



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Under Growing Pressure: Prague to Conform to the US Interests
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Under Growing Pressure: Prague to Conform to the US Interests

Summary

The Czech Republic remains predominantly under Washington's dominance. Joe Biden's victory has already produced multiple negative effects as far as the US expansive politics is concerned. A call between the Czech Prime Minister and US Secretary of State anticipated forthcoming changes in the Czech Republic's external relations, the shape of which is influenced significantly by the US interests and their global agenda. In March, the Czech diplomacy was focusing on the anti-pandemic fight and vaccination, emphasising this issue in Wien, Brussels or Jerusalem. Attempts to cooperate with Chinese and Russian partners are, however, problematised and undermined by adherents of the Atlanticist orientation both in our country and abroad.

Introduction

The US has stepped up their pressure on the CEE countries including the Czech Republic after the new President Joe Biden took over the power. The election victory of the Democratic Party will not mitigate international frictions and this applies especially to the relations with Russia. Anti-Russian policy became evident during the talks between Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and the US Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The latter reaffirmed the long-term confrontational agenda and continuation of Washington's dominance over our country. It has an impact also on the vaccination problematics and politicisation of the pandemic.

Confirming hegemony over the Czech Republic¹

Paradoxically, Donald Trump's administration endeavoured to change the confrontational attitude towards Russia, however, powerful actors within the US establishment (which is sometimes called the „Deep State“) succeeded in sabotaging this positive shift. Biden's new administration has already started to restore the US influence over the European continent. A call between the Czech Republic's Prime Minister and Antony Blinken made in

¹ For a more general insight into the Czech-US relations see Zemánek, L. (2021). *Czech Republic external relations briefing: The Czech-US relations: Love & Hatred*. Budapest: China-CEE Institute (available at https://china-cee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021er02_Czech-Republic.pdf).

March confirms the continuity of confrontational US politics towards Russia and China which might be masked by a more diplomatic way of conduct but it is hostile in its essence perhaps to a higher degree than in Trump's era. In full accordance with the general position of Biden's administration, Blinken put emphasis on the importance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the US self-appointed commitment to the alleged defence of democracy and freedom in the world against „autocracies“ and their „malign influence“. Naturally, the US representative had first and foremost China and Russia in mind when talking with the Czech PM. Brief information about their communication which was published reveals the readiness of the US side to pursue their interests in our region without regard to the needs and national interests of the Czech Republic itself.²

Obviously, the issues that are of the utmost importance for Washington remain unchanged: (1) military dominance over the region (through NATO); (2) political hegemony over the continent including the Czech Republic through incessant pressure and interference; (3) ideological hegemony pursued by means of spreading narratives about the alleged threat posed by „undemocratic“, „hostile“ regimes and inventing of the enemy in order to mobilise the Western and CEE societies against the artificially invented threats, thus vindicating the need for the US hegemony and dominance over foreign territories; (4) economic, security and technological dominance through the exclusion of Chinese and Russian subjects from critical infrastructure, the building of 5G networks or nuclear energy projects (see Dukovany power plant), and through undermining pragmatic, multilateral initiatives as 17+1 (Belt and Road Initiative). Not by coincidence, US Secretary Blinken stressed the role of the Three Seas Initiative (Trimarium) as one of the pillars of regional economic resilience. However, one should not forget that this project is backed and financially supported by Washington for a long period and given a strong role played by Poland since its inception, it can turn into a tool aimed against Russia very simply. Trimarium should be therefore perceived as an Atlanticist project which is to undermine EU-Russia cooperation and Eurasian integration while preserving US influence in the region. Nevertheless, the Czech political leadership prefers the Visegrád Group as a platform for mutually beneficial regional interactions to the Three Seas Initiative.

As far as other forms of dominance are concerned, the US representative pointed to the need for „military modernisation“ and „robust defence spending“. In other words, the Czech side is pushed to eliminate Soviet and Russian military equipment while replacing it with the US made one (the process has already begun with purchase of new helicopters manufactured

² *Secretary Blinken's Call with Czech Prime Minister Babiš* (2021, March 5). Retrieved April 20, 2021, from <https://www.state.gov/secretary-blinkens-call-with-czech-prime-minister-babis>.

by the US Bell Textron company). The Czech Government has conformed to Washington's demands as to increasing military expenditures in relation to the broader NATO commitments. The constant US pressure on the member states to raise military expenditures is aimed to make the US dominance stronger abroad as the total military capability is employed to carry out US unilateral interests. It is beyond any doubts that by stepping up coercion, the US create conditions for multiplying their military presence in Europe, which is aimed primarily against Russia. The March conversation between Secretary Blinken and the Czech PM Babiš foreshadowed a precipitous turn in the Czech-Russia relations which hit rock bottom, resulting in a political and diplomatic war in April.³

Vaccination as a political question

Fight against the pandemic and vaccination were another matter of the Babiš-Blinken talks. Generally, it was the vaccination question that became the dominant topic of the Czech Republic's external relations in March. The Czech side raised this problem in Wien during a meeting with Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Bulgarian PM Boyko Borisov, Slovenian PM Janez Janša, Croatian PM Andrej Plenković and Latvian PM Krišjānis Kariņš.⁴ The main attention was drawn to the supply and distribution of vaccines in the EU. The Czech Prime Minister stressed the need for solidarity and a just distribution scheme which could be based on the number of inhabitants in individual countries, thus reiterating our official position presented at the European Council in December. It emphasises the principle that there are not to be differences in the speed of the vaccination process. At the beginning of April, Austria decided to provide our country with 30 thousand vaccine doses as a gesture of solidarity face to face with a stance adopted by the EU at the end of March.⁵ According to that, the Czech Republic was excluded from a group of member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia and Slovakia) which would be given an additional amount of vaccines beyond the scheme common for all EU countries.

³ This topic will be analysed in depth in the following external relations briefing.

⁴ *Premiér Babiš jednal ve Vídni o dodávkách a distribuci vakcín proti covid-19 v EU* (2021, March 16). Retrieved April 20, 2021 from <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/premier-babis-jednal-ve-vidni-o-dodavkach-a-distribuci-vakcin-proti-covid-19-v-eu--187282/>.

⁵ *Rakousko věnuje Česku 30.000 dávek vakcín proti covidu, slíbil Kurz* (2021, April 2). Retrieved April 20, 2021, from <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/rakousko-venu-je-cesku-30-000-davek-vakcin-proti-covidu-slibil-kurz/2016562>.

The Czech Republic has pursued a concept of „vaccination passports“ which is to make travelling possible within the European Union.⁶ At the same time, such a system shall not be discriminatory vis-à-vis unvaccinated persons given the fact that vaccination is available for all population neither in the Czech Republic nor in other countries. Nevertheless, the political representation set travelling in summer one of the main priorities to be solved at the European level. If a common solution is not found, the Government will be prepared to introduce a regional one together with the neighbouring countries. The vaccination strategy was discussed by the national leaders in the European Council in March.⁷ The Czech PM put emphasis on equity and speed of distribution as well as arranging for a sufficient amount of vaccines for individual countries. Earlier, the EU declared the goal that 70 per cent of the adult population should be inoculated by July, which seems hardly feasible under current conditions.

The European structures have shown inflexibility again. Successful fulfilment of the political obligations and priorities are, moreover, hampered by ideological prejudice and geopolitical rivalry, ruling out cooperation with China and Russia which can provide the EU with some of their vaccines (Sputnik V, Sinopharm, CoronaVac, Convidecia, EpiVacCorona, ZF2001, WIBP-CorV, CoviVac). The politicisation of the health issues and pandemic as such does harm to progress and restoring normal processes, protracting the crisis. The question arises whether the current state of affairs is not convenient for political elites or interest groups of some countries. Otherwise, there is no reason why not to import and distribute Chinese or Russian vaccines in Europe including the Czech Republic. President Miloš Zeman is the highest representative who has been in favour of the use of Russian and Chinese vaccines. At the end of February, Zeman requested his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin for Sputnik V following an agreement with the PM Babiš. Russian partners responded affirmatively. President did the same in the case of Sinopharm, Beijing's reaction being similarly positive.⁸ However, incidents that happened later in April caused that the Czech Republic would hardly follow the examples of Hungary and Serbia that have accepted these vaccines irrespective of the EU's official position.

⁶ *Česko preferuje, aby očkovací pas vznikl na úrovni celé EU* (2021, March 8). Retrieved April 20, 2021, from <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/cesko-preferuje-aby-ockovaci-pas-vznikl-na-urovni-cele-eu/2006015>.

⁷ *Prime Minister Andrej Babiš met with EU leaders on vaccines and internal market* (2021, March 26). Retrieved April 20, 2021, from <https://www.vlada.cz/en/media-centrum/aktualne/prime-minister-andrej-babis-met-with-eu-leaders-on-vaccines-and-internal-market-187515/>.

⁸ *Prima: Zeman má od Putina pro Česko slíbenou vakcínu Sputnik* (2021, February 27). Retrieved April 20, 2021, from <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/prima-zeman-ma-od-putina-pro-cesko-slibenou-vakcinu-sputnik/2002166>. *Tiskové prohlášení* (2021, March 3). Retrieved April 20, 2021 from <https://www.hrad.cz/cs/pro-media/tiskove-zpravy/aktualni-tiskove-zpravy/tiskove-prohlaseni-15832#from-list>.

Conclusion

The US continues exerting pressure on the Czech Republic and other European actors with the aim to maintain dominance over the Western part of the Eurasian macroregion. In the case of the Czech Republic, the persisting US hegemony is exercised in the field of ideology, politics, military, economy as well as security. This asymmetric relation and a long-term agenda manifested themselves during the conversation between the Czech Prime Minister and US Secretary of State held in March. Washington's interests have also affected the Government's position towards vaccination. Notwithstanding positive signs in relation to Chinese and Russian vaccines and affirmative response both from Beijing and Moscow, the huge potential will likely not be fulfilled as a result of the US pressure in the near future.