



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:
External Relations Outlook for the Post-Crisis Period
Ladislav Zemánek**

China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.
Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Chen Xin
Kiadásért felelős személy: Huang Ping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.
 +36 1 5858 690
 office@china-cee.eu
 china-cee.eu

External Relations Outlook for the Post-Crisis Period

The following months will likely to be characterised by deterioration in relations between the Czech Republic on one hand and China as well as Russia on the other. This negative tendency might be already observed in the course of the last months. In this analysis, I will inquire into prospects of relations with these two powers, taking a broader domestic and international context into consideration, as both China and Russia have been one of the most prominent topics in the current Czech political discourse.

Czech-Russian relations: deepening animosity

The Czech-Russian relationship has been damaged by several affairs, inappropriate statements and missteps made by both sides. The ties have deteriorated especially after the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. The Czech Republic has supported the Western sanctions imposed on Russia, thus following the common EU policy. Nevertheless, there are some political actors or businessmen who criticise the sanctions as they have damaged the Czech exporters. In addition, the sanctions are not abided by strictly in many cases by different European countries. The ongoing construction of the Nord Stream gas pipelines, which are to connect Russia with Germany, is the most prominent example. The sanctions as such have thus turned into hypocrisy, anachronism and obstacle on the path towards further development of the complex and multi-layered European-Russian relations. Given the fact that the Czech economy belongs to the most affected ones in consequence of the coronavirus crisis, it is quite possible that the number of Czech politicians and entrepreneurs pushing the lifting or releasing of the sanction regime may be increasing as it is beyond any doubts that the Czech enterprises have suffered, losing multiple business opportunities and their position on the Russian market.

At the same time, efforts to improve relations at the political level should be made. In general (applying to both the Czech Republic and the EU as a whole), the point is that the major hindrances lie in politics and broader geopolitical motives, whereas the economic actors act more pragmatically, supporting ties with Russia in a much higher degree. Therefore, different political, geopolitical and ideological factors should be put aside as far as possible, creating space for mutually beneficial economic cooperation and interaction. Closer economic ties could gradually bring about a reversal in the political ones, contributing to a rise in mutual trust. The anti-Russian sanctions have been repeatedly subjected to criticism by President Miloš Zeman

who is one of the most influential movers of the Czech Republic's external politics. Taking his position on the Czech political scene into account, one can expect that these critical attitudes will be adopted by other actors. So far, sceptical stances have been held especially by the Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia, and populist, anti-EU Freedom and Direct Democracy movement. However, it will be crucial that the criticism would be shared by the dominant ANO movement headed by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš. Notwithstanding his frequently independent behaviour and policy at the EU level, he has not opposed the sanctions openly yet. Differences between individual departments and ministries are observed in this regard, and it is highly probable that such ambiguousness will continue. While a discourse followed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been typical of strong pro-European orientation, idealism and emphasis on the human rights agenda complicating deeper cooperation with China or Russia, activities carried out by the Ministry of Industry and Trade are characterised by pragmatism and interest in developing mutual relations and business irrespective of politically motivated struggles. This difference is in accordance with the thesis presented above that the economic sector and its actors are in favour of interactions which are – on the contrary – restricted and hindered by the political actors.

In any case, it has to be stressed that the official Czech Republic's policy is neither anti-Russian nor anti-Chinese in its essence. The biggest obstacle is the excessive dependency on the US and NATO policies together with activities conducted by some domestic political forces and NGOs which push this unconstructive, even deleterious agenda. The most prominent examples of the last months are removal of the statue of the Soviet marshal Ivan Konev in one of the Prague districts, unveiling of a memorial dedicated to the anti-Soviet Russian Liberation Army, renaming Prague streets and squares with obvious anti-Russian motives or media disinformation creating a story about the alleged Russian spy who arrived in Prague to assassinate Czech local representatives.¹ Unfortunately, it seems that problems and controversies between our two countries will continue in the following period. Paradoxically, the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War arouses disagreement in public as well as political discourses instead of contributing to a general consensus. The main reasons are politicising of the history in relation to the present-day problems, divergent historical experiences connected with the Soviet triumph in different European countries (even within the CEE region) or consequent social, economic and political development of the nations liberated by the Soviet forces, which was characterised by dependency on Moscow and controversial

¹ The affair is already over. In June, it ended up with mutual expulsion of diplomats which has deepened mutual mistrust and animosity. For greater detail see <https://tass.com/politics/1164583>.

social experiment following a pattern of the Soviet Union without regard to local particularities and needs. Therefore, it is crucial to suppress radical attitudes on both sides, endeavouring to seek after common interests and topics regardless of the past injustices and conflicts.

Theoretically, an important role in building ties with Russia could be played by the Visegrád Group which has been increasingly active and effective, its members being closer and closer to each other. Stances adopted by individual participants are, nevertheless, still very different. Whereas the Polish external policy is openly anti-Russian traditionally, the Hungarian one is – by contrast – friendly and open to cooperation with this Eurasian power. The Czech Republic is placed somewhere in the middle. The Polish position will remain the main obstacle to developing deeper V4-Russian ties. This year's 75th anniversary has strengthened anti-Russian moods among the political elite in Poland so a reversal cannot be expected in the short-term perspective in this regard. It seems therefore that V4 as a whole will not contribute to the normalisation of the European-Russian relations in the foreseeable future. Such normalisation will be rather dependent on the willingness of Germany or France. But when a positive turn happens, the Czech Republic cannot afford to be falling behind.

Czech-Chinese relations: attempts to undermine the partnership

As for the Czech-Chinese relations, they have been affected negatively by several controversies and diplomatic splits during the last months. One can mention annulment of a friendship agreement between the capital cities of Prague and Beijing, initiated by the current Prague's leadership, or media campaign revolving around a document elaborated by the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Czech Republic and submitted to the then Senate Chairman Jaroslav Kubera in which the Chinese side rightly warns against the Kubera's planned visit to Taiwan. Some commentators and politicians have even related his unexpected passing with an alleged pressure exerted by the Chinese diplomats on him, thus accusing China of the death of the second-highest constitutional representative of the country indirectly.² This internal political and ideological struggle will have a negative impact on mutual relations inevitably.

All the more that Jaroslav Kubera's successor Miloš Vystrčil has adopted anti-Chinese agenda announcing his firm decision to pay an official visit to Taiwan at the turn of August and September. Such a visit will be unprecedented in terms of both the Czech Republic and the

² For more information about the life and work of Jaroslav Kubera see the March political briefing: <https://china-cee.eu/2020/03/25/czech-republic-political-briefing-an-unexpected-end-of-one-life-and-political-story/>.

European Union, being in breach of the official Czech Republic's policy towards China respecting One China principle. Vystrčil's conduct will meddle in China's internal affairs, infringe sovereignty and territorial integrity of the PRC as well as basic norms and conventions of the international relations just as bilateral commitments. Unfortunately, the second-highest Czech Republic's representative has consented to play anti-Chinese card and advance particular interests of those groupings which have made efforts to undermine Czech-Chinese cooperation and friendship over a long period. The Senate Chairman reported his decision to the public on the 9th of June. His speech resembled pre-election campaign, being affected, aggressive (labelling the novel coronavirus "Chinese flu" demagogically) and reproducing key nodes of the discourse of Havlism such as the need for protecting liberal democracy and human rights, defending and promoting the "right" values disregarding Realpolitik, radical pro-Western orientation or elitism.³ The planned visit to Taiwan is probably an attempt to take the lead of the Havlist camp and become their presidential candidate in 2023. It is thus of the utmost importance to stress that such behaviour of some political actors does not and will not represent the official Czech position, being criticised by both the President Miloš Zeman and the PM Andrej Babiš.

³ The main figure of this movement is the first Czech Republic's President Václav Havel (1936–2011).