
Chapter 8

Russia in the Czech Foreign Policy

INCREASED CONTACTS AMID INCREASED TENSIONS

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Executive Summary: Amid the ever-higher tensions between the West and Russia, the Czechs became more active on the political level in 2017, with the highlight being the official visit of President Zeman to Russia. However, several structural factors prevented this flurry of political activity from turning into tangible political or economic results. First, the ongoing sanction regime and Russia's aggressive stance in the neighbourhood rendered any deeper economic or political co-operation difficult to achieve. Second, the focus on internal issues (the then upcoming presidential elections in both countries) made foreign policy a mere pawn in the domestic political games. Third, while President Zeman confirmed his role as one of the most vocal advocates of President Putin, the continuing polarisation of the public opinion as well as the re-grouping of Czech anti-Kremlin forces limited his influence on the day-to-day Czech policy *vis-à-vis* Russia.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

In 2017, the relations between the Czech Republic and Russia were generally characterised by three developments. First, the souring of the relations between the West and Russia reached a new height, and the Czech Republic, while not particularly active in this regard, did share the increasing security concerns which began to spread among the Western allies. Second, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU, the Russian countersanctions, and the only shaky growth of the Russian economy limited the prospects of an increased bilateral economic co-operation between the Czech Republic and Russia. In spite of the flurry of activity surrounding the official visit of President Zeman to Russia, the sluggish growth in Russia made an economic breakthrough in the bilateral relations impossible. Third, the domestic developments (the then upcoming presidential election in Russia, and the parliamentary elections in October and the subsequent coalition negotiations in the Czech Republic) have fur-

ther limited the prospects for any substantive change of the rather stagnant political relationship.

Russia continued to belong to the most divisive political issues in the Czech political debates. Perhaps even more strongly than in the previous presidential election in 2013, in the 2017 election, the Czech Russia policy has become a litmus test of the candidates' attitudes to NATO, the EU and the West in general. While such a dichotomous view is an oversimplification, it has, nonetheless, become firmly established in the popular understanding of foreign policy. Hence, today, pro-Russian policy-makers are universally seen as critical both of the trans-Atlantic link and of the European Union. Importantly, both the critics of Russia and those who see Russia rather as a partner, and not a threat, played the Russian card. But also in the popular discourse, positive attitudes to Putin's Russia have become a code word for a broader illiberal political stance which typically includes homophobia, anti-Muslim attitudes and the critique of gender equality.

In spite of the internationally visible pro-Russian position of the Czech President Miloš Zeman, these political disagreements had only a limited impact on Czech diplomacy. Particularly in the multilateral sphere, the Czech Republic has consistently advocated the positions agreed on with the other EU member states. This pertains to the annexation of Crimea, and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, as well as the sanction regime. Thus, perhaps surprisingly, in the Central European context the Czech Republic has played the role of a moderate actor in regard to Russia, occupying the middle ground between the radically critical position of Poland and the strongly pro-Russian policy of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.

AGENDA AND EVENTS

The bilateral agenda regarding Russia was particularly busy in 2017 and its high point was the official visit of President Zeman to Russia in November 2017. Nevertheless, even before that visit a number of Czech officials visited Russia, including the Minister of Agriculture Marián Jurečka (in April), and the Minister of Trade and Industry Jiří Havlíček (in May, July and October). In October, the Deputy Foreign Minister Jakub Dürř took part in a political consultation in Moscow with the First Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov, which revolved around the bilateral issues, but global political problems were also discussed (such as the rising tensions in the Korean Peninsula and the war in Syria). The Deputy Minister also met with the MGIMO Vice-Rector Evgeny Kozhokin, and with representatives of the Russian NGO Memorial, as well as the Moscow Community Centre.

The official visit of President Zeman to Russia was an event that was being prepared for a while, and the leaders officially announced the planned official visit during the meeting of the Presidents of the two countries on the sidelines of the One Belt – One Road summit meeting in Beijing in May 2018. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the President coordinated the preparations. President Zeman

himself prepared the ground by repeatedly stressing his good relations with Russia in his pre-election campaign and even by exaggerating the importance Russia has for the Czech Republic, e.g. by stating that “*Russia is ten times as important for us as France*”.¹ The preparations of the visit were also the main discussion point for the meeting of President Zeman with Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in New York on 20 September.

The official visit itself took place between 20 and 24 November. In its course, President Zeman and his entourage visited Sochi, Moscow and the Sverdlovsk Oblast, and the President held meetings with the Russian President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev as well as the former USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev. The main topics discussed were of a bilateral nature, but the Presidents also touched upon the sanctions regime and the international situation, with a special reference to President Zeman’s favourite topic: global terrorism.

President Zeman also used his meetings with the Russian President and the Prime Minister for raising several issues that did not receive substantial coverage in the Czech press. He, for instance, pleaded for an improved access of Czech researchers to the Russian archives. During the talk with President Putin, Zeman intervened in favour of the Ukrainian religious expert Igor Kozlovsky, who had been captured by the Donetsk separatist groups in 2016. Kozlovsky was released in December 2017 and, according to his own words, Zeman’s intervention played a decisive role in this case.²

During the visit, several treaties and agreements on various topics were signed; these were mostly, but not exclusively, of an economic nature. Indeed, discussions about economic co-operation played an essential role at all the meetings. An entrepreneur mission representing dozens of Czech companies accompanied President Zeman³ and around eight hundred Czech and Russian entrepreneurs and state officials attended the business events organised for the occasion. During the visit, altogether thirteen memoranda were signed, and the overall sum of their values was CZK twenty billion (for instance, the signatories included the Czech companies BRISK Tábor, Pragoimex, and Alta Brno). Although these documents were negotiated and their contents finalised a long time before the visit, for some companies this political dimension was essential, especially for those which continually cultivate a high-level profile in Russia or need to push through specific interests in its market (such as the PPF Group, Škoda Auto or Hamé). Interestingly, most of the agenda was linked to Czech investments on the Russian territory as the Russian side clearly preferred localisation of production to imports.⁴

Russian diplomats also continued to exert pressure on easing the visa relations between the two states. Although President Zeman expressed his support for cancelling the visa requirements for Russian citizens several times, such a step would have to be agreed on more broadly and would involve a co-ordinated policy change with other EU member states (and, in particular, other Schengen countries). Clearly, the current tense relationship between the EU and Russia is not conducive to such measures and since the Russian diplomacy is well aware of this, the suggestions cannot be considered as anything more than testing the ground for a possible future policy change.

An issue which provoked a disproportionately big controversy was the establishment of the Czech-Russian (Russian-Czech) Discussion Forum. The memorandum of understanding on which it was founded was signed on 22 November between the Institute of International Relations in Prague and MGIMO University. The aim of the Discussion Forum is to establish a regularly convened format for debating issues of mutual interest. However, the step was criticised by a group of Czech policy-makers who saw it as a Russian Trojan horse, through which the Russian regime's propaganda could be spread more effectively in the country, thus further manipulating the public opinion in the Czech Republic.⁵

In reality, the signing of the Memorandum, as well as the establishment of the Forum, was a long-standing goal of Czech diplomacy, with the Czech MFA having advocated it for a considerable period of time. The Russian MFA, on the other hand, had been quite reticent in regard to it, and Russian diplomats had been trying to neutralise the idea for years. Only after the intervention of President Zeman and the support given to the idea by President Putin did the Russian MFA have to change its policy.

The first meeting of the Forum took place in Prague in June 2018, and the two key topics discussed were issues related to research and tertiary education (university reforms, student exchange programmes, etc.; this topic was proposed by the Russian side) and the Czech(oslovak) anniversaries of 1918, 1938, 1948 and 1968, in particular in connection with the improved access to Russian archives for Czech historians proposed by the Czechs. Importantly, while the establishment of the Forum was interpreted as a deviation from the Western approach to Russia by some Czech commentators, such formats already exist between Russia and Germany, France, Slovakia, and Poland, to name just some of the EU member states that have them. From among the many additional issues on the bilateral diplomatic agenda, two can be mentioned here to demonstrate the difficulties the Czech-Russian relationship is currently facing. The first was the case of the Russian hacker Evgeny Nikulin. The authorities in Prague arrested Nikulin on charges of hacking Dropbox, LinkedIn and Formspring servers and stealing around 77 million users' data from their accounts in November 2016. Furthermore, there was a widespread suspicion that Nikulin was involved in the hacking of the webpages of the US Democratic Party. For all these reasons, the United States demanded his extradition.

However, Nikulin was also under investigation in Russia, where he was accused of an on-line theft of a relatively small amount of money – RUB 88 thousand – in 2009, with the Russian side also asking for his extradition. The Russian Federation's representatives were particularly active in this case, lobbying intensely and even allegedly warning Czech diplomats that Nikulin's extradition to the USA instead of Russia might have serious consequences for the future extradition of persons from Russia to the Czech Republic.⁶

The second case, which also received substantial coverage in the Russian media, related to the statue of Marshal Ivan Konev in one of Prague's districts. The Russian embassy, together with the ambassadors of four other post-Soviet republics (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Azerbaijan), protested against the plans of the Prague 6

Municipal Council to amend the inscription on the tablet at the base of the statue. The statue, installed only in the 1980s, became an object of clashes of interpretation between the Russian side and a part of the Czech population. The main reason for the dispute lies in the fact that the official information tablet on the statue exclusively speaks about Konev as a saviour of Prague during the Second World War while being silent on the rather less positive part Marshal Konev played during the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. The MFA refused the Russian intervention due to the fact that the decision about the tablet was strictly in the jurisdiction of the authorities of Prague 6. While this may seem a diplomatic trifle, clashes regarding collective memory and interpretations of history emerge regularly and have become an ever present irritant in the mutual relations.

On the multilateral level, Czech diplomacy's main point of reference continued to be the commonly agreed positions in the EU. This was particularly the case in the Czech-Russian discussions about the war in Ukraine (with Czech diplomats stressing the need to comply with the Minsk Agreements and their Russian counterparts underlining the deficiencies on the Ukrainian side), but also the Crimean issue and, to a lesser extent, the war in Syria.

Czech diplomats also discussed the country's Chairmanship in the Council of Europe (May–November 2017) with Russian officials. The activities of the Council of Europe have developed into yet another sore point in the Russian relations with the West as Russia gradually became more and more critical of the organisation, up to the point where the Russian membership in the organisation became a matter of speculation. The Czech chairmanship priorities were, however, well received by the Russian MFA during the consultations.

In spite of the flurry of activity accompanying the presidential visit to Russia, the current economic trends are only marginally influenced by the officials' declarations. The growth of the Czech exports to Russia by 12.1% in the first nine months of the year 2017 was primarily caused by the stabilisation of the internal situation in the Russian Federation, and Russia's exports, which grew by 52.9%, were pulled by growing oil prices.⁷ This growth, nevertheless, represented only an offset of the previous four-year decline. While the diplomatic activity might have helped to boost the positions of Czech exporters in the Russian market, it is still premature to speak about any kind of substantial expansion.

Nuclear power remained the one area of particular interest for Russian policy-makers and diplomats. The Russian side expressed its interest in building the new reactors in the Dukovany Nuclear Power Station and later those in Temelín. The Russian company Rosatom, one of the main contenders, also offered financial means for the project.⁸ Czech firms working in nuclear power also participated in the roundtable about the prospects of their joining in Rosatom's nuclear power projects. This issue was also the main topic of the visit to Russia of the Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade of the Czech Republic Lenka Kovačovská in June 2017.

However, similarly to the previous years, the Russian offer was generally received only lukewarmly, mainly because the Czech side has yet to decide about the construc-

tion of the reactors. Importantly, as the new nuclear reactors would be definitely seen as a national security issue, Russian companies would also have to dispel the Czech concerns about the country's over-dependence on one supplier country, which is difficult to imagine in the current political situation.

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTIC OF KEY ACTORS

In terms of institutions, the main actor to conduct and shape Czech foreign policy is the Government (in particular the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Prime Minister). The constitutional role of the President in foreign policy is mainly the external representation of the state. However, due to a number of reasons, this formal distribution of tasks did not correspond to reality in 2017, particularly as far as the Czech relations with Russia are concerned. The President was clearly the dominant figure in this respect, with the ability to set new items on the agenda and push for specific measures, even if they contradicted the official policy of the country as formulated by the Government or the MFA.

The imbalance has both structural and idiosyncratic reasons. Structurally, the role of the President received a boost after the direct presidential election was introduced to the Czech political system in 2012, a move which is not adequately reflected in the Constitution, as the Constitution did not envision the President's direct election. Other reasons relate to the specific domestic political situation in 2017 – the President carried on his strong critique of the Social Democratic Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, and gradually, the President forged an alliance with the main opponent of the Prime Minister in the government, the leader of the ANO movement Andrej Babiš. As Minister Babiš remained entirely indifferent towards foreign policy (with the exception of matters where his preferences and his business interests were at stake), the President enjoyed Babiš's tacit support and the resulting free playing field, which he exploited fully.

Thus, the ungrateful role of chiding the President for deviating from the official course of Czech foreign policy often fell to Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek. Minister Zaorálek, however, was reluctant to challenge the President directly, not least because of his own party's divisions regarding the President, but also because Zaorálek has, for a time, become the crown prince of ČSSD, believing that he, unlike Prime Minister Sobotka, would be able to mend fences with the President. This dream, nonetheless, entirely evaporated after the electoral debacle in which ČSSD scored its worst result since 1992.

For all these reasons, President Zeman disproportionately shaped the Czech relations with Russia. Besides his visit to the Russian Federation mentioned above, President Zeman frequently expressed his opinions about Russia in such a radical way that his domestic opponents remained speechless and foreign commentators were shocked. To name just one example, during the Council of Europe meeting in October, he claimed that the annexation of Crimea was a *fait accompli*, arguing that Ukraine should give up its legal claim to the territory and instead receive a compensation in the form of gas and oil supplies. It came as no surprise that this proposal was met not

only with disbelief in the Czech diplomatic circles, but also with outrage in Ukraine and elsewhere.⁹

Unfortunately, the President's statements often came close to Russia's official positions such as when he was airing his claims about Russia's alleged huge losses of European exporters due to the Western sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions. The President's openly pro-Kremlin position on this issue is no exception to his usual positions, though. In fact, it is hard to find any substantive policy area where President Zeman starkly deviates from the Russian official position – ranging from his critique of the Western intervention to Syria to his assessment of the conflict in Ukraine. The above-mentioned case of Evgeny Nikulin is also a case in point: President Zeman actively lobbied for Nikulin's extradition to Russia to such an extent that the Justice Minister Robert Pelikán started to talk publicly about the undue pressure from the Office of the President.¹⁰

No other institution or influential politician shared the President's tendency to publicly present controversial statements about Czech foreign policy. Indeed, the foreign policy positions of the Czech government or the Prime Minister only seldom caught the attention of international media, the unfortunate result of which was an incorrect reading of the overall Czech foreign policy. Nevertheless, from time to time the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister was forced to publicly countermand the President's statements. Typically, they did so by stressing the Czech commitment to the common EU position or by reiterating that the official Czech stance on the particular issue of concern had not changed. The strongest such clash between President Zeman and Prime Minister Sobotka occurred in October after the President's speech about Crimea. In that case, both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister rejected President Zeman's words as not corresponding with the official Czech policy.¹¹

On the level of day-to-day diplomacy, however, the Czech position was substantially more predictable. In particular, the role played by the Foreign Ministry's diplomats had a stabilising effect on the situation, and even the co-operation between the Office of the President and the Foreign Ministry on common issues (such as the President's visit to Russia) was running smoothly. Two factors further increased the Ministry's stabilising role. First, the Czech Republic played a moderating role in the Visegrad Four, where the Polish and the Hungarian views of Russia starkly diverged. Second, the Czech position was relatively moderate also in the EU-wide context, with the Czech Republic belonging to neither the camp of appeasers nor that of hawks. However, the newly emerging EU consensus (that was further strengthened at the beginning of 2018 following the Skripal case) has come much closer to the views which are held at the Czech MFA.

The Czech embassy and consulates conducted the foreign policy agenda on a day-to-day basis. The Czech Ambassador to Russia Vladimír Remek decided to leave his office at the beginning of 2018. In his final year, he was criticised for his lack of activities, mainly in the political sphere.¹² On the other hand, his overall evaluation is more or less neutral due to the demanding conditions during his tenure. Importantly, and perhaps contrary to the expectations of his critics, Remek's public views have never diverged from the official positions of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹³

Among the other ministries, the Ministry of Industry and Trade was particularly active in its relations with Russia, focusing on the promotion of the interests of Czech exporters and investors in Russia. Besides this, as mentioned above, its agenda was connected with the future construction of the new reactors in the Czech nuclear power plants, in particular the Dukovany power plant. Furthermore, the problem of the indebtedness of some of the Russian subjects to the Czech Export Bank and EGAP emerged as points on the agenda in the talks between the Czech Minister of Trade and Industry and his Russian counterpart. Additionally, the Ministry of Agriculture can be mentioned here as well since Minister Jurečka made an official visit to the Rostov Oblast in April 2017 and there he promoted a potential co-operation with Czech exporters of agriculture machinery.¹⁴

After the Czech parliamentary election in October, new coalition negotiations started, but there was still no stable government by the end of the year. In fact, as Andrej Babiš's ANO movement is likely to gain the position of the Prime Minister, as well as the office of the Foreign Minister, the Czech foreign policy is likely to become less predictable since Andrej Babiš shows an utter lack of interest in foreign policy and international politics, a position that is sadly prevalent in the ANO movement as a whole. This means that the few foreign policy experts the movement has will be very influential in defining its overall Russia policy as well as the course of the Czech MFA. Simultaneously, the movement's experts, ranging from Martin Stropnický to Dita Charanzová, are generally pro-European and critical of the recent developments in Russian foreign policy.

The Czech Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber for Co-operation with the CIS States were bearers of the anti-sanction rhetoric in the Czech public sphere. The head of the Chamber of Commerce Vladimír Dlouhý claimed that while their critique of the sanctions did not mean agreeing with Russian foreign policy or the annexation of Crimea, he was rather vocal about his conviction that the sanctions are counter-productive.¹⁵ Also, representatives of both chambers expressed their views regarding Russia on numerous occasions, including the meetings with their Russian partners in November, but also internally *vis-à-vis* Czech officials.

The list of the Czech key business players involved in the Russian market has not substantially changed either. The PPF Group, which announced its purchase of a commercial building complex in Moscow, and Škoda Auto, which owns a factory in Kaluga and assembles its cars at the GAZ factory of Nizhny Novgorod, remain the main players. Both were also actively involved in the roundtables and meetings of the presidential delegation in November 2017.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

The Czech public debate regarding Russia was more diversified in 2017 than in the previous years. Three clusters of topics were closely followed: global issues, bilateral relations (including EU-Russian relations) and Russian domestic developments. While the Czech media reported on these issues in 2016 as well, the stress moved to-

wards analysing the interconnections among the three clusters, and the overall attention was considerably more constant. The reasons for this were the continuing global involvement of Russia (Syria, the US presidential election), the upcoming Russian presidential election and the corresponding toughening of Russian authoritarianism (the increased persecution of LGBT+ persons, the continuing clampdown on the media and NGOs), but also the more intense bilateral political exchange.

The heightened tensions also sometimes translated into scandals, which meant that even Czech tabloids reported about Russia. The most visible diplomatic scandal of this type broke out during the November visit of Miloš Zeman to Russia when the Russian article titled '*Czechoslovakia Should Be Thankful for the 1968 Invasion*' was published. As the webpage it appeared on, *Zvezda*, belongs to the publishing house of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, and as its contributors could be hardly called independent, the publication sparked harsh criticism across the Czech public sphere. Indeed, the representatives of some opposition parties even called for an immediate return of the President's mission to Prague. The Czech President labelled the author of the article a madman, while also asking for an apology.¹⁶ The Russian side, namely the Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, rejected any responsibility for the article, arguing that it did not represent the official position of the Russian Federation.¹⁷ To complete the absurdity of the situation, an article with the exact opposite message that eloquently praised the Prague Spring almost immediately replaced the criticised article.¹⁸ In his characteristically undiplomatic way, President Zeman then claimed that the replacement was just another proof that journalists are in fact prostitutes.¹⁹

The media scene continued to be divided into two unequal parts in regard to Russia, with the majority critical of Russia and its recent policies. Virtually all the major media outlets came up with critical articles on Russia from time to time. The most vocal critique of Russia came from the weekly *Respekt*, followed by the business-oriented daily *Hospodářské noviny*, with somewhat less critical attitudes towards Russia being expressed in the newspapers *Mladá fronta DNES* and *Právo*. However, even in the latter two, Russia was not depicted in a predominantly positive light, with the main points of criticism being its manipulation of the US presidential election and its continuing hybrid warfare in Ukraine.

A vocal minority of news sources, which portrayed themselves as *alternative*, were much more positive about Russian policies, up to the point where some of them almost verbatim repeated Russian official positions. These media included *Parlamentní listy*, *Sputnik*, *Aeronet* and similar outlets. As these media often combined their pro-Putin reporting with a broader anti-Western and illiberal agenda, they have succeeded in attracting various segments of the Czech society that hold a negative view on Western liberalism in general. Hence, pro-Putin articles were often peppered with anti-NATO rhetoric, Euroscepticism, homophobia and xenophobia, often bordering on racism.

The public opinion regarding Russia remained as split as in 2016. In the last years, however, anti-Kremlin segments of the Czech society have become much more organised and politically visible. While previously, radicalisation was a hallmark of the pro-Putin media and elements in the Czech society, a similar trend is now palpable on

the opposite front, with several outlets almost exclusively focussing on articles which are critical of the current Russian political and economic developments.

The public opinion concerning Russia remained relatively stable with a dominantly negative tone. According to the STEM polling agency, Russia was seen positively by 30% of the population, while 36% held a negative view of it. The rest remained undecided. This evaluation also ranked Russia among the worst performers of the researched group of countries (consisting of EU members plus some non-EU countries).²⁰

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The entire year of 2017 saw a continuing worsening of the relations between Russia and the West. Russia's stated preference for a renewed dialogue with the EU ran counter to its actions, both in the EU and its neighbourhood, and even beyond these areas. For this reason, many EU member states, in particular the previously indifferent ones in Western or Southern Europe, have come to see Russian activities in a more critical light. As a result, the Czech position, which used to be seen as a relatively hawkish one, has become the EU mainstream position by the end of 2017. This gave the Czech diplomacy a unique position – that of a mediator between the much more radical Polish/Baltic views and those which are less critical of Russia. To change the Czech Russia policy from a reactionary one into a proactive power broker policy, however, the Czech Republic has to overcome the three major weaknesses of its Russia policy.

First, as exaggerated as the differences between the key institutional actors in the Czech foreign policy-making are, the President has become an outlier. His views, especially when explicitly publicly formulated, cannot be often easily reconciled with the policies of the Government and the long-standing position of the MFA. This fragmented nature of the Czech foreign policy is a long-term problem which also affects the Czech position in the EU and NATO, where credibility and unity are essential prerequisites for coming up with successful initiatives.

The second problem lies in the single issue on which there is an agreement among Czech policy-makers – economic diplomacy. The economic focus can, nevertheless, easily degenerate if, under the pretence of promoting Czech business interests, key policy-makers and influential business groups forge non-standard *special relations*, which they already do (see the relationship between the President and the PPF Group). In the end, these connections are detrimental, even in terms of economic diplomacy, because they give undue advantage to one particular business (an ethically problematic business at that) over its competition. In addition, an undue focus on economy sometimes leads to neglecting the other, similarly important aspects of diplomacy – ranging from cultural diplomacy to co-operation in the field of research, education or environmental issues.

Finally, the ongoing polarisation of the Czech Russia policy decreases the chances of a stable and predictable policy as the issue has become so politically sensitive that

grand gestures often overshadow practical interactions. Indeed the Russian activities in the region of Central Europe, which are supervised from Russia's embassy in Prague, and the Russian support for illiberal new and old media paradoxically make this polarisation even more real: while fomenting the distrust towards the West, Russia's strategy also increases the suspicions regarding its own intentions.

Hence, for the critics of the current Russia, any common project with Russia is necessarily evil and a result of Russian manipulation (see the overblown reaction to the establishment of the Czech-Russian Discussion Forum). The advocates of Russia, on the other hand, often overlook blatant abuses of human rights and Russia's increasing authoritarianism (see the Russian treatment of Crimean Tatars, LGBT+ people in Chechnya, opposition leaders, independent media, etc.). Clearly, no consensus concerning Russia will be attained in the near future in the Czech Republic. But the basic understanding that the Czech relation to Russia is, naturally, a conglomerate of sticks and carrots, and of co-operative and offensive measures is a necessary precondition for the conduct of any meaningful long-term policy *vis-à-vis* Russia.

Endnotes

- ¹ iDNES (2017) Komentář: Zeman se vrací. Bude mít jeho ruská cesta nějaký výsledek? [Comment: Miloš Zeman Is Returning Home. Will There Be Any Result of His Russian Journey?]. *iDNES*, 24 November 2017 [online]. Available from: https://zpravy.idnes.cz/milos-zeman-rusko-putin-cesta-dkz-/zahranicni.aspx?c=A171124_115302_zahranicni_jav (Accessed 13 April 2018).
- ² ČTK (2017) Zeman v besedě s Putinem intervenoval za vězněného teologa [Zeman Pleaded in Favour of the Imprisoned Theologist During the Talks with Putin]. *ČeskéNoviny.cz*, 23 November 2017 [online]. Available from: <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/zeman-v-besede-s-putinem-intervenoval-za-vezneneho-teologa/1554061> (Accessed 13 April 2018); iRozhlas (2017) Zemanovi jsem vděčný, říká propuštěný ukrajinský historik. Výrok o Krymu považuje za urážlivý [‘I Am Grateful to Zeman,’ Says the Historian Released from Capture. He Finds Zeman’s Remark About Crimea Insulting]; *iRozhlas.cz*, 3 March 2018 [online]. Available from: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/ukrajina-separatiste-rusko-kozlovskij-kozlovsky-unos-vezeni_1803031915_jgr (Accessed 13 April 2018).
- ³ BusinessInfo (2017) České firmy podepsaly v Rusku smlouvy za více než dvacet miliard korun [Czech Firms Signed Contracts for More Than 20 Bln CZK in Russia]. *BusinessInfo.cz*, 7 December 2017 [online]. Available from: <http://www.businessinfo.cz/cs/clanky/ceske-firmy-podepsaly-v-rusku-smlouvy-za-vice-nez-99196.html> (Accessed 13 April 2018).
- ⁴ IHNEC.cz (2017) Čeští vývozci se vrací do Ruska. Místo hotových výrobků však dodávají stále častěji jen polotovary [Czech Exporters Are Returning to Russia. However, Instead of Final Products They Increasingly Export Semi-Finished Products]. *IHNED.cz*, 24 July 2017 [online]. Available from: <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-65808300-cesti-vyvozci-se-vraci-do-ruska-misto-hotovych-vyrobu-vsak-dodavaji-stale-casteji-jen-polotovary> (Accessed 13 April 2018).
- ⁵ One of the authors of this study is Petr Kratochvíl, who was a signatory of the Memorandum, and the interpretation of the role of the Forum is therefore purely his.
- ⁶ See the series of investigative articles in *Respekt*: <https://www.respekt.cz/jevgenij-nikulin>. Nikulin’s case was finally resolved in March 2018, when he was extradited to the United States; Cf. iRozhlas (2018) Česko vydalo údajného ruského hackera Nikulina, v noci odletěl do USA. Obhájce

- o tom nevěděl [Czechia Extradited the Alleged Russian Hacker Nikulin; During the Night, He Flew to the US. His Defence Attorney Did Not Know About It]. *iRozhlas.cz*, 30 March 2018 [online]. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/jevgenij-nikulin-byl-vydan-do-usa_1803301111_miz (Accessed 13 April 2018).
- ⁷ BusinessInfo (2017) AMSP ČR: Obchodování s Ruskem se začíná odrážet ode dna [Czech Entrepreneur Association: Business with Russia Is Beginning to Bounce Back After Hitting Rock Bottom]. *BusinessInfo.cz*, 21 November 2017 [online]. Available from: <http://www.businessinfo.cz/cs/clanky/obchodovani-s-ruskem-se-zacina-odrazet-ode-dna-97352.html> (Accessed 13 April 2018).
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