
Chapter 14

Sub-Saharan Africa in the Czech Foreign Policy

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The gap between the relevance of Sub-Saharan Africa in the Czech foreign policy and its relevance in EU external relations is larger than that of any other region of the world.¹ Sub-Saharan Africa (here also abbreviated to ‘Africa’ if not specified otherwise) maintains tight political, military and economic relations with its former colonizers among the ‘old’ member states of the European Union, and it remains the primary target of the EU development policy. In contrast to that, its relative importance in the bilateral relations with the Czech Republic, including the number of diplomatic missions and priority countries of development cooperation, has been steadily decreasing.

National economic interests and the preservation of good bilateral relations with selected African countries still play a determining role in shaping the Czech policy towards Africa, but the most important events, agenda and strategic choices during the actual period originated at the EU level. This is attested by the Czech ‘boycott’ of the Lisbon EU-Africa Summit as a protest against the human rights violations by the Zimbabwean government in 2007, the approval of the first strategy document towards Africa by the Governmental Committee for the EU in 2008, and the successful Czech presidency in the Council of the EU in the first half of 2009, the most intense year in reciprocal relations ever.

This rather positive account of the influence of the EU on the domestic policy is balanced, however, by the Czech Republic’s strong orientation toward and specialization in the former Eastern bloc. The country remains passive in its involvement in the global and security agenda related to Africa at the EU and the multilateral level, which leads to further marginalization of the continent at the domestic level. This division of labour between the Czech Republic and the EU could be seen as a positive outcome of Europeanization, but the preference of public opinion to favour Sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the development agenda, points out the general absence of the region at the political level.

The period of Czechoslovakia’s intense, ideologically-laden relations with the African countries ‘on the way to socialism’ before 1989 is over.² The ‘Made in Czecho-

slovakia' trademark and much of the Czech know-how and diplomatic networks have been lost during the subsequent transition period, which was characterized by a concentration on the country's internal problems and the so-called catching up with Europe and the West. The repeatedly closed and re-opened Sub-Saharan Africa Department seems to have eventually found its due place at the MFA with the main focus being on the political and economic interests fuelled by the growing Czech exports to Africa.

The rest of the agenda will probably not depart from the level of a more or less passive participation of the Czech Republic in the EU and global policies: Africa is not a 'priority' but an 'agenda' of the Czech foreign policy. In spite of that, the Czech Republic remains one of the most active and experienced countries among the 'new' EU member states.

THE AFRICAN DIMENSION OF THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Background

Until 2008 the *Conceptual Basis of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic for the 2003–2006 Period* had remained the only strategy paper that explicitly mentioned Africa, even if this mention of Africa was still vague. The Czech Republic was supposed to focus on the 'stable regional powers', promote new and maintain traditional economic relations, and adequately help in solving conflicts in the region.³ Given the generally missing or outdated formulation of the Czech foreign policy strategy, it was only seemingly paradoxical that Africa deserved the approval of the document *The Preparation [sic] of the Strategic Debate on the Approach of the Czech Republic to Africa* at the Governmental Committee for the EU in June 2008.⁴ Drafted by the MFA, the document was originally required by the Office of the Government in relation to the upcoming EU presidency, and hence it was drawn up because of an external incentive, without internal political disagreements. Rather than a 'preparation', the document contains a very detailed strategy proposal, but the 'debate' mentioned in its title never took place since the document was never published.

The main difference from the 2002 general strategy paper consists in the addition of the multilateral and the EU level, and the criticism of the 'stagnation of the traditional bilateral approach'.⁵ The motivations of the Czech involvement in Africa have remained pragmatic, but they reflect the changing geopolitical context and the rising activity of emerging powers on the continent. The Horn of Africa was selected as the priority subregion due to its proximity to the Middle East. The paper suggested selecting two priority countries of the Czech development cooperation in Africa and adding Zimbabwe to the priority countries of the transition policy. Attention was also paid to the increased visibility of the Czech Republic through small development projects and cultural events, partly to get African support at multilateral fora. In its multilateral dimension, the paper promotes the African Union in building the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) and a limited participation of the Czech experts in UN

peace missions and ESDP civil missions. Recommendations at EU level concerned the presidency in the Council of the EU, which is analysed further in this chapter.

Political Context

In contrast to the global and European politics, and to a lesser extent to the Czech media, public opinion and the civil society, Africa is almost absent from the domestic political space. This is partly related to the entirely missing political debate on the role of the Czech Republic in the world. Political parties do not refer to Africa either. In this generally indifferent ambiance, individual preferences of actors at diverse political positions in the government, and the MFA in particular, may hence influence the policy. The most notable initiatives were initiated by Karel Schwarzenberg, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, between January 2007 and May 2009, at least in comparison with his predecessors and his successor Jan Kohout. Schwarzenberg even claimed that the Czech Republic wanted to play ‘an important role on the African stage’, approved the rebirth of a separate Sub-Saharan Africa Department at the MFA, and became personally interested in the situation in Zimbabwe.⁶ Apart from this rare exception, the Czech policy to Africa is most frequently designed at the expert level within the corresponding department at the Czech MFA, or new developments in it occur as reactions to events that trickle down from the EU level. In consequence, the African policy has to compete with the strong preference for the Eastern dimension in the hierarchy of the ministry, which leads to the generally low relevance of the policy for the policy-makers.

THE AFRICAN DIMENSION OF THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: AGENDA AND EVENTS

Bilateral Relations

The focus on the regional powers and traditional partners is reflected in the schedule of state visits to Sub-Saharan Africa. After the visits to Asia and Latin America, the trip to Africa by President Václav Havel at the end of his second term had to be cancelled due to his poor health. The first Czech President to visit Sub-Saharan Africa, namely Nigeria and South Africa, was Václav Klaus in December 2006. With business on the top of the agenda, the official visit included a short stop in Angola, a priority country of the Czech development cooperation, which was seen then as a prospective market. To put the Czech foreign policy in perspective, Klaus was the first head of state in Central Europe to visit South Africa after the fall of apartheid, which attests the relatively high attention paid to the continent by the Czech Republic in comparison with other post-communist countries. The MFA assessed the visit to South Africa as successful and in May 2008, the Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka came on a working visit to Prague.⁷ In addition to trade, technology and tourism, the agenda with South Africa includes higher education since South African students are involved in three programmes at Czech universities financed by South Africa.⁸ The Nigerian visit has not been reciprocated so far.

The planned visit of Prime Minister Topolánek to the former Soviet allies Yemen and Ethiopia in July 2007 was cancelled for personal reasons. Eventually, only the visit to Ethiopia took place, and this time, it was led by the Deputy Prime Minister, and the delegation included the Ministers of Defence and Human Rights. Excellent relations were thus restored after an alleged minor diplomatic incident that had resulted in the non-inclusion of Ethiopia on the list of priority countries of development cooperation in the early 2000s. In April 2009, the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs received his Ethiopian homologue Seyoum Mesfin, with trade (including arms), investment and development cooperation on the agenda. Ethiopia is to become one of the five programme countries of the Czech development cooperation again.⁹

Another working visit to Prague, which took place in May 2008, concerned Kabinga Pande, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Zambia. The third priority country of the Czech development cooperation in Africa.¹⁰ However, the development programmes with Angola and Zambia gave mixed results and both countries are not to be kept on the list. In the same month, the Czech Prime Minister Topolánek visited two countries on his way to the EU-Latin America Summit: Cape Verde, a special partner of the EU, and Mali, an important market for Czech goods. In the last case, the Czech Republic attempted to sell its superfluous L-159 air fighters, which was a recurrent topic in the talks with other African countries as well. Finally, the Czech President and Prime Minister received Jean Ping, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, during his working visit to Prague in April 2009. The review of all bilateral visits identified trade, arms export, historical ties from the communist era, development cooperation and the EU agenda as the major motivations for the bilateral contacts with Africa. In November 2009, a celebration of 50 years of diplomatic relations with Ghana took place in Prague.

Security and Human Rights

The bilateral endeavours of the Czech Republic in the field of African security and human rights are very limited. In the case of conflicts, they are almost reduced to humanitarian assistance. The country has only sent a couple of military, civil and election observers to UN and/or EU missions, especially those in Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). They include two officers at the French headquarters of the EU mission to the Central African Republic and Chad (EUFOR). The Czech financial participation corresponds to one per cent of the costs of the EUFOR mission.¹¹ The common Czech and Slovak ESDP battlegroup was not deployed in the second half of 2009. The MFA has repeatedly claimed that Africa does not make up a part of its priorities and that the Czech army is unprepared to intervene in the tropics.¹² It also did not respond to the call of the UN Secretary General to provide six helicopters to the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) and troops to the Mission in DRC (MONUC).¹³

In the agenda of human rights, the Czech Republic has been active solely towards Zimbabwe – at the bilateral, EU and UN levels. It provided about 20,000 € to independent media as a part of the transition policy in 2008, and it also organized a ‘symposium on EU-Africa relations’ for new Zimbabwean diplomats in 2009. With the crisis-related reduction of budgets, the inclusion of Zimbabwe on the list of the priority

countries of the Czech transition policy is unlikely, but it would strengthen the credibility of the policy, which is currently focused on Belarus, Burma and Cuba. The most important event of 2007, the Lisbon EU-Africa Summit, was not a bilateral event, but it was the domestic sensitivity to human rights violations by the Zimbabwean government that led to the downgraded Czech representation by Minister Schwarzenberg instead of the originally planned representation by Prime Minister Topolánek as a way of protesting against the presence of President Robert Mugabe at the Summit. Alongside Britain and, later, some other 'new' EU member states, the Czech Republic did not consider the planned critique of Mugabe at the margin of the event as sufficient. This was the only time during the 2007–2009 period that an African agenda has led to a collective decision by the government without being widely discussed, however.¹⁴ It should also be acknowledged that the Prime Minister's absence was facilitated by a planned family event. The perceived critical stance of the Czech Republic has changed since then and the MFA does not consider having a different approach to Zimbabwe than other EU countries anymore. The Czech Republic has been recently criticized by international non-governmental organizations for exporting 'tools of torture' to Senegal in 2007 and Cameroon in 2008.¹⁵

Reduction of the Czech Diplomatic Missions in Sub-Saharan Africa

The 'boycott' of the Lisbon Summit was a less controversial issue than the reduction of the diplomatic missions in Africa. A network of embassies in the region remains a precondition not only for efficient bilateral relations, but also for the participation on the EU and multilateral agendas. As of 2008, the Czech Republic had eight embassies in Sub-Saharan Africa (Abuja, Accra, Addis Ababa, Harare, Luanda, Kinshasa, Nairobi and Pretoria). This was one less than Poland, the same number as Romania and Greece, one more than Bulgaria, and two more than Austria. The Czech Republic had already left the francophone West Africa by closing the Embassies in Abidjan and Dakar in 2005 under the Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda, which has been recognized as an error since then. In summer 2007, the media informed about the MFA's intent to close the Embassies in Harare and Kinshasa (the latter closing was announced already in 2006) while continuing to reinforce the Missions in the ex-Soviet Union and Asia.

The announcement was criticized by the Foreign Committee of the Chamber of Deputies with the argument that the Parliament was not consulted on the decision, but without criticizing the choice of Africa.¹⁶ In reality, as underlined by the media, the intent to leave the DRC and Zimbabwe in times of democratic transition would rather meet misunderstanding from other EU member states and could be interpreted as a sign of mistrust. Eventually, only the Consulate General in Cape Town was closed down, and in October 2009, the caretaker government decided to close the Embassy in Luanda by the end of March 2010, and also to close the one in Harare upon further reconsideration (i.e. probably by the new government set up after the May 2010 elections).¹⁷ The Foreign Minister justified the choice of Angola by the high costs (1.3 million € per year) and the failure of development and commercial projects.¹⁸ In the times of crisis, the idea of reopening a Mission in francophone West Africa has stalled, but the plan for a 'Visegrád House' in Cape Town seems to be more realistic. Overall, the

process of reducing the diplomatic network was rather random and did not foresee the possible consequences in the medium and long term.

Economic Relations

The reduction of the diplomatic networks in Sub-Saharan Africa would be understandable as its part in the Czech foreign trade has been steadily decreasing to reach only 0.36% in 2009. No African country makes up a part of the *Export Strategy of the Czech Republic (2006–2010)*, but there are four Latin American countries in it, and they are included on the basis of a double total volume of trade.¹⁹ Nevertheless, after a long stagnation in the early 2000s, the volume of trade with Sub-Saharan Africa has more than doubled since 2003, in spite of the setback of the financial and economic crisis, which attests the huge economic potential of the region hampered by the crisis. From 2008 to 2009 the Czech exports have decreased by 9% to 370 million € and the imports by more than a quarter to 220 million €. ²⁰ South Africa dominates both exports (two thirds) and imports (one half of the whole). Major importers of Czech goods include Mali, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Angola and Ghana.²¹ The commodity structure is not as asymmetric as expected, and it concerns goods with higher added value on both sides. Many bilateral and regional Chambers of Commerce are active in the field, especially in the regions where diplomatic missions are missing.

The EU Presidency

The Preparation of the Strategic Debate on the Approach of the Czech Republic to Africa has drawn a roadmap for the Czech Presidency in the Council of the EU. The Sub-Saharan Africa Department, the Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels and the Embassies shared the agendas in the working groups for Africa (COAFR) and the African, Caribbean and Pacific states (ACP). The foremost task for the Czech Republic was to ensure progress in the partnerships of the Action Plan of the *Joint EU-Africa Strategy*. The presidency's other priority concerned the revitalization of the dialogue with the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), which was related to the national priority given to the Horn of Africa. The presidency had also planned to facilitate the progress on the negotiation of the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) within the Cotonou Agreement, but the Czech liberal stance met preliminary resistance already in 2008.²²

According to the itinerary, the Czech Republic got involved in four implementation teams of the Action Plan: it was active in those on democratic governance and human rights through the MFA, and in those on trade and regional integration through the Ministry of Industry and Trade. It was less active in the teams concerned with peace and security, and energy. As the Czech Republic does not have vested interests in Africa, it was well placed to reach an agreement in the Council. These were often drawn between the former colonial powers and the rest of the EU members, as was the case with the coup in Madagascar, the constitutional tensions in Niger, and the judicial misuses in Zimbabwe. It succeeded in organizing both troikas with the Czech Republic's main partners, South Africa and Nigeria, and with IGAD, its subregional priority. As unofficially intended, the EU presidency has benefited the Czech bilat-

eral relations. It also organized troikas with the African Union, Cape Verde and Zimbabwe. Where applicable, the presidency tried to mainstream its general priority in the area of energy security.

The Czech presidency was generally praised for its experience and its respect for the unwritten rules in the Council in comparison to the preceding presidencies. The presidency gave an opportunity to a number of high level politicians and diplomats to get in contact with the African agenda. However, when a parallel event was planned in relation to the Eastern dimension of the EU external relations, another main priority of the Czech presidency, they preferred the East to Africa.

THE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN DIMENSION OF THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KEY ACTORS

The Government

As a typical regional policy, the Czech foreign policy towards Africa is determined hierarchically on the line from the government to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Deputy Minister for Bilateral Relations, the Section for Non-European Countries and Development Cooperation and the Sub-Saharan Africa Department. With the low priority given to the region and the rare occasions in which it has appeared at the top political level (i.e. the Lisbon Summit and the Africa strategy paper), an informal network of officials outside this hierarchy, often former Ambassadors or Africanists, promote Africa from other positions within the MFA and the government at large. This situation is not perceived as unusual. The informal network probably stood at the origin of the initiative of the Office of the Government to prepare the first strategy paper for Africa as well. On a personal level, Prime Minister Topolánek publicly praised the development efforts of the Czechoslovak citizens kidnapped in 1983 in Angola.²³ He also expressed his interest in visiting Africa after the EU presidency, but his government fell before its end. In the anticipation of the elections, the caretaker government headed by Jan Fischer did not undertake any initiative towards Africa.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs

After the long period of the reduction of African capacities in Prague and at the missions abroad, the current capacities seem to have stabilized. The number of personnel working on the Sub-Saharan African agenda in the capital decreased with the split of Czechoslovakia from 19 in 1992 to 4 in 1994, and it increased to 6 in 2008. Moreover, the agenda alternatively made up a part of the Sub-Saharan Africa Unit of the Middle East and Africa Department, and of the separate Sub-Saharan Africa Department. The latter was refounded only in January 2008 under the direction of Bronislava Tomášová, who was replaced by Blanka Fajkusová after the end of the Czech EU presidency. As of the end of 2009, the Department was formed by five officers focused on the West, the South, the East, the African Horn, and the Great Lakes with the ACP respectively. Secondments from Denmark and the European Commission and in-

terns have supported the Department during the EU presidency. More generally, the MFA career rules are not always enforced, and many diplomats are not interested in the positions at the missions in Africa.

The Parliament

The role of the Parliament in shaping the Czech foreign policy is predominantly *ad hoc*. In 2007 the Committee on EU Affairs of the Senate approved the draft of the joint EU-Africa strategy without further recommendations.²⁴ In 2008 the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the Chamber of Deputies discussed the draft of the *Preparation of the Strategic Debate on the Approach of the Czech Republic to Africa* and recommended the MFA to respect the choice of Angola and Zambia as priority countries of the Czech development cooperation.²⁵ The one rare occasion when Africa was mentioned during the plenary sessions was the ratification of the revised Cotonou Agreement, but it was only considered as a part of the *acquis*. While the Parliamentary Friendship Group with Sub-Saharan African states has only three members as it has not been active at all, the group with South Africa has nine members, which shows the particular position of the regional power. Committees of both chambers quite regularly organize visits to Africa. However, the Chamber of Deputies had to cancel one of them after the media accused it of wasting public money in the times of crisis.

The President

In accordance with his ultraliberal economic opinions, President Klaus has been critical of trade barriers and development aid to Africa.²⁶ After his 2006 state visit, he returned to Nigeria on an invitation of the Osigwe Anyiam-Osigwe Foundation in 2007.²⁷ Since then, he did not publicly show any interest in Africa.²⁸

Non-Governmental Organizations

The Society of the Friends of Africa is the most important NGO interested in the continent. In October 2007 it co-organized a large conference called *The Czech Republic and Africa* in the seat of the MFA. Other NGOs have intensified cultural exchanges with Africa during the last years. More importantly, Africa remains the darling of private humanitarian and development activities of the civil society such as ‘adoptions at a distance’, building of schools, etc. Some of these grassroots organizations have sporadically protested against human rights violations in the countries of their activity.

CZECH FOREIGN POLICY TO AFRICA IN THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPACE

Like in other countries of the North, the media image of Africa in the Czech Republic is generally negative and hampered by stereotypes. The continent is represented either as backward and troubled or as exotic. At the same time, Africa is given more media attention than other regions of the South, which contrasts with the priorities of the Czech foreign policy. For example, the Czech citizens see Africa as the primary

target by far of the Czech development cooperation, which sharply contrasts with reality.²⁹ Nevertheless, with the rising income of the Czech population, the growing opportunities for travel, and the increasing African diasporas, people to people contacts are more intense than ever, which presents an opportunity to narrow the false image of the continent.

CONCLUSION

Due to its traditionally low priority in the Czech foreign policy, Sub-Saharan Africa does not even come close to becoming a subject of fierce and audible debates that would divide the political scene, or even the society at large. Hence, it appears as a seemingly uninteresting agenda, characterized by weak economic and low-profile political relations with sporadic and non-controversial meetings at the high level. However, the attitude of the MFA towards Africa is a remarkable but somehow paradoxical example of Europeanization. Even though the longstanding preference of the EU for the region has incited the Czech Republic to stabilize its African policy both strategically and institutionally over the 2007–2009 period, its influence has also led to a certain division of labour and the prioritization of the Eastern dimension to the detriment of Africa in various areas, including economic diplomacy and development cooperation.

In contrast to its political insignificance, the societal support for Africa is higher, though mainly in the framework of charity. Sub-Saharan Africa appeared only exceptionally on the government agenda, and it is possible that this was largely because of the intervention of pro-African individuals within the official structures of the MFA and the government at large, as is true for other regions as well. The Czech-African relations have suffered from the geopolitical changes after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Even though the Czech Republic acceded both EU and NATO, the perception of the former USSR as a threat remains one of the cornerstones of the Czech foreign policy, which leads to the mobilization of resources and political will on the Eastern agenda. The perception of Africa as the Third World, or the ‘Rest’ to the West, has not changed, and the region is seldom seen as a relevant *partner* for the Czech Republic, or even for Czech businesses.

The geopolitical shift to a multipolar world with the emerging powers more active in Africa has been acknowledged by the recent strategy paper, but a general awareness of the new opportunities in Africa may probably arise only with more intense people-to-people contacts through visits and migration. The MFA may pretend to specialize in the East and leave Africa to the policy of the EU and multilateral organizations, but the reduction of official bilateral political ties by closing the embassies and the reduction of development cooperation by reducing the number of priority countries on the poorest continent will probably lead to further undermining of the potential in the relations with Africa that may be sighted by the civil society organizations and businesses. However, the relatively important national contribution to the European Development Fund from 2011 may soon be an important factor in changing the lukewarm attitude of the government.

Endnotes

- ¹ I am grateful to the following people for interviews, written communications, and/or comments on the preceding versions of the paper that were realized in 2007–2009: Blanka Fajkusová; Michal Jeřábek; Jakub Karfík; Petr Kopřiva; Jan Látal; Viktor Lorenc; Jaroslav Olša; Václav Prášil; Bronislava Tomášová from the Czech MFA; Václav Exner; Jaromír Štětina and Přemysl Rabas, members of the Czech Parliament; Celia-Sanda Botha, Ambassador of South Africa to the Czech Republic; and Mohammed Nurudeen Ismaila, Minister-Counsellor of the Embassy of Ghana in Prague. The responsibility for the final version is mine.
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- ⁴ Výbor pro EU: *Příprava Strategické debaty o přístupu ČR k Africe*.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 10.
- ⁶ *Afrika a EU chtějí těsnější spolupráci. EU kritizuje Zimbabwe*. České noviny, 8. 12. 2007. On-line: (www.ceskenoviny.cz/svet/index_view.php?id=285815).
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- ¹³ Czech News Agency, 1. 8. 2008; *OSN hledá vojáky pro Kongo. Česko má jiné priority*. Aktuálně.cz, 24. 11. 2008.
- ¹⁴ *Usnesení vlády č. 1332 ze dne 28. listopadu 2007 ‘Souhlas s vysláním delegace na II. Summit Evropská unie – Afrika v Lisabonu ve dnech 7. až 9. prosince 2007’*.
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- ²⁸ See on-line: (www.klaus.cz).
- ²⁹ SC&C: *Zahraníční rozvojová spolupráce. Závěrečná zpráva, 7. 11. 2008.*