
Chapter 9

Russia in the Czech Foreign Policy

Petr Kratochvíl, Petra Kuchyňková

RUSSIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Czech-Russian relations pose quite a controversial topic in the Czech political debate. They may even be characterized by a long-term obsession with Russia on the part of the Czechs. Russia is often represented negatively in the Czech political debate and even as a threat to national security. Here a gradual shift may be observed from seeing Russia as a Soviet-type danger to seeing it as the ‘new Russia’ – a rising power which still has strong interests in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. In recent years a second shift is observable – that from viewing Russia as a military threat to viewing it as a colleague in matters of economy and energy. This second shift is quite important because Russia is also often portrayed positively in the Czech political debate. More specifically, it is portrayed as an opportunity, particularly as an economic opportunity. The so-called positive discourse about today’s Russia in the Czech political debate is also often accompanied with relatively little attention being devoted to the other post-Soviet countries, even though the potential in this respect is quite great (for instance, in the case of Ukraine).

The Czech political debate about Russia and Czech-Russian relations is characterized by a strong political polarization, especially in recent years, when the topic was strongly influenced by the controversial problems of the anti-ballistic missile defence system and by the increased attention paid to potential security threats connected with Russian economic interests in strategic areas (energy) or projects. In the political sense the right is close to the first type of discourse of Russia. Russia is seen by them as a potentially dangerous and rather unstable country that has to be contained. Trade with Russia is often seen as an unfortunate necessity that we have to live with (especially in connection with the import of Russian energy resources). This type of discourse was typical for some of the representatives of Topolánek’s cabinet, although the main right-wing party in the ČR, the ODS, is not completely unified on this interpretation of the ‘Russian threat’. On the other hand the left sees Russia in an oddly optimistic way. It sees Russia as a great opportunity and as a partner in dialogue. No fear of the energy and economic dependence is present in this type of discourse. The

strengthening of contacts between ČR and Russia is systematically supported especially by the Communists. To some extent it was also supported by the SPO, headed by the former Prime Minister Miloš Zeman, which had some chance of getting into the parliament after the elections, but in the end they did not succeed. The idea that today Russia is a standard country which acts as a standard partner of EU and other European organisations is often expressed by the representatives of the Social Democratic Party as well.¹ The polarisation of the Czech political scene on this topic also brings frequent u-turns in Czech foreign policy.

Besides the divisions on the party-political scene, a quite special actor in the Czech foreign policy towards Russia is President Václav Klaus, whose role in this matter is visible especially in recent years. In contrast to his predecessor, Václav Havel, whose position towards contemporary Russia is rather reserved, cautious, and close to the above mentioned negative discourse, Václav Klaus often emphasizes that Russia as it is today cannot be compared to the USSR.² He stresses the great power status of today's Russia as a fact that capacitates it to sovereignly conduct its own foreign policy and he often expresses similar views in regard to matters of international relations (e.g. the problem of Kosovo's recognition, the Iraq war, the Russian-Georgian war, the Western critique of the quality of Russian democracy or human rights in Russia, the struggle with climate change, etc.), which even led to him being suspected of Russophilia by some of his critics.

In general terms, Czech activities *vis-a-vis* Russia should be divided into two relatively autonomous spheres. The first is the sphere of (high) politics, which is marked by frequent changes in the mutual relations, ranging from a 'cold peace' after the Czech NATO entry and the bombing of Kosovo (1999) to somewhat warmer relations in the first years of Putin's presidency. Often, a single step taken by Czech diplomats is perceived as so irritating for the Kremlin that the relations stay sour for several years. A good example of such an evolution is the Czech and US decision to build a missile defence base in the Czech Republic. Even though in the end the plans were scrapped by the new US administration, the political relations reached an all-time low during that period.

The second sphere is that of economy. In spite of the changing political landscape, the economic relations between the two countries were steadily improving, with a continuous rise in both Russia's imports to the Czech Republic and the Czech exports to Russia. Although these ties were somewhat hampered by the double imbalance (in terms of the trade deficit in favour of Russia, which was caused by the high amounts of raw materials imported to the Czech Republic; and in terms of the trade in high-tech commodities, which was in favour of the ČR), they were long considered a stabilizing anchor in the mutual relations.

However, in the course of 2008–2009, the economic ties with Russia have become a target of close scrutiny by Czech policy-makers, who started to express their fear that Russia might use its economic leverage over the country to induce a higher level of political compliance with Russia's political goals. This change was particularly palpable in two areas: First, it became palpable in the increased sensitivity of the Czech government towards Russian companies trying to buy strategic Czech firms,

such as those dealing with transport (e.g. Czech Airlines – ČSA) and transport infrastructure (e.g. Prague Ruzyně Airport), or those involved in the imports and processing of raw materials (e.g. Transgas). Second, the whole area of Czech dependence on external energy resources has moved from the purely technical level to the more politicised arena, becoming a part of the currently fashionable ‘energy security’. The debate about the Nabucco pipeline and its Russia-sponsored alternatives is just one of the many examples where political concerns have clearly played a much more important role in the debate than purely economic calculations.

Two more deeply ingrained features of Czech-Russian relations are worth mentioning as well. In the context of the growing awareness of the CR’s dependence on Russia’s energy resources, the regular winter energy crises have been gaining more and more attention in both the Czech media and the Czech political discourse. The first of these crises, which was covered in much detail, was the Russian-Belarusian clash over energy prices in January 2007. The culmination of the trend of thorough coverage of Russia’s energy policy was the dispute between Russia and Ukraine in early 2009. This was further reinforced by the fact that the Czech Republic as the country that just resumed the EU presidency was actively involved in the settlement of the dispute, with Prime Minister Topolánek employing a self-styled shuttle diplomacy to solve the crisis.

The second fascinating feature is the positive effect of mutual visits and the negative impact of ‘indirect relations’. In other words, both Czech and Russian politicians often resorted to harsh rhetoric when talking not *to* each other, but rather *about* each other. For instance, Russia’s top generals often used explicitly threatening rhetoric in the context of the plans for the radar base in the ČR.³ Another example, which may be less visible at first glance, but which is all the more sensitive in Russia, was that of the various comments about World War II monuments in the ČR.⁴ Scathing remarks about Russia’s foreign activities by Czech diplomats, such as Foreign Minister Schwarzenberg, were also seen in a very negative light in Russia. On the other hand, mutual visits of high-ranking politicians have usually contributed to a ‘détente’ in the mutual relations. President Klaus’s visit to Moscow in April 2007 is a case in point. Surprisingly, the same can be said about direct discussions concerning the radar base in the ČR. Unlike the remarks for the international media, these discussions were quite calm and sometimes even unusually friendly. This applies, among others, to the visit by several high-ranking Czech diplomats to Moscow in August 2007.

RUSSIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: AGENDA AND EVENTS

Undoubtedly, the single decisive element in the Czech-Russian relations in 2007 was the never ending debate about the missile defence and its components that were supposed to be located in Central Europe. In the course of 2007, the Russian view of the US radar base in the ČR evolved considerably. In the first half of the year, the comments of Russian diplomats were extremely confrontational. For instance, discussions about a possible change of the Russian military doctrine would incorporate the al-

legedly new security environment (the deputy chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma Leonid Slutskiy); others mentioned re-targeting a Russian missile so that it would aim at the bases (the commander of Russia's strategic missile force Nikolay Solovtsov). President Putin's speech at the February Munich Security Conference marked the peak of Russia's critique of the American plans. The situation calmed down a bit in the spring only to return to the forefront of the Czech-Russian agenda in the summer. Russian diplomats came up with a proposal that the United States might use the military base in Azerbaijan in June and the offer was reformulated a month later, this time offering a military base in Southern Russia. Although these offers caught Czech diplomacy by surprise, they nevertheless show that by summer 2007, Russia moved from an outright rejection of the bases to a discussion of alternative steps that would make the American plans more acceptable for Russia. In this context, the Czech delegation that visited Russia in mid-August did not have to cope with Russia's threat but engaged in real discussions with their Russian counterpart; a further change in the Russian position did not occur, however.

In 2008, as well as in 2007, one of the key problematic points of the Czech-Russian agenda was the issue of the US radar base in the context of the Czech-American SOFA agreement. The topic was to some extent influenced by the Russian Presidential elections in March 2008, especially as to the sharp discourse presented by the Russian media and Russian officials, not only those from the army circles. This was the case despite the fact that after Putin's 'nomination' of Dmitri Medvedev and after the parliamentary elections in 2007 the results of the Presidential elections were quite clear. During 2008 the Russian side sharpened its rhetoric on the level of the Russian executive as well as on the level of responsible Russian army officials expressing their refusal of the project in the form suggested by the American side and also their concern about violations of the military balance in Europe.⁵ In parallel negotiations led by Russia and the USA about the anti-ballistic missile system in Central Europe, Russian representatives suggested, e.g a permanent presence of Russian army representatives on the bases (i.e. including the planned radar base in the Czech Republic), which was a highly controversial topic for the Czech side as well.

The end of the Russian Presidential elections campaign promised a certain relaxation in the tight Russian rhetoric aimed not only towards the Czech Republic. The new Russian President Medvedev acted as an initiator of a wider discussion about the new European security architecture (the so-called European Security Treaty proposal), but at the same time he also acted as a critic of the American unilateral security policy in recent years (including the policy of NATO enlargement support). This was in accordance with the fact that President Medvedev also threatened with retaliatory actions from the Russian side after the signature of the SOFA agreement in the summer of 2008. It is worth mentioning that Russia accompanied its sharpened rhetoric with tests of new missile systems (the RS-12M Topol with a range of 10.000 km that was supposed to be able to overcome the anti-ballistic shield).⁶ At the same time the annual report of the Czech BIS (Security Secret Service) registered increased activity of foreign intelligence on the territory of the Czech Republic, including Russian secret service activities.⁷

Even in 2008, the topic of the U.S. anti-ballistic missile defence system plan as well as the Russian position towards the project had strong potential to divide the Czech political scene in connection with the Senate and the regional election campaign in the autumn of 2008. The Russian reactions were quite vigorously commented by then Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg, who labelled them as evidence that Russia still considers the former members of the Warsaw Pact as her sphere of influence. The reactions of then Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek were similar. On the other hand the conviction that the potential location of the US radar base in the Czech Republic would harm Czech-Russian political and economic relations and violate the balance of military forces in Europe was advocated by the opposition, especially by the Social Democrats (ČSSD) and the Communists (KSČM). One of the most controversial actions was the invitation of Russian general Yevgeniy Buzhinsky and the organization of the press conference with him in the headquarters of the Czech Social Democratic Party on the same day when US State Secretary Condoleezza Rice signed the SOFA agreement in Prague.⁸ Czech President Václav Klaus, in contrast with his views on other topics of the Czech-Russian relations, held a somewhat reserved position towards the US base issue. During his visit to Washington in May 2008, he just noted that as to the radar base building, the Czech Republic would not ask Russia for permission and labelled the Russian reactions as counter-productive and encouraging for the supporters of the radar project.⁹

Other points of dissonance in the Czech-Russian relations of 2008 may be represented by the different positions towards the problem of recognizing Kosovo's independence and the official Czech position towards the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. As to Kosovo's status the Czech position could be designated as cautious: the Czech diplomacy connected the question of Kosovo's recognition with the common EU position towards the issue (EU eventually left the decision to the member states, so the recognition of Kosovo's independence from the Czech side followed only after this decision). Russia strictly refused Kosovo's independence and connected the issue with the status of the contentious areas of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh.¹⁰ The issue of Kosovo's independence was not consensual even within the Czech political scene: the leftist opposition was against it with reference to the potential deterioration of the political and security situation in the Balkans. But in contrast to the US radar base issue it did not provoke either significant political tensions in the ČR or significant tensions in Czech-Russian relations.

As to the war between Russia and Georgia in August 2008, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, even before the open conflict, expressed concerns, e.g., about the increase of the number of Russian forces in the area of Abkhazia and appealed to the preservation of Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹¹ After the breakout of the conflict the ČR officially appealed to both parties to end their military actions without discussions about who is to be 'blamed' for its beginning. On the other hand the Russian consecutive recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence was officially refused by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹² President Klaus, on the contrary, warned against one-sided conclusions as to the matter of the Russian-Georgian conflict¹³, and his disavowal from the common declaration supporting Geor-

gia's further approximation to NATO, signed by the Presidents of Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states, was interpreted as one of the expressions of his pro-Russian position in the Czech foreign policy field.

In the first half of 2009 Czech-Russian political relations were influenced by the Czech presidency in the Council of the European Union. During the first six months of 2009 the ČR and her main political representatives not only diplomatically represented the Czech state, but they also took part in the transmission of the EU's common position on the platform of the EU's Common Security and Foreign Policy. Therefore one of the first tests for the Czech presidency and Czech diplomacy in connection with Russia was posed by the dispute between the Ukrainian site and the Russian company Gazprom, which led to a reduction and finally a disruption of gas deliveries via Ukraine. This influenced some of the EU member countries in an unprecedented way. In the name of EU and in cooperation with the European Commission's representatives, the responsible members of the Czech government led negotiations and tried to mediate between both sides in order to achieve a renewal of gas deliveries via Ukraine to Europe. The Czech presidency mission led the negotiations with Gazprom representatives and attempted to organize a meeting between Gazprom and Naftohaz representatives in Brussels. The shuttle diplomacy of Prime Minister Topolánek between Brussels, Kiev and Moscow included negotiations about the establishment of a technical monitoring mission with Russian Prime Minister Putin.¹⁴

In spite of the somewhat premature celebrations of the results of Topolánek's shuttle diplomacy that occurred in the media, the Russo-Ukrainian summit in Moscow that took place on 17th and 18th January 2009 brought the technical agreement on further conditions of gas trading between Ukraine and Russia as well as other deals that are supposed to safeguard the renewal of gas deliveries to Europe via Ukraine.¹⁵ The so-called *gas crisis* was mostly portrayed by the Czech media as politically motivated, as another example of Russian 'energy diplomacy'. Among Czech politicians this interpretation was not shared especially by President Klaus, who emphasized primarily the business reasons of the dispute and its bilateral, not 'European', character.¹⁶

Even after the settlement of the gas dispute, energy remained one of the key topics of Czech-Russian relations. After all, the Czech EU presidency named energy security as well as the reinforcement of the ENP's Eastern dimension among its key priorities. Accordingly the Czech presidency expressed its support of the Nabucco pipeline project and on 7th May 2009 Prague hosted the inauguration summit of the Eastern Partnership that meant enhanced cooperation between EU and six countries in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia).¹⁷ In contrast to previous projects of enhanced cooperation between EU and the countries of the post-Soviet area (ENP or Black Sea Synergy), this time Russia officially expressed disfavour for the project, which was portrayed as a new division of Europe through spheres of interest (Russian Minister Lavrov's expression)¹⁸ or a building of a 'Commonwealth of Dependent States' (Kommersant diary as a contrast reference to CIS).¹⁹ The project of Eastern Partnership did not have directly negative impacts on the Czech-Russian relations (comparable e.g. with the radar cause), as it was a part of the broader CFSP of the EU, although Topolánek's government

shielded it from the position of the Czech EU presidency and attempted to be quite active in this role. Nevertheless, the Prague Eastern Partnership summit was influenced by the fact that in April 2009 the Czech Parliament removed Topolánek's government, and also by the absence of some of the key representatives of EU member countries (e.g. British Prime Minister Brown or French President Sarkozy, who sent to Prague ministers of their cabinets as substitutes for themselves). In the connection with Czech-Russian relations the fact that Russian side was somewhat fussy about the project could be demonstrated e.g. by the words of the Russian ambassador to the EU Vladimir Chizhov, who expressed his disapproval of the words of Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Schwarzenberg about potentially uninviting Belarus to the summit if Belarus joins in the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The EU-Russia summit in Khabarovsk that was also supposed to be one of the highlights of the Czech EU Presidency in the context of Czech-Russian relations took place already after the designation of the new Fischer government. The ČR was represented in the EU-Russia summit by President Klaus and the new Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Kohout. The media highlighted the atmosphere of understanding between the Russian and the Czech President, who emphasized that the summit contributed to the repairing of the cracked EU-Russia relations. On the other hand the agenda also included topics that divided the EU representatives (Commission President Barroso and CFSP High Representative Solana) and Russian President Medvedev. The summit in Khabarovsk was devoted especially to the problems of European security, the visa regime and energy (Russia proposed a global energy treaty blueprint in April 2009 that might replace the Energy Charter Treaty but the acceptance of the preliminary proposal was quite cold on the EU side; EU, on the other hand, signed a memorandum of understanding with Ukraine concerning the modernization of the Ukrainian pipeline system that was also observed with suspicion by Russia, which refused to be left out from matters concerning the Ukrainian energy sector).²⁰

In the political-security dimension of Czech-Russian bilateral relations the topic of the missile defence system was still present in the media and public discourse in the first half of 2009. But it was already influenced on the one hand by the fact that the change of the Czech government brought a change of rhetoric towards Russia even on this topic, and on the other hand especially by the fact that the Obama cabinet indicated a change of the American position towards the project.

The new apolitical government of Jan Fischer moderated its rhetoric towards Russia but some of the controversial moments of the mutual relations did not disappear. One of the most serious moments in Czech-Russian political and diplomatic relations came in August 2009 after the accession of the new government (but the decision that caused the problem had already been taken by Topolánek's cabinet).²¹ The Czech side decided to relegate two Russian diplomats on the ground of suspicion of espionage in the field of Czech economic interests (especially energy). Reciprocal diplomatic steps on the Russian side followed.²² During the period of its EU presidency ČR also tried to be active on the platform of human rights in its relation with Russia (the official EU statement towards the shooting of the lawyer Stanislav Merkelov²³ and the journalist Anastasiya Baburova, the start of monitoring of trials with a human rights

dimension – e.g. the trial of the people suspected of Anna Politkovskaya's murder,²⁴ the new trial of Mikhail Khodorkovskiy or the trial of Yuriy Samodurov, the director of the Sakahrov Center²⁵). In July 2009 the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a statement expressing its concern about the murder of Natalya Estemirova, an activist of the Russian human rights organization Memorial.²⁶

The autumn visit of President Klaus to Moscow, on the other hand, was interpreted by the Russian media as a signal of an amelioration of the Czech-Russian relations. The one-day visit was arranged during the EU-Russia summit in Khabarovsk and both Presidents devoted it especially to the signature of several business contracts between Czech and Russian companies. The Czech President dealt with President Medvedev for a longer period of time than was originally planned and the press conference followed, where the Russian President, among others, denied information about the increased activity of Russian intelligence in the CR,²⁷ and the Czech President, on the other hand, indirectly welcomed the Russian interest in investments in the CR.

Economic and Trade Relations

In contrast with the political relations between Russia and the Czech Republic during 2007 and 2008 economic relations showed a quite promising development, which was perceptible not only on the bilateral but also on the inter-regional level until the end of 2008, when the influence of the financial crisis and coming economic recession began to be visible even in the development of Czech-Russian trade relations. Although the Czech-Russian trade relations record a passive balance on a long-term basis because of the imports of Russian energy resources, after 2000 Czech exports to Russia showed annual increases. The Russian market is attractive especially for Czech machinery (cars), chemical, food and building industries.²⁸ On the other hand the Czech Republic appeared also in the focus of Russian investors encouraged by the Russian economic growth in recent years, which was supported by high prices of energy resources (oil, natural gas).

Czech-Russian economic relations were also developing dynamically on an inter-regional level. The Chamber of Trade and Industry for the C.I.S. Countries, which was set up by the Economic Chamber of the Czech Republic, organized several business missions to the so-called priority regions (Penzenskaya oblast, Khanty-Mansiysk, Nizhniy Novgorod, etc.) in 2008, and two Czech national exhibitions were organized in Ufa and Volgograd.²⁹ The priority regions for Czech trade in Russia include big cities (Saint Petersburg, which is a partner of the Czech capital Prague)³⁰ and prospective regions rich in natural resources (like the oblasts in Central Ural). An important sector of Czech-Russian economic relations is tourism. From 2000 up to 2008, when the impacts of the recession began to be visible in this field (they were especially visible at the end of 2008 and during the first months of 2009), the share of Russian tourists travelling to the Czech Republic was rising substantially.

Russian deliveries of energy resources take up a substantial share of Czech-Russian trade relations, although thanks to the diversification policy of the 90's, the Czech Republic is not 100 percent dependent on Russian gas (there is a possibility to import natural gas from Norway, which accounts for approximately 24 percent of the Czech

annual gas supplies) or Russian oil (the Czech Republic was given an opportunity to use the IKL oil pipeline and the TAL pipeline system, which enable the ČR to supply itself with oil from other resources). The main events that influenced Czech-Russian relations in the energy field in 2008 were the short-time restrictions of gas deliveries via Ukraine and Slovakia that happened as a result of the dispute between the companies Gazprom and Naftogaz during the end of February and early March 2008, and the short-time restriction of Russian oil deliveries to the ČR via the Druzhba pipeline in the summer of 2008.³¹ That time the decline of gas deliveries went almost unnoticed by the Czech energy network. On the contrary, in spring 2008 the intergovernmental Czech-Russian working group on energy cooperation discussed future increases of Russian gas deliveries to the ČR in connection with the planned building of new gas power stations on its territory.

On the other hand, the unexpected fallout of the Druzhba oil supplies at the beginning of July 2008 was commented by the media and even associated with the U.S. radar base project and the signature of the SOFA agreement. Russia stated that the restriction of oil deliveries was a part of the necessary repairs and revisions of the pipeline system and refused the ‘political’ interpretation of the event. On the other hand, Czech representatives emphasized that no technical problem or accident had been announced and that the ČR paid for the deliveries regularly and without delays. In connection with the temporary disruption of the Druzhba oil supplies to the CR, a potential gradual termination of Russian oil deliveries to Central Europe via this pipeline branch was mentioned. What was also mentioned was the possible hidden intention of the Russian side to gain some control of the Czech state company MERO CR, the owner of the Czech part of the Druzhba pipeline as well as of a part of the ‘alternative’ IKL pipeline system.

In 2009 Czech-Russian trade relations were already influenced by the fall of dynamics caused by the recession (a decrease of the whole turn-over, including a decrease of Czech exports to Russia by almost 38% during the first seven months of 2009 and a decrease of Russian exports to the ČR by 45%, which was especially caused by the fall of prices of raw materials) after the record year of 2008 when the volume of turn-over reached its maximum.³² Activities aimed to stimulate economic cooperation with Russia continued even in 2009 (the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade demonstrated the importance of Russia as a trade partner, e.g., through the publication of the Action Plan on Russia) and some Czech enterprisers even experienced success in penetrating the Russian market with their intentions (e.g. Petr Kellner).³³

As to the Russian investment intentions in the CR, in 2009 the Russian company Transneft signed a memorandum with the Czech company MERO, which is the main oil importer of the ČR and provides for emergency oil supply storage as well. Transneft expressed its interest in establishing a joint venture but some of the representatives of Czech authorities in the field of energy security were more cautious and labelled the idea as premature (especially the Czech envoy for energy security Václav Bartuška).³⁴ Concerns also enclose the increased Russian interests in the cooperation in the nuclear energy sphere. The Tvel company (a part of Rosatom hold-

ing), which, since 2010, is the exclusive supplier of nuclear fuel for both of the Czech atomic power plants (in Temelín Tvel replaced the American company Westinghouse), expressed its interest in building the first plant to process the fuel elements abroad. Atomstroyexport, another part of Rosatom holding, joined a consortium with some Czech companies in a competition for the contract for building new blocks of the Temelín atomic power plant.³⁵ Concerning the significant share of the Czech state in the energy company ČEZ and the strategic importance that nuclear energy has in the Czech energy sector, the important decision-making actor in the competition will also be the Czech government.

Nevertheless, the precedential decision of the Czech government on the basis of which a Russian investor was disqualified from a big and strategically important competition took place already in the beginning of 2009. The Russian airline Aeroflot, of which a 51% share is owned by the Russian state, was disqualified from the privatization of Czech Airlines (ČSA), and the whole competition was eventually cancelled. The reason was not communicated officially but possible security threats were cited as a primary reason because the decision had been published after the matter was also discussed in the Security Committee of the Czech Chamber of Deputies.³⁶

RUSSIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KEY ACTORS

The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a key role among the Czech foreign policy actors towards Russia. Especially in 2008 its role was visible through press releases and official notes addressed to the RF concerning especially the Russian position towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Czech Foreign Ministry, which was under the leadership of Karel Schwarzenberg while the Topolánek government was in office, reacted in a more assertive way to Russia's sharp rhetoric concerning controversial topics such as the anti-ballistic missile defence system.

In 2009 the government played the key role not only as a representative of Czech foreign policy but also in the special position connected with the Czech EU presidency. In relation to Russia this position was especially visible during the negotiations connected with the January Russo-Ukrainian gas dispute. Then the government as a key foreign policy actor was somewhat weakened by the resignation of Topolánek's cabinet. Nevertheless, the new care government of Jan Fischer adapted to its role quite quickly, and its activities had some continuity with those of the previous government, although there was a remarkable change in its rhetoric towards Russia. The more resentful and careful attitude and rhetoric of the new foreign minister Jan Kohout, emphasizing the presence of divisive issues in the mutual relations but at the same time the Czech interest in good economic relations with Russia, went hand in hand with the fact that the most controversial topics of the Czech-Russia relations became less prominent.³⁷

On the other hand, shortly after the inauguration of Fischer's cabinet, there was the affair of the banishment of the Russian diplomats but the decision had already been

made before the Fischer government entered office. Despite this, the topic of the presence and activities of foreign (not only Russian) intelligence in the Czech Republic did not disappear as an alarming issue but the comments on the official Czech side were more careful.

President Klaus must also be mentioned among the important actors of this dimension of Czech foreign policy. His role was prominent especially in 2007, in connection with his visit to Moscow accompanied by a delegation of Czech businessmen, and in 2009, when he assumed the position of the representative of the presidency country at the EU-Russia summit in Khabarovsk after the demise of Topolánek's government.

The importance of the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade among the actors of Czech external relations towards Russia was increasing in direct proportion with the increasing importance of Czech-Russian trade relations. Contrasting with the problematic political relations (especially during 2007 and 2008), the representatives of the Ministry of Industry and Trade strived to separate the political and the economic dimension of the mutual relations, as in the field of energy, e.g. in connection with the temporary interruption of the Druzhba pipeline deliveries.

Russia is on the list of priority countries for Czech exports. As was already mentioned, in 2009 the Action Plan for Russia was published and the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade initiated and supported the above mentioned two Czech national exhibitions that took place in Ufa and Volgograd in 2008 accompanied by important business conferences. The meetings of the Czech-Russian Intergovernmental Commission for Economic, Industrial and Scientific and Technical Cooperation are held annually, together with the meetings of special working groups (e.g. for cooperation in the areas of industry and energy).

The Chamber for Commercial Relations with the C.I.S., the Economic Chamber of the ČR and the Confederation of Industry of the ČR cannot be omitted from any list of relevant actors of the Czech-Russian economic relations. Interregional cooperation is another perspective direction of Czech-Russian economic relations. Last but not least, the activities of key companies working especially in the energy sector also influence the whole picture of Czech-Russian economic relations – sometimes in an indispensable way (e.g. the readiness of some Czech companies to cooperate with Atomstroyexport may increase the chances of the Russian company to obtain a commission for building new Temelín reactors).

During the monitored period, the Czech Parliament influenced the development of important issues connected with Czech-Russian relations several times, not only through the visits of delegations of Czech deputies and senators to Moscow and regional centres. For example, the responsible committees of the Czech Parliament also discussed the sensitive issue of the ČSA privatization and influenced its results.

The Czech embassy in Moscow, the Czech Centre and the Czech House (the latter two united in 2008 and formed 'Czech House Moscow') serve as relevant and subsidiary actors of the economic, business and cultural relations between the two countries.³⁸

CZECH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS RUSSIA IN THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPACE

The media traditionally reflect the key political topics that are present in the political discourse. On the other hand, the media also to some extent constitute and co-design the public discourse.

During the monitored period the Czech media naturally paid attention to the main issues that influenced the political relations between ČR and Russia, such as the issue of the American anti-ballistic missile defence system and the connected Russian reactions. In this context the voices of official representatives of Russian politics and the Russian army as well as the opinions of personalities such as former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev were presented in the Czech media.³⁹ The quite sharp tone of the media discourse connected with the radar issue was reduced when this issue was replaced with other events and especially after the decision of the new American administration to reassess the previous project of the defence system. But the media reflection of sensitive issues of Czech-Russian relations, especially the radar issue, was also influenced to some extent by the internal political situation in the Czech Republic, especially in connection with the regional and Senate elections in 2008 and later in connection with the postponement of the parliamentary elections. The topics of the U.S. radar base in the ČR and the Russian position towards that issue posed quite controversial topics within the framework of the Czech public and political debate that time. For example in the summer of 2009 the attention of the Czech media was attracted with the fact that the chief of the Social Democrats Jiří Paroubek unofficially visited Moscow, where he met also the Prime Minister Putin. According to the media the visit was not previously discussed with the representatives of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Paroubek was said to promise there to Putin, that he would make the problem of U.S. radar base in the ČR one of the main topics of his party election campaign. This information was promptly denied by the spokesman of the ČSSD and the chief of the ČSSD himself portrayed his unexpected visit to Moscow as an attempt to ameliorate the aggravated Czech-Russian relations.

As to the issue of the Russian-Georgian war, in 2008 the Czech media reflected especially the reactions of Czech politicians, including the words of President Klaus that exceeded the official discourse of the Czech government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In 2009 the media portrayal of the Czech-Russian relations gained slightly darker and more conspiratorial contours, especially in connection with the demise of Topolánek's government and the words of the former Prime Minister himself about the 'celebrations' of his demise in the Russian Embassy. The issue of the banished Russian diplomats that leaked into the media also supported this conspiratorial tone and moved the media attention slightly away from the political security topics of the Czech-Russian relations to the domain of economic relations and the energy security issues. The security dimension of Russian business interests in the Czech economic and energy sphere was being mentioned in connection with the issues of the commis-

sion for the building of the new Temelín blocks, the interest of Tvel in building a nuclear fuel plant in the ČR and even the suspicions that Russian interests also rest behind the company CEEI, which obtained the commission for the building of the buffer stocks of burnt out nuclear fuel in the ČR. The premise that the new commissions in the energy sphere may become one of the main issues of the 2010 parliamentary elections campaign was not confirmed in the end. The candidate parties as well as the media were quite silent about these issues, except for some criticism from the Greens.

Nevertheless, the reflection of Czech-Russian economic and business relations and their perspectives could, as always, be treated as a domain of dailies and magazines specializing in economic issues. The mass media usually do not devote much attention to this important dimension of the mutual relations, including the special topic of energy issues. Certain exceptions might be the issue of the short-time reduction of the Druzhba pipeline deliveries, which was naturally reflected by the Czech media with more attention being paid to it, the issue of the ČSA privatization and the role of Aeroflot in the cause, and, of course, the issue of the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute and the role of the Czech EU presidency in the event.

On the other hand, the Czech media devoted a relatively small amount of attention to the economic situation in Russia itself in connection with the financial crisis and world economic recession. Sporadic news reports and commentaries were devoted to the effects of the recession on the Czech-Russian mutual trade relations or tourism but analyses of the impacts of the recession on the Russian economic conjuncture were rare. The reason for this may be found in the information embargo on the Russian side or even in the Czech media's disinterest in this topic.

CONCLUSION

The Czech foreign policy towards Russia and Eastern Europe as such has been burdened in the long term with stereotypes. On one hand, there has been the stereotype of the post-Soviet area with its 'otherness' and backwardness and also the stereotype of that area as a source of danger in the sense of political or security-related danger (the security concerns were related to *hard security*, internal security as well as economic or energy security in the sense of the Czech Republic's constant partial dependence on Russian resources). At the same time the Czech 'Eastern policy' has been concentrated more on Russia in the long term, and the course of events in other parts of the so-called post-Soviet area has been largely understood as dependent on or derivative from the development of Russian policy and therefore underestimated.

Another long-term weak point of the Eastern dimension of the Czech foreign policy and the Czech policy towards Russia could be described as a lack of coherent and consistent conceptualization, a lack of a long-term and coherent strategy. Political priorities and economic interests have not always been in accord, which was reflected by the occasional lack of coordination between the responsible actors of the Czech foreign policy towards Russia. Certain moments of crisis in the mutual relations (especially the issue of the radar base) had a potential to become not only topics of for-

eign policy but also eruptive topics for clashes between the government and the opposition, especially in the atmosphere of the pre-election campaign (in 2008, before the regional and Senate elections) and in the first half of 2009, when Topolánek's government was removed.

Critical moments of the mutual relations (especially the issue of the radar base and the banishment of the Russian diplomats in 2009) and the way in which information about some issues lying between the political and the economic sphere (e.g. energy security) was mediated (especially in the media discourse) did not contribute positively to the general picture of the Czech-Russian relations. The sharpened rhetoric of Russian official representatives, especially during 2008, certain controversial steps of Czech political actors (e.g. the invitation of General Buzhinski to the ČSSD seat) and the rather assertive responses from Topolánek's cabinet to the Russian position, refusing anything which could resemble Russian dictates as to the direction of the Czech foreign and security policy, illustrated the rather disturbed atmosphere of 2008.

In contrast to the political dimension, where the events seemed to confirm the abovementioned negative perception of this direction of Czech foreign policy as an erratic source of potential dangers, the economic relations were showing a gradually increasing tendency even before 2007. During 2008 the financial crisis began to influence the general turnover of Czech-Russian trade, including the promising development of Czech exports. The whole impacts of the recession on the Czech-Russian economic relations could be observed during 2009 and 2010, although these years also brought interesting information concerning not only Czech Republic as an attractive place for Russian investments, but also some success stories of Czech entrepreneurs in Russia.

The Czech EU Presidency in the first half of 2009 had several effects. On one hand, it forced the government to slightly rearrange its positions in the Eastern dimension of the foreign policy, considering the fact that it represented the voice of the whole EU. On the other hand, the adaptation to the challenges of the coming EU Presidency, which included the planned Eastern Partnership summit, somewhat shifted the attention of the Czech foreign policy towards the other countries that cooperate with the EU in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy, such as Ukraine, Georgia or Azerbaijan, where the ČR has certain economic interests. It is debatable, though, whether this can be understood as a lasting feature of the development of the Czech foreign policy or rather as a shift connected with the short-time attempt to play a more active role in the relations between the EU and its Eastern neighbours.

During the second half of 2008 and 2009, a multiplication of key topics of the Czech-Russian relations with an increasing emphasis on energy issues could be observed as well. Energy issues, including the questions of EU energy security and diversification, were also among the Czech EU Presidency's priorities (e.g. the issue of the Southern Corridor). Certain situations that the Czech EU Presidency had to solve ad hoc (especially the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute) contributed to this development. These tendencies, which were discernible already in the second half of 2008 (the more prominent role of energy and its strategic dimension), came out fully in 2009 when the issues of *hard security* in the Czech-Russian relations (especially the issue

of the American missile defence system in Central Europe) withdrew. At that point, the media devoted more attention to the economic dimension of the mutual relations.

The withdrawal of the most controversial issue of the mutual political relations might have enabled a shift towards a more pragmatic approach, and at the same time it opened more space for other important topics of the mutual relations. Economic interests and especially the topic of energy include a security context, especially in connection with ‘espionage aspects’. But as to the complicity and multiplicity of influencing interests, these issues are too complicated for the mass media communication and too blurred to become clear topics of public and political debates. Nevertheless, a continuation of the important role of economic relations and energy may be expected not only in Czech-Russian relations.

The Czech political debate about relations with Russia is also influenced by the development of EU-Russia relations and the topics of the corresponding debate. For example, among other issues, the question of visa policy in the context of EU-Russia relations may play an important role in the near future as EU is not unanimous on the topic of the liberalization of the visa regime towards the East European countries.

Among the main actors who participate in the political debate about the Czech foreign policy towards Russia, an important role will be played by the incoming government, where some persons connected with Topolánek’s cabinet will have an important role again (e.g. Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg or Minister of Defence Alexander Vondra). An important task will be to coordinate more effectively the various aspects (especially the political and economic aspects) of the Czech-Russian relations and generally put the relations with Russia in accord with other dimensions of the Czech foreign policy (especially the policy towards other East European countries, the Czech position on the platform of EU external policy and Czech-U.S. relations).

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