



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Czech-Russian «Espionage Affair»: A Case Study
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Czech-Russian «Espionage Affair»: A Case Study

The briefing is a case study of an affair which is an example of a deliberately launched anti-Russian campaign. Starting as a very local political decision, it developed into a diplomatic quarrel between the Czech Republic and Russia, spreading through the leading Western media as well as the highest echelons of the NATO. I will, therefore, analyse a genesis, development and consequences of the affair, taking broader political context into account.

At the beginning of April, the municipal government of one of the Prague districts decided to remove a statue of the Soviet marshal Ivan Konev who contributed significantly to the liberation of the Czechoslovak capital in May 1945. The current government had already decided on the removal earlier but due to citizens' protests and disagreement, they had been hesitating to do so for a long time. The local mayor Ondřej Kolář, a representative of the right-wing TOP 09 party, subsequently admitted that they had made use of the state emergency, introduced in response to the coronavirus crisis, to remove the statue, unveiled in 1980, quietly. The local political garniture has adopted radical anti-Russian stances repeatedly, thus being in accordance with the current Prague government. Besides the removal of the Konev's statue, in February, both governments also renamed a square where the embassy of the Russian Federation to the Czech Republic is located after Boris Nemtsov, thus provoking obviously the Russian side. Similarly, the Prague mayor from the Pirate Party has stirred up a quarrel with the Chinese partners when he terminated a sister city agreement between Prague and Beijing.

Who is behind?

These political forces combine anti-Russian and anti-Chinese policy with fierce criticism of the current Czech Government, the President Miloš Zeman and the Czech Republic's official foreign policy, thus endeavouring to thwart cooperation with both powers. Not by coincidence, they are supported by political NGOs pursuing the same agenda. The Prague 6 mayor is a son of the diplomat Petr Kolář, a former ambassador to the USA or Russia, who is well-known for his critical attitudes towards Russia and China.¹ Kolář collaborates with one of the most radical

¹ Recently, he accused China of lies concerning the coronavirus epidemic and alleged efforts to capitalise on the global crisis, denouncing the role of the World Health Organisation at the same time.

political NGO called European Values Think Tank, financed, for instance, by the US embassy, NATO Public Diplomacy Division or Open Society Foundations.

The April action of the Prague 6 government has been subjected to criticism from other political parties as well as the President Miloš Zeman who condemned the removal together with the misuse of the state of emergency, the latter calling „morally unjustifiable“. The Russian embassy protested against such „vandalism“, which is in breach with the 1993 Treaty on Friendly Relations and Cooperation between our two countries. The Russian side has considered the action „outrageous“, „cynical“ and „criminal“, criticising indulgence of the Czech Government towards the actions aimed to undermine bilateral relations, observing that local politicians' behaviour would bring consequences. Diplomatic protests were followed by practical steps. The Russian Minister of Defence Sergey Shoygu called for a criminal prosecution against those responsible for the statue's removal, including members of the local government, in accordance with a newly promulgated Russia's law enabling punishment of persons damaging Russian war graves or monuments. Subsequently, Russia's prosecuting authorities launched an investigation, which provoked disagreement of the Czech side which stated that such an investigation was unacceptable, interfering in the domestic affairs and that Russian laws would be enforceable under no circumstances on the Czech territory. The proceeding has been criticised even by the President Miloš Zeman, according to whom it is „stupid“ and „ridiculous“.

Russian spy to assassinate Czech politicians

It is obvious that despite the Russia's position towards the removal being understandable, their subsequent steps are counterproductive and inappropriate as it plays into Russia's critics' hands in fact. In light of these irritated reactions, anti-Russian forces' assertions about alleged Russia's aggression, imperialism and attempts at meddling in the affairs of other states seem believable for many. Russian side's statements on the need of retaliation were misused by these forces to start playing another phase of „the game“. At the end of April, one of the Czech weekly magazine which has pursued the anti-Russian as well as anti-Chinese agenda over a long period published (dis)information about an alleged Russian spy with a diplomatic passport who had arrived at our country to poison three local politicians (including the Prague city mayor Zdeněk Hřib and the Prague 6 mayor Ondřej Kolář) for their anti-Russian actions. The journalists referred to a confidential source from the Czech intelligence services.

Unsurprisingly, a group of politicians, experts and activists (including the abovementioned Petr Kolář or the former chairman of the NATO Military Committee Petr Pavel) launched a campaign pressing the Government and state authorities to withdraw our ambassador to Moscow, reduce the number of the Russian diplomats in Prague, terminate bilateral agreements and ban the Russian companies from participation on strategic contracts in the Czech Republic. Moreover, these three politicians were taken under police protection with respect to an alleged threat to their lives. Strangely enough, they gave interviews speaking about the danger Russia poses to our country. The affair has stirred the Czech political scene, presently gaining considerable international dimension. Not only did prominent Western media take heed of such fantasies but also the highest Russian authorities, as well as the incumbent Secretary General of NATO Jens Stoltenberg commented them. The latter considers Russia's behaviour towards the Czech Republic threatening, intimidation and an attempt to undermine democracy. Another firefight followed after the Russian embassy decided to criticise the magazine which had published the information about the alleged planned assassination, the article being a part of a smear campaign in the Czech media. In response, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Russian side of attacking freedom of the press.

No evidence presented

Amid tensions, more constructive statements appeared eventually. At the end of April, the Russian Foreign Ministry declared that Moscow did not wish to deteriorate bilateral relations and escalate frictions. Several days later, the Russian side put forward negotiations about the problem of preservation of the war monuments. It should be noted that there are a lot of Czech war graves and monuments on the territory of Russia from the times of the First World War and the civil war in which many Czech soldiers took part. However, remains of the Czech presence is still oftentimes perceived as controversial and negative by the Russians, the monuments and graves being exposed to attacks from time to time, which should be prevented by the Russian authorities, at least with respect to the 1999 Agreement between the Czech Republic and Russia on mutual maintenance of war graves.²

² In May, the chairman of the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia and the vice-chairman of the Chamber of Deputies Vojtěch Filip gave a Russian military newspaper an interview in which commented Czechoslovak legionaries fighting in Russia disdainfully, criticising their role in the then tragical events. At the same time, he spoke about the dissemination of Nazi ideas among the Czech society, labelling those who were in favour of the removal of the Konev's statue as fascists or neo-Nazis, which is, however, as demagogic as those politicians' anti-Russian agitation. Such extreme positions cannot contribute to mutual understanding, rapprochement and trust.

Therefore, the dialogue is needed without any doubts. A sober attitude was adopted by the Czech Government. Prime Minister Andrej Babiš put emphasis on the principle of sovereignty and unacceptability of interference in the internal affairs as well as of any actions against the Czech citizens. At the same time, nevertheless, the PM refused excessive demands coming from some opposition politicians in relation to Russia, for instance, expulsion of the Russian ambassador to Prague. According to the vice-PM Karel Havlíček, potential retaliatory measures could be taken only after confirmation of the information from the intelligence services, warning against panic and premature, rash decisions. President Miloš Zeman subsequently concluded that media rumours had not been confirmed. One could thus observe that the affair is an example of a political game based on fabricated disinformation.

All in all, the narrative about a spy under diplomatic cover charged to assassinate Czech politicians seems absurd. It is too fanciful to be true. Furthermore, the Czech case is a variation of similar narratives from abroad, sharing the same anti-Russian paranoia, suspiciousness and enmity, striving for resuscitating and instigating the cold war mentality. It should be emphasised that cheap shots and attacks are committed by both sides. Therefore, Russia should act more temperately and avoid meddling in the domestic affairs of other states. At the same time, the Czech side should understand that some topics are of high sensitivity for Russia. In this regard, cultivation of the domestic public debate should be the task.