



# Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic political briefing:**  
**Czech RussiaGate: Contemporary McCarthyism in Practice**  
**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](mailto:office@china-cee.eu)  
 [china-cee.eu](http://china-cee.eu)

# **Czech RussiaGate: Contemporary McCarthyism in Practice**

## **Summary**

*The so-called RussiaGate is an affair of the alleged attack on the Czech territory carried out by Russia in 2014. The information was made public in April and subsequently led to a massive anti-Russian campaign. The target of the alleged operation was to thwart supplies of ammunition to Ukraine or Syria via Bulgaria. Even though the explosions have been investigated as improper handling from the beginning, the later version works with Russia's involvement. There is a wide array of questions and doubts and only one thing is indisputable – the accusations made by the initiators of the campaign are based on speculations and faith while evidence is lacking.*

## **Introduction**

The Czech domestic political discourse became dominated by the accusation made by the Government against Russia in April and May. This major power allegedly conducted a sabotage operation on the territory of the Czech Republic, as a result of which two ammunition depots were destroyed by explosions in 2014. Two Czech citizens were killed and the liquidation of the consequences of the explosions lasted until October last year, costing around 1 billion CZK (nearly 40 million EUR). Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Deputy PM Jan Hamáček announced that the GRU officers had been involved in the „act of state terrorism“, taking retaliatory measures against Moscow and giving rise to an anti-Russian campaign. However, multiple circumstances of the affair cast doubt on the dominant interpretation.

## **What happened?**

Two ammunition warehouses located in Vrbětice, Zlín Region were destroyed by two explosions in October and December 2014. Both depots were leased by Imex Group, a private Czech company dealing with the arms trade. Two employees of the company died during the first explosion. In total, up to 63 tonnes of ammunition, including artillery ammunition or submachine guns, were kept in the warehouses. In response to the explosions, more than 800 inhabitants of the adjacent villages were evacuated. Subsequently, the state authorities provided

compensations for damages and started to clean up the damages in the compound and beyond while prosecuting authorities initiated an investigation. Several misconducts were revealed. Neither the regional political representation nor the State Mining Administration, which was to inspect the compound, depots and ammunition was aware of the fact that these were not used by the Ministry of Defence anymore and that the department leased the compound to private armament companies. It emerged that the Police had not inspected the ammunition in Vrbětice as was supposed to do. Furthermore, basic safety standards and rules were violated, since aerial bombs and artillery ammunition were stored next to the easily ignitable materials.<sup>1</sup> There was also suspicion of warehousing of internationally prohibited ammunition including land mines. In 2016, nevertheless, the court eventually proved the innocence of two accused companies' representatives as they were storing only parts of the land mines, which is not prohibited.<sup>2</sup>

Even though the legal proceedings are not strictly connected with the explosions as the mines were detected within the subsequent inspection of other warehouses in the compound, it indicates that malpractices and mistakes existed, which might have played a role in the tragic events of 2014. Not by coincidence, the Police worked with a version that the explosions were caused by improper handling of the ammunition. It is far from being impossible if consider the abovementioned facts. On April 17, 2021, however, the case gained unexpected momentum. After virtually 7 years, Prime Minister announced that the Czech security forces have a reasonable suspicion that the explosions were not a tragic accident but an operation carried out by officers of the GRU's unit 29155. Deputy PM compared the situation to the Salisbury affair and declared that all workers of Russia's embassy in Prague identified by the intelligence agencies as spies were obliged to leave the country within 48 hours – it applied to 18 persons.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, this statement set off an unprecedented campaign accompanied by a sharp deterioration in Czech-Russian relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Gazdík, J., Hrubeš, K. *Kdo selhal? Hejtman nevěděl, že muniční sklad nepatří armádě* (2014, November 10), Aktuálně.cz. Retrieved May 30, 2021, from <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/kdyz-granaty-bouchaji-a-nikdo-nic-netusi/r~eebeb83065c811e49e4b0025900fea04/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Soud zprostil obžaloby Excalibur Army a Real Trade v kauze Vrbětice* (2016, July 27), Lidovky.cz. Retrieved May 30, 2021, from [https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/soud-zprostil-obzaloby-excalibur-army-a-real-trade-v-kauze-vrbetice.A160727\\_114518\\_In\\_domov\\_ELE](https://www.lidovky.cz/domov/soud-zprostil-obzaloby-excalibur-army-a-real-trade-v-kauze-vrbetice.A160727_114518_In_domov_ELE).

<sup>3</sup> *Přepis: Co přesně řekl Babiš o podílu Rusů na výbuchu ve Vrběticích* (2021, April 17), Seznamzpravy.cz. Retrieved May 30, 2021, from <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/prepis-co-presne-rekl-babis-o-podilu-rusu-na-vybuchu-ve-vrbeticich-151002>.

## **Dubious circumstances**

The case is characterised by a wide array of dubious circumstances and aspects from the very beginning. First and foremost, the timing. It concerns both the publishing of the suspicion and the press conference itself. As I mentioned in the previous briefing, it came in a moment of gradual improvement of the bilateral relations with Moscow. The Government had decided not to exclude Russian company from the strategic tender on the expansion of one of the Czech Republic's nuclear power plants, entailing a high probability that Rosatom would become the winner, furthermore, the political leadership wanted to negotiate on supplies of the Russian vaccine Sputnik V and proposed the US and Russian side to hold the presidential summit in Prague.

As far as the tender is concerned, willingness and probability of involvement of Rosatom in the Czech strategic power industry might have contributed to political instability and the US interference in the past as well. In May 2013, Prime Minister Petr Nečas paid an official visit to Russia, an expansion of the Czech nuclear power plant being one of the priorities to discuss with Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev. In that time, mutual relations have been accelerated in terms of trade, business and politics. A month later, however, Nečas was overthrown in response to a theatrical Police raid conducted in the seat of the Government (the operation was coined „NagyGate“). Results were obvious: the tender fizzled out and the Czech-Russian relations worsened, which was deepened the following year in connection with the crisis in Ukraine.

The then events have multiple similar features compared to the present „RussiaGate“. Meanwhile, unexpected political turns provoked by the non-elected actors have become a recurrent phenomenon in Czech politics after 1989. Some Czech sociologists use the term „cold putsches“ for analysing the changes of government through Police, intelligence or media manipulations and coercion in conjunction with both domestic and foreign interest groups. From such a perspective, the RussiaGate or the Vrbětice affair is the fifth „cold putsch“ in contemporary history, the aim of which is to discredit and remove the independentist, sovereigntist part of the political elites from power.<sup>4</sup> It should be added in this regard that the Parliamentary election will be held in October so the timing of the operation plays into the hands of those who call into question the official version conveyed by the Prime Minister and elaborated by the counter-intelligence service. The question is why such „a reasonable

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<sup>4</sup> Klán, J. *České studené puče*, (2021, May 10), Novéslovo.sk. Retrieved June 01, 2021, from [https://noveslovo.sk/c/Ceske\\_studene\\_puce](https://noveslovo.sk/c/Ceske_studene_puce).

suspicion“ was presented in the middle of the weekend in the evening and why it was presented seven years later when the Czech-Russian relations were about to restart. The press conference was called after Andrej Babiš met with the representatives of the counter-intelligence. It indicates that the decisive impetus came from these circles. Coincidentally, three days before the Government was to debate the National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Threats, the first strategic document of its kind, defining the goal to reduce the Czech Republic’s dependency on countries with different ideological and value systems as well as to resist activities carried out by „authoritarian and revisionist powers with regional or global power ambitions“.<sup>5</sup> It is beyond any doubts that China and Russia are meant. This confrontational paradigm is enforced especially by NATO structures. Indeed, two days after disclosure of alleged Russia’s hostile attack against our country, the new National Strategy aimed at the strategic containment of the non-Western partners was approved.

There has been a united intelligence-media-political front that started the anti-Russian, McCarthy-like campaign. It is noteworthy that the same day as the PM’s press conference took place, one of the most radical liberal, pro-Western magazine published an article analysing the GRU’s involvement in the explosions in detail, this information coming from the intelligence circles.<sup>6</sup> According to the article, the operation should have been carried out by the same officers who are suspected of poisoning Sergei Skripal in Salisbury. Pictures of those men were broadcasted on TV accompanied by a Police appeal to the public for cooperation on their capture. The public television broadcaster launched live transmission on Saturday evening, lasting overnight. The presenters explicitly called the Russians „cockroaches“. Such a xenophobic, hateful, ideologised campaign was unprecedented. Political reactions followed immediately, being marked by similar sentiment. The Westerners called upon to expel all Russian diplomats, suspend any relations with Moscow and annul the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation from 1993. Only a minority of the political representation risked opposing the massive campaign and suggesting constructive and reasonable actions. It applied, first and foremost, to the Freedom and Direct Democracy movement, Communist Party, President Miloš Zeman, his predecessor Václav Klaus and some members of the Government. Nevertheless, thanks to these actors, the explosive situation gradually stabilised.

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<sup>5</sup> *National Strategy for Countering Hybrid Interference* (2021, April 22), mocr.army.cz. Retrieved June 01, 2021, from <https://www.mocr.army.cz/assets/informacni-servis/zpravodajstvi/national-strategy---aj-final.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Kundra, O., Spurný, J. *Za výbuchem muničního skladu ve Vrbětčích stojí ruští agenti, kteří se pokusili zabít Skripala* (2021, April 17), Respekt.cz. Retrieved June 02, 2021, from <https://www.respekt.cz/agenda/za-vybuchem-municniho-skladu-ve-vrbeticich-stoji-rusti-agenti-kteri-se-pokusili-zabit-skripala>.

## **Conclusion**

The RussiaGate launched in April has brought about multiple consequences. First, the plans to import the Russian vaccine Sputnik V were cancelled. Second, the plans to organise the US-Russian summit in Prague became unreal and undesirable at the same time. Third, the strategic tender on the expansion of the Dukovany power plant has been postponed and the participation of Rosatom excluded. Fourth, the Czech side expelled 81 workers from the Russian embassy in Prague, thus carrying out a long-term goal set by the anti-Russian forces. Fifth, the operation thwarted the warming of the bilateral relations again and deepened the dependency on the Atlanticist countries, primarily the US. In terms of the consequences achieved on the Czech territory, the operation, originated abroad and having an international dimension, was successful for now.