the Prime Minister Karen Karapetyan. Besides the economic topics that were the core of the visit, Štěch also discussed the affair of the sale of Czech arms to Azerbaijan. However, as he stated, the sale was not licenced by the Czech authorities and therefore did not represent a change in the foreign policy of the Czech Republic.¹³

Some of the highest representatives of the Eastern Partnership states paid visits to the Czech Republic in 2017. Pavel Filip, the Prime Minister of Moldova, visited the Czech Republic in May. As was typical for most of the contacts between the Czech Republic and the EaP countries' representatives, he concentrated on economic agenda. According to the Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, the visit was an expression of the Czech support for Moldova's orientation towards the European Union.¹⁴ Prime Minister Filip was the highest ranking of the visitors to the Czech Republic from the EaP countries. But besides him, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Uladzimir Makey also visited Prague in June.

The agendas of the Czech foreign policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries were largely oriented towards economic diplomacy in 2017. Most notably, a degree of economic revival in Ukraine increased the interest of Czech companies, such as MND (*Moravské naftové doly*) or ZVVZ, in the Ukrainian market, especially in energy and

infrastructure projects. However, the growing interest of Czech firms in investing the region was recorded in other Eastern Partnership countries as well. For instance, in Azerbaijan, the Czech company Tatra planned to invest in the production of its trucks in Ganja.¹⁵ An exception to the growing interest of Czech investors in EaP countries was Belarus, where economic problems prevailed.

Development co-operation was a keystone of the Czech foreign policy towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership Programme in 2017. The Czech Republic adopted a new strategy of foreign development co-operation for the period of 2018–2030.¹⁶ While Moldova and Georgia remained priority countries for the bilateral part of the Czech development policy, Ukraine received a special status in it due to its need to recover from the destruction of the war.¹⁷ The main aim of the co-operation, which covers, with the exception of Azerbaijan, all the EaP countries, is to help the countries to reach the EU standards in multiple fields. The Czech projects quite rationally concentrate on the development of social, ecological, agricultural or infrastructural projects that are small scale, but well targeted.¹⁸ Such an approach is commensurable to the possibilities and means of the Czech Republic, but that makes it more effective.

As a result of the increased emphasis on the economic diplomacy, the human rights agenda was relatively sidelined. However, it would be too strict to state that it was ignored entirely, but it was primarily pursued through the international organisations or through the support of NGOs.¹⁹ For example, the Czech Republic's representatives expressed their support for the Crimean Tartars. The Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Jakub Dürř met with Refat Chubarov, the head of the Crimean Tartars' Medzhlis and a member of Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada. The situation of human rights in the annexed Crimea was the main topic of the talks. As Chubarov underlined, the Czech Republic gives constant support to the matter of the Crimean Tartars. He especially emphasised the co-operation with the embassy in Kyiv.²⁰

The Visegrad Group partnership represented another channel of support for the Eastern Partnership countries. The V4 countries, during the 2017 meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 and the Eastern Partnership countries, agreed on their strong support for the programme of the Eastern Partnership and they welcomed the acknowledgement of the European aspirations of some of the Eastern European countries, while searching for ways to co-operate with the others. The V4 countries especially expressed their desire for an intensification of support for the EaP countries and their aspirations on the part of the European Union during the meeting. Nevertheless, it must also be added that numerous accounts questioned the conclusions of the meeting on the grounds of the V4 countries' rising populism and the fall of interest in supporting the Eastern Partnership in the Visegrad countries.²¹

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KEY ACTORS

As in the previous years, the Czech President Miloš Zeman continued to play an independent and partly government-opposing role. His speech at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg in October 2017 provoked a scandal.

In the speech, President Zeman stated that the Russian takeover of Crimea was undoubtedly an annexation, but Crimea belonging to Russia was a *fait accompli*, while further claiming that Ukraine should negotiate a compensation in the form of oil, gas or money for this territory. Some Ukrainian representatives replied that their land was not for sale and that Zeman should sell Karlovy Vary, a place well-known as a favourite destination for Russian tourists, or Prague to Russia instead.²² In an official reaction, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine stated that Zeman's words were an unacceptable example of cynical behaviour. Ukraine's President Petro Poroshenko and Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroysman reacted in the same manner.²³ Furthermore, the Russian side rejected the words of the Czech President as well, stating that Crimea joined Russia legally and therefore there could not be any compensation given to Ukraine for it.²⁴ Criticism of Zeman followed also from the domestic scene. The Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, as well as other representatives of the state, rejected the President's words. According to the Prime Minister, such words contradicted the official position of the Czech Republic and only reflected the President's personal views. Zeman's words, however, were upheld by the Communist Party, Tomio Okamura's Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and some politicians from the Czech Social Democratic Party (e.g. Jaroslav Foldyna).²⁵

The parliamentary elections in October 2017 brought a change to the post of the Prime Minister. Sobotka, who was relatively active in the promotion of the Eastern Partnership program, was replaced in the post by the head of the ANO party Andrej Babiš. The current acting Prime Minister did not voice any substantial reservations towards the EaP. Since his main ideology was pragmatism, it was expected that the general interest of the Czech government would be directed toward topics other than the support for the Eastern Partnership countries. Similarly, the replacement of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek with the acting minister Martin Stropnický did not represent a sharp turn in the Czech foreign policy. Nevertheless, it is premature to come to any deeper conclusions about the future aims of the Czech foreign policy since the changes in the government have been very recent at the time of writing.

In regard to Ukraine, the political scene was divided in a similar manner as in the case of the aforementioned Presidential speech at the Parliamentary Assembly in October. The Czech deputies, if they somehow voiced their positions regarding the matter, usually supported the official policies towards the Eastern Partnership countries. Nevertheless, the Communist Party and the SPD held pro-Russian stances in relation to Ukraine. In March 2017, Jaroslav Holík from the SPD visited Crimea during the celebrations of the annexation of the peninsula by Russia. Such a step was strictly condemned by the Ukrainian embassy in Prague because Holík travelled to Crimea without an official permission from Kyiv. But in a response to Holík's journey to Crimea, the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament Jan Hamáček underlined that it was a strictly private enterprise without any consent of Czech authorities.²⁶

The Czech Republic has its embassies in all the Eastern Partnership countries, where they continued to play an active role in day-to-day policies in 2017.²⁷ Especially in the countries where interstate relations are constrained by a highly controlling political regime, the embassies were vital for maintaining good relations. Some

of them underwent a rotation during the year, such as the one in Kyiv. Nevertheless, the process did not change the work of the embassies materially. Besides their promotion of interests of Czech companies, they also organised numerous cultural events. The embassies presented Czech culture in the EaP countries through events such as the concert of the guitarist Štěpán Rak in Chisinau or the celebrations of the 100th anniversary of the Battle at Zborov in Ukraine. The embassy in Kyiv was particularly active in this field.

As for Czech NGOs, the most prominent and well-known among them, *Člověk v tísni (People in Need)*, continued to operate in four out of the six EaP countries, namely Armenia, Azerbaijan, Moldova and Ukraine. It concentrated on development and civil society programs. Despite the organisation's expulsion from the 'people's republics' in November 2016, it did not leave Ukraine or Eastern Ukraine completely and continued to work with internally displaced people, as well as with people living close to the frontline. In the ACCESS consortium with other NGOs (Action Contre La Faim, Médecins du Monde, ACTED and the IMPACT initiative), and in collaboration with the EU, it provided help to around 163,000 of these people on both sides of the frontline.²⁸

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

The general tone of the public debate about the Eastern Partnership countries was muted in 2017 due to the Czech internal affairs. None of the events outlined in the first section provoked a heated and long-lasting public debate.

The media sphere, as in the case of Russia, was divided in its views on Ukraine, while the other EaP countries were, more or less, outside of the scope of the interests of Czech newspapers. The divide, however, cannot be called a fifty-fifty divide, since the majority of the press informed about Ukraine in either a neutral or a slightly pro-Ukrainian tone (for instance, the commentators Vladimír Votápek, Ondřej Soukup and Jan Moláček).²⁹ Among the media outlets with a larger audience only *Parlamentní listy* and only a few particular authors, such as Jaroslav Doubrava, Tomáš Haas or Jaroslav Bašta, held a strictly pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian stance.³⁰ On the opposite side, even these debates were somehow muted and overshadowed by the debates about the presidential and parliamentary elections. In these debates the topic of migration played a dominant role.

The media devoted only limited space to the problems of the Eastern Partnership countries. Only some of the relevant events, such as the visit of Nadia Savchenko in Prague, the protests against the *sponge tax* in Minsk in March 2017 or the nomination of Mehriban Aliyeva for the Vice Presidency of Azerbaijan, were mentioned in the daily press, but without clear links to the Czech foreign policy.³¹ Even the November Eastern Partnership summit in Brussels was overshadowed by the parliamentary elections that took place in October 2017. Such a conclusion can also be attributed to the fact that the summit itself only confirmed the previous goals and brought forth only limited goals related to the twenty deliverables that should be achieved by 2020.

As in previous years, in 2017, the members of the European Parliament represented a highly visible group of individual actors. Among the politicians that impacted the relations with the Eastern Partnership countries, Jaromír Štětina, a member of the European Parliament, played one of the most visible roles. In February, he observed the elections in Nagorno Karabakh. In connection with this, the Azerbaijani side issued an arrest warrant against Štětina. Nevertheless, the impact of this on the relations with Azerbaijan was only limited, if there was any, as Štětina's actions were not regarded as a part of the Czech foreign policy. The Czech Republic, like other states of the international community, did not recognise Nagorno Karabakh as an independent state. This policy is unlikely to change in the near future.

Pavel Svoboda, a member of the European Parliament from the KDU-ČSL party, organised a visit of the former Ukrainian POW and current politician Nadia Savchenko to Prague in January. She was met by the representatives of TOP 09 Miroslav Kalousek, Marek Ženíšek and Karel Schwarzenberg and, privately, by the Minister of Culture Daniel Herman (KDU-ČSL). Nevertheless, this visit was organised as a strictly private one, and none of the leading representatives of the Czech state met her officially. This may be explained partly by Savchenko's questionable activities as an MEP of the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Czech policy towards the Eastern Partnership countries in 2017 was burdened by domestic Czech politics, namely by both the parliamentary and the presidential elections as well as by the lack of agreement on the EU level. Internal topics or topics directly impacting internal politics overshadowed the foreign policy issues even more than in *normal* years. Since the presidential elections did not bring any change, it can be expected that President Zeman will continue pursuing his vision of a pragmatic foreign policy, and grow closer to the positions of Russia and China. The victory of the ANO bloc in the parliamentary elections and the nomination of Martin Stropnický to the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs so far has not brought any meaningful change from the previous government, but a final conclusion about this can be made only after the new government is formed.

The Czech Republic pursued a strategy of emphasis on development and economic programmes in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, where the chances for political, not to mention humanitarian, ties were extremely limited. This, it must be said, was in line with the EU policies. To a great extent it represented a sort of a quest for balance between the pragmatic policy of 'keeping the guys in game' and insisting on the values of democracy and human rights. While the former strategy receives criticism from the internal politicians in the EU countries as a rejection of principles, the latter leads to protests of the target countries against the perception of them as pupils that need to be taught, which may lead to a full rejection of any desire to co-operate.

The Czech Republic should continue in its policies of building the ties with the EaP countries on a bilateral level, as well as through European institutions. The sup-

port of non-political connections, be they scientific, cultural or through development co-operation, creates long-time relationships that could prevail against temporary upheavals in the political relations. Scaling such a co-operation down to well targeted projects represents a rational policy that should be sustained. In the political ties, most of the agenda is pursued through the European Union, which has a much higher impact than when it is pursued bilaterally, especially in regard to the questions such as those of promoting democracy and the rule of law. This, together with the concentration on the support of interests of Czech exporters and investors, creates an ideal mix of policies. Even though a much more active role for the Czech Republic in the Eastern Partnership through higher political involvement would be welcomed, it is unlikely in the near future.

Endnotes

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