



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Chastening Experience: Cooperation with Russia Fatal**
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

Chastening Experience: Cooperation with Russia Fatal

Summary

The Czech-Russian relations started to improve in the spring. The Government reaffirmed that Rosatom would be allowed to take part in a strategic tender in the field of nuclear energy whilst the Deputy Prime Minister was about to negotiate supplies of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V in Moscow. The Czech side also proposed Prague to be a place of the US-Russian summit between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin. Nothing of the abovementioned, however, did become reality after provoking a scandal within which Russia was accused of a terrorist act against the Czech Republic. Probably, the Czech operation was a part of the broader plan to further destabilise Eastern Europe and strengthen anti-Russian forces in the region.

Introduction

Over the last months, signs of improvement in the complicated Czech-Russian relationship could be observed. Such a development was in contrast with previous controversies and disputes, accompanied by several scandals. Irrespective of frictions and tense relations between the West and Russia for a long period, the Czech Republic's Government attempted to play a more independent role, breaking out of the one-sided, biased and inferior position of the European Union, which is still subordinated to Washington and the hegemonic US interests. However, the warming of the bilateral relations, as well as independentist tendencies, were both halted, and promising prospects dashed. On the contrary, diplomatic and political war between Prague and Moscow erupted.

Pre-history of the crisis

The Czech leadership showed readiness for constructive relations with Russian partners as told on several cases. First, the Government did not exclude – unlike China General Nuclear Power Group – the Russian Rosatom from a tender for the expansion of the Dukovany power plant, which is a long-term project of the utmost strategic significance. Given the technical parameters and demands, Rosatom was the main favourite that used to provoke a negative response from Washington, lobbying for their Westinghouse. Obviously, the Government

managed to resist the US pressure in this field. Second, Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hamáček started to prepare an official visit to Moscow to negotiate supplies of Russia's vaccine Sputnik V to the Czech Republic. It was a risky business, since the EU and all the more the US still oppose the use of both Russian and Chinese vaccines, being afraid of a rise in popularity of these major powers among Western societies. Let's remind that the Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovič was forced to step down in connection with supplies of the Sputnik V in April. Jan Hamáček was well aware of these risks, yet he dared to take due steps. Third, Deputy Prime Minister Hamáček, who was also holding the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs in April, put forward an offer to arrange a summit between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin in Prague, the idea of which was announced by the US side shortly before. Such an event would have followed the Medvedev-Obama summit in 2010 when both Presidents signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) at Prague Castle.¹

In case these actions were successful, it would bring several consequences: (α) The international image and position of the Czech Republic would have improved and the Czech diplomacy would have proved to be very operational. (β) The import of the Russian vaccine would have speeded up the building of collective immunity, thus contributing to the mitigation of negative impacts of the pandemic. (γ) These effects would have led to an increase in public support for both the Government in general and the Social Democratic Party in particular, which is crucial given the decreasing popularity of both. However, everything turned out in a completely different way. On May 17 in the evening, an extraordinary press conference was broadcasted in which Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and his deputy Jan Hamáček announced that Russia committed a terrorist act on the territory of the Czech Republic in 2014. The action was allegedly carried out by two officers of the Russian GRU who are officially suspected of poisoning Sergei Skripal in Britain in 2018. The Government's accusation subsequently resulted in the most severe crisis in the Czech-Russian relations after 1993, a massive anti-Russian campaign in the media, shocks on the domestic political scene and unprecedented actions in relation to the Russian side. Nevertheless, the affair has a wide array of dubious circumstances and aspects. These will be analysed in the following political briefing.

¹ *Česko navrhne konání summitu USA-Rusko v Praze* (2021, April 14). Retrieved May 25, 2021, from https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/cesko_navrhne_konani_summitu_usa_rusko_v.ht ml (in Czech).

International context

Even though some domestic actors were interested in such an action, undermining the Czech-Russian relationship (incidentally, these are also obstructing the Czech-Chinese strategic partnership), it should not be analysed considering only the internal causes. It is to be emphasised that a decisive role was played by and the principal incentive came from abroad, more specifically from the US establishment structures. It is hardly possible that such an operation would have happened without external support or at least consent. I have written about a permanent US engagement in the Czech Republic's internal affairs and a strong pressure from Washington in several briefings. Under Trump's administration, this pressure was mitigated which is related to a Trumpist reinterpretation of the US foreign policy and national interests of the great power. The relatively low importance that the then administration attributed to our country was manifested symbolically by the fact that Donald Trump declined to meet his Czech counterpart Miloš Zeman, albeit the latter belonged to Trump's supporters and, at the same time, President Zeman strove for that. Nevertheless, it does not mean that Washington's interference ended as demonstrated, for instance, by an official visit paid by the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Prague in August 2020.² The main issues relevant to the US leadership have been the following: the Czech energy sector, 5G networks, cybersecurity, modernisation of the national armoury and last but not least external orientation. These priorities were reaffirmed by Pompeo's successor Antony Blinken in March 2021.³

After Joe Biden took over the presidency, the US presence in the CEE region has escalated. Although being speculative, one might assert that the Czech operation aimed against Russia would have not been carried out if Trump remained President as his Russian agenda was moderate and rather constructive taking the US context into account. Under Biden, the US-Russian relations deteriorated at first. Washington stepped up the pressure on the European countries (especially Germany) to distance themselves from participation in the project of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline which allegedly contradicts EU interests undermining the position of Ukraine and Central Europe. Washington is worried about the European-Russian cooperation as it undermines the present US geopolitical, hegemonic interests – and also the geoeconomic ones since Washington wants to capitalise on the export of shale gas. In addition, tensions between Ukraine and Russia have been strengthening recently, which overlaps with military

² Zemánek, L. *Mike Pompeo's "Czech Mission": Surprise and Disappointment* (2020, October 05). Retrieved May 26, 2021, from <https://china-cee.eu/2020/10/05/czech-republic-external-relations-briefing-mike-pompeos-czech-mission-surprise-and-disappointment/>.

³ Zemánek, L. *Under Growing Pressure: Prague to Conform to the US Interests* (2021, May 12). Retrieved May 26, 2021, from <https://china-cee.eu/2021/05/12/czech-republic-external-relations-briefing-under-growing-pressure-prague-to-conform-to-the-us-interests/>.

drills carried out by NATO in Eastern Europe and Washington's plans to send warships to the Black Sea.⁴ However, tensions have been intensifying not only over Ukraine but also over Belarus, which forms the common Union State together with Russia. Since the presidential elections in August last year, strong pressure from the West has been exerted on the Belarusian leadership. According to a wide array of indicia and evidence, the country should have become another victim of the so-called colour revolution, a coup plotted from abroad with the aim to subjugate Belarus to the Atlanticist camp led by the US, similarly to adjacent Ukraine.⁵ It is possible that the Czech operation was a part of the broader plan to further destabilise Eastern Europe and strengthen anti-Russian forces, fueling Russophobia sentiments in the region. From such a perspective, disclosure of the information about alleged Russia's terrorist act against the Czech Republic could have served as a pretext for an operation in Belarus as Moscow's key ally or at least for diverting attention.⁶ It is therefore very likely that the internal developments in our country are connected with external processes and cannot be separated from them.

Conclusion

The unprecedented actions took by the Czech political leadership in April and May in relation to Russia provoked a serious crisis in the bilateral relationship, damaging it for many years to come. There is a reasonable suspicion that the highest constitutional representatives were exposed to pressure from abroad, without which the abovementioned steps would have not been made. It entails a serious encroachment on sovereignty and deepening of dependence on the Atlanticist forces. The official actions thwarted attempts to restore constructive and mutually beneficial relations between Prague and Moscow, which harmed the Czech national interests. For the time being, the Czech Republic's subordinate position has been cemented.

⁴ The so-called DEFENDER-Europe is an annual US-led joint exercise including 28 thousand participants in 2021. Todd Lopez, C. *Defender Europe 21 Exercises. Multinational Interoperability, Readiness, Transparency* (2021, May 03). Retrieved May 26, 2021, from <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2593494/defender-europe-21-exercises-multinational-interoperability-readiness-transpare/>.

⁵ Цепляев, В. *Сергей Лавров: «Санкциями и угрозами Россию не испугаешь»* (2021, May 26). Retrieved May 26, 2021, from https://aif.ru/politics/world/sergey_lavrov_sankciyami_i_ugrozami_rossiyu_ne_ispugaesh (in Russian).

⁶ *Захарова: заявления Праги должны были "перекрыть" данные о готовящемся перевороте в Минске* (2021, April 18). Retrieved May 24, 2021, from <https://tass.ru/politika/11181221> (in Russian).