



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Campaigning against Russia: Czech and European Initiatives
Ladislav Zemánek


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Campaigning against Russia: Czech and European Initiatives

Summary

The briefing inquires into the Czech Republic's recent policies aimed at countering Russia both at home and at the international level. These include close cooperation with Washington in the security and military fields as well as initiatives in favour of the acceleration of Western assistance to Ukraine. Individual aspects of this assistance are analysed from a comparative perspective which shows that the Czech Republic is one of the leaders of the support for Kiev. Attention is paid to Prague's international plan of collective purchase of ammunition to be transferred to Ukraine. The analysis is framed by development in the public opinion in European countries and the EU's actions in the area of European collective security inclusive of battlegroups and the Rapid Deployment Capacity.

Introduction

The Czech Republic continues to follow a hardline policy towards Russia while advocating as much extensive support for Kiev as possible. Prague has been recently engaged in a new plan of military supplies to Ukraine at the international level and is adopting active measures against the Russian subjects at home. The Czech security bodies have also participated in US-led cyber operations against the Russians. All these actions demonstrate Prague's efforts to play an important role externally and be a crucial player in the Euro-Atlantic community. The same applies to the Czech government's engagement in the Israel-Palestine conflict in which it, however, sides with Israel to such a degree that goes against both the European mainstream and the Biden administration. The Czech Republic's international role is, therefore, ambiguous and fails to win Washington's favour in contrast to the adjacent Poland. Moreover, it has turned out that the cabinet's moralist foreign policy suffers from inner contradictions which can be demonstrated by the official position on the conflicts in Ukraine and Palestine.

Czech legal measures

Czech-Russian relations are at a freezing point. The government is not interested in developing communication with Moscow and focuses on repressive measures instead. In February, the cabinet extended its ban on issuing visas and residence permits to Russian and Belorussian nationals except for a limited circle of opposition citizens and activists. From now on, the ban is unlimited in time.¹ Furthermore, the government has frozen several dozens of pieces of real estate owned by the Russian Federation and is trying to reduce the properties of the diplomatic mission in Prague.²

A group of deputies has also drafted a special act on the protection of national security which is aimed at confiscation of Russian assets on the Czech territory. Even though the draft contains no mention of Russia, the deputies admit that their initiative is motivated by the effort to eliminate Russian influence in the country. At the moment, the draft is analysed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In case of approval of the draft by the Parliament, the Czech Republic would become the second country in the EU to have such a law in its legal framework after Estonia. Aside from Estonia and the Czech Republic, a similar initiative exists in Latvia. The Czech government deputies have the ambition to cooperate with Latvia as well as other possible partners, especially Finland, Lithuania and Poland, to implement new legislation.³ At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has added new subjects to the national sanction list which was introduced last year. As of the end of February, the Czech side put six natural persons and one legal person on the list. It includes *Goszagransobstvennost'*, that is, Enterprise for Property Management Abroad which is authorised to administer the state property under the auspices of the Administrative Directorate of the President of the Russian Federation.⁴

Cooperation with FBI

Besides repressive measures against Russian subjects in the Czech Republic, the country conducted active operations against Russia in collaboration with the Americans and other allies.

¹ Česko nadále nebude vydávat povolení k pobytu Rusům a Bělorusům, schválila vláda (2024, February 21). ČTK. <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2482356>

² Rogner, Š. (2024, February 16). Vláda potvrdila zmrazení desítek nemovitostí ve vlastnictví Ruska. ČT24. <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/clanek/domaci/vlada-potvrdila-zmrazeni-desitek-nemovitosti-ve-vlastnictvi-ruska-346142>

³ Rambousková, M. (2024, January 16). Česko by mohlo mít zákon o vyvlastnění ruských majetků. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-cesko-by-mohlo-mit-zakon-o-vyvlastneni-ruskych-majetku-243725>

⁴ Vnitrostátní sankční seznam (2024, February 21). Ministerstvo zahraniční věcí ČR. https://mzv.gov.cz/file/5366217/Vnitrostatni_sankcni_seznam.pdf

In January, the Czech Military Intelligence participated in an operation called Dying Ember which was led by the FBI. The action's goal was to neutralise a network of routers which had reportedly been attacked by the Russian GRU through spearphishing and other campaigns. Those routers were allegedly used against important targets in NATO countries and Ukraine.⁵ On that occasion, Minister of Defence Jana Černochová emphasised that Russia has not only waged a conventional war against Ukraine but also a hybrid war against the Czech Republic.⁶

Overall, the security cooperation between Prague and Washington is deepening. Several weeks after the Dying Ember operation, Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation Christopher Wray visited the Czech capital and met the minister of defence, minister of the interior as well as director of the Military Intelligence. According to the Czech agency, both sides maintain above-average relations, especially as far as cyber defence and sharing intelligence in the field of combating terrorism are concerned.⁷ The American FBI has its office in Prague and is even involved in the investigation of some domestic cases including but not limited to the tragic attack at the leading Czech university in December 2023 during which 15 people died.⁸ This fact is worth noticing all the more so that it has nothing to do with the US and its interests. The American agency has offices in 19 European countries but also in Russia and China.

Western assistance to Kiev

An integral part of the state's anti-Russian policy is active support for Kiev. The ruling cabinet has recently accelerated its international activities in this regard to mobilise further sources to be provided to the Ukrainian side. At the end of January, the heads of government of the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany and the Netherlands published an open letter in the Financial Times, whereby highlighting the need for long-term and sustainable

⁵ *Justice Department Conducts Court-Authorized Disruption of Botnet Controlled by the Russian Federation's Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (GRU)* (2024, February 15). U.S. Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-conducts-court-authorized-disruption-botnet-controlled-russian>. *Vojenské zpravodajství provedlo aktivní zásah v kybernetickém prostoru* (2024, February 16). Vojenské zpravodajství. <https://www.vzcr.cz/vojenske-zpravodajstvi-provedlo-aktivni-zasah-v-kybernetickem-prostoru-226>

⁶ *Česko vytáhlo do boje s ruskými tajnými službami. Braňme kyberprostor, vyzval Fiala* (2024, February 16). iDNES.cz. https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/petr-fiala-bezpecnost-vojenske-zpravodajstvi-ruske-tajne-sluzby-gru-dying-ember.A240216_131111_domaci_seel

⁷ *Jednání s ředitelem FBI* (2024, February 23). Vojenské zpravodajství. <https://www.vzcr.cz/jednani-s-reditelem-fbi-228>

⁸ *FBI pomáhá s vyšetřováním střelby na univerzitě v Praze* (2024, February 23). Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/prave-se-deje-fbi-pomaha-s-vysetrovanim-strelby-na-univerzite-v-praze-246450>

military supplies to Ukraine. The European leaders argue that military support must be stepped up to prevent Russia from defeating Kiev.⁹ Hardline European representatives are increasingly worried about Russia's internal resilience and recent military achievements as well as the risk of Washington's partial withdrawal from the conflict, especially after the presidential election in November.

It is beyond any doubt that Kiev's prospects would deteriorate significantly without American support. According to the data of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, the US is a leader in government military aid to Ukraine with 42.2 billion EUR spent by mid-January. The US is accompanied by Germany (17.7 billion EUR), Britain (9.1 billion EUR), Denmark (8.4 billion EUR) and the Netherlands (4.4 billion EUR). The Czech Republic has already spent at least 1.3 billion EUR on military transfers. Overall, the biggest sponsors of the war are the EU institutions, the US, Germany, Britain and Denmark. The EU has spent not less than 85 billion EUR in contrast to some 68 billion EUR on the American side. Nevertheless, one must take into account the expenditures of individual EU countries as well. In this regard, the Czech Republic's expenditures are higher than those of Italy or Spain whose economies are much larger. In the CEE region, Prague is a leader together with Warsaw. In terms of the share of GDP, the Czech Republic is at the same level as Germany.¹⁰

Czech arms initiative

Furthermore, the Czech Republic has launched an initiative aimed at purchasing ammunition and military equipment for Ukraine. The plan, which had been prepared for the last 18 months, was discussed at a summit in Paris on February 26. The event was attended by some 20 European leaders under the aegis of French President Emmanuel Macron. Prime Minister Petr Fiala said that about 15 countries inclusive of Canada, Denmark, France and the Netherlands agreed to join the Czech initiative. The idea is to fund and purchase ammunition from third countries to offset the lack of artillery shells which were to be sent to Kiev. The Czech side has identified 500,000 rounds of 155-calibre and a further 300,000 rounds of 122-calibre ammunition worth 1.5 billion USD which can be purchased and supplied to the Ukrainians in a short period of time. Prague has a list of items at its disposal and provides the

⁹ Camut, N. (2024, January 31). *Leaders demand the EU gets real about arming Ukraine*. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-ukraine-weapons-olaf-scholz-mette-frederiksen-petr-fiala-kaja-kallas-mark-rutte/>

¹⁰ *Ukraine Support Tracker* (2024). Kiel Institute for the World Economy. <https://www.ifw-kiel.de/topics/war-against-ukraine/ukraine-support-tracker/>

allies with information about available ammunition in third countries. The Czech side is not to be a contracting party but should play an informal intermediary role in the entire process. Given the high sensitivity of the question, some of the possible business partners want to maintain anonymity, nevertheless, South Africa, South Korea and Türkiye could be among possible suppliers.¹¹

Publicity of the Czech plan in Paris was, however, overshadowed by Macron's speculations about sending European troops to Ukraine. According to official statements, neither the US nor NATO are preparing to send troops to the Eastern European country at the moment but Macron's remarks indicate that some countries could be in favour of unilateral actions in this regard. It was confirmed by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico ahead of the Paris summit.¹² By that time, the *New York Times* published an article revealing the direct long-term engagement of the CIA in Ukraine inclusive of at least 12 intelligence bases which has been actively involved in the war against Russia.¹³

Communicating with Washington

Yet the political support for the acceleration of the military campaign in Ukraine is unclear at the moment. The next aid package for Kiev has been blocked by American congressmen, which has made some European allies nervous. At the end of February, representatives of parliamentary bodies from 20 European countries decided to send a letter to the speaker of the House of Representatives, calling for approval of further assistance for Kiev. The appeal was signed by heads of parliaments from Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, the

¹¹ Posaner, J., McLeary, P., Barigazzi, J. (2024, February 1). *Czechs want EU to shop abroad for Ukraine shells*. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/czech-republic-artillery-weapons-ukraine-european-union/>. *Czechs line up Canada, Denmark, others to fund ammunition supplies for Ukraine* (2024, February 23). Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/czechs-line-up-canada-denmark-others-fund-ammunition-supplies-ukraine-2024-02-23/>. Wirnitzer, J., Pokorná, Z. (2024, February 26). *Rok a půl tiché práce, obrovský vojenský význam. Co víme o českém plánu na dodávky munice Ukrajině*. Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/1362764/rok-a-pul-tiche-prace-obrovsky-vojensky-vyznam-co-vime-o-ceskem-planu-na-dodavky-munice-ukrajine/>. Boubínová, M. (2024, February 29). *Český plán patřil v Paříži k nejdůležitějším tématům. Fico byl asi na jiném jednání, říká Pojar*. Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/1365361/situace-neni-dobra-snazime-se-aby-nebylo-hur-rika-pojar-k-ceskemu-planu-pomoci-ukrajine/>

¹² Rose, M., Irish, J. (2024, February 27). *France's Macron does not rule out Europeans sending troops to Ukraine*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/paris-conference-belie-doom-gloom-ukraine-elysee-says-2024-02-25/>. Vilček, I., Soukup, J. (2024, February 26). *Některé země NATO a EU zvažují vyslat vojáky na Ukrajinu, tvrdí Fico*. Novinky.cz. <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/zahranicni-evropa-nektere-zeme-nato-a-eu-zvazuji-vyslat-vojaky-na-ukrajinu-tvrdi-fico-40462095>

¹³ Entous, A., Schwirtz, M. (2024, February 25). *The Spy War: How the C.I.A. Secretly Helps Ukraine Fight Putin*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/25/world/europe/cia-ukraine-intelligence-russia-war.html>

Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Spain and Ukraine. Speaker of the Czech Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová is one of the initiators of this action. European politicians argue that Russia's military operation undermined the security of the whole Euro-Atlantic area and encouraged "dictatorial and undemocratic regimes" worldwide to spread instability, which is pushing the "rules-based international order" to the brink of collapse. It is worth noticing that the signatories revive the notorious term "axis of evil" and highlight the need to defeat the "axis" countries, first and foremost, Russia, Iran and North Korea. From the European politicians' perspective, this war must be fought for the sake of democratic values and a sustainable world order based on rules and respect for the UN Charter.¹⁴

Despite this activism on the Czech part, Prague has not lived to see an invitation to the White House which the Czech side has tried hard to achieve for several years. The invitation to the White House is very symbolic within the Atlantic community, being an expression of the highest recognition from the hegemon. For the last time, this privilege was given to Prime Minister Andrej Babiš in 2019. It is of certain interest that neither the incumbent prime minister nor the president has been offered the opportunity to meet the American head of state in the Oval Office. In contrast, the Americans invited both Polish President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Donald Tusk to Washington on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to NATO. Invitation for both Polish representatives concurrently is unprecedented but builds on close alignment between Washington and Warsaw, for the latter has been a traditional pillar of American interests in the region irrespective of the party in power. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Joe Biden visited Poland two times. The White House has refused to explain why the American side has not invited the Czech and Hungarian representatives.¹⁵ In any case, the last event clearly shows that Prague's significance for Washington remains low compared to the Polish one despite an extremely pro-American orientation of the ruling cabinet, a wide array of joint projects in numerous fields of cooperation and active behaviour at the international level in line with the American policies.

¹⁴ Šídlová, T. (2024, February 28). *Schvalte pomoc Ukrajině a zabraňte destrukci, piší čeští politici do Kongresu*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zahranicni-stredni-evropa-schvalte-pomoc-ukrajine-a-zabrante-destrukci-pisi-cesi-do-kongresu-246752>

¹⁵ Harzer, F., Ulrychová, T. (2024, February 19). *Políček pro Česko od USA? Polsko slaví „double“*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zahranicni-stredni-evropa-polaci-maji-netradicni-dve-vstupenky-do-bileho-domu-cesi-budou-doma-245978>

Declining support for the war

Even though the incumbent government has adopted a hardline stance on the war in Ukraine, contributing to the prolongation and possible escalation of the military conflict, the Czech public is increasingly in favour of ceasefire and peace talks. According to long-term sociological surveys, the number of people who believe that the Czech Republic should support Ukraine's military campaign until seizing control over the pre-2014 territory even at the cost of prolongation of the war decreased from 38 per cent in September 2023 to 31 per cent in January 2024. An overwhelming majority of 69 per cent of people, on the contrary, argue in favour of a quick termination of the conflict irrespective of a loss of former Ukrainian territories and their recognition as a part of the Russian Federation. This development and growing opposition to the war against Russia, at the same time, coexist with widespread conviction that Russia is an unequivocal culprit of the conflict. According to September data, up to 65 per cent of people consider Russia the only aggressor in contrast to 34 per cent who disagree with such an interpretation.¹⁶ In addition, the Czechs are slightly more optimistic about the final outcome of the war than the European average. While 10 per cent of Europeans believe that Ukraine will win the war compared to 20 per cent who argue in favour of Russia, the figures amount to 13 and 15 per cent respectively in the Czech case. The figure regarding Ukraine's victory is the fourth-highest in Europe.¹⁷

Nonetheless, this opinion can hardly outweigh the clear tendency towards peaceful settlement among the public as soon as possible. This position is politically represented by the parliamentary opposition, that is, ANO and SPD. In February, ANO's Chairman Andrej Babiš called upon the Chamber of Deputies to discuss a plan to organise an international peace conference about Ukraine in Prague. However, his proposal was refused by the government coalition. On the same occasion, the opposition leader criticised Chief of the General Staff Karel Řehka for his repeated statements about the need to prepare for a war against Russia.¹⁸ At a meeting of the highest military representatives in Prague on February 20, the chief of the General Staff emphasised the task of supporting Ukraine as much as possible and enhancing

¹⁶ *Češi nepolevuji v podpoře uprchlíků z Ukrajiny* (2024, February 23). STEM. <https://www.stem.cz/cesi-nepolevuji-v-podpore-uprchliku-z-ukrajiny/>

¹⁷ *Česká veřejnost je v otázkách podpory Ukrajiny rozdělená, ukázalo mezinárodní srovnání* (2024, February 28). STEM-MARK. <https://stemmark.cz/ceska-verejnost-je-v-otazkach-podpory-ukrajiny-rozdelena-ukazalo-mezinarodni-srovnani/>. Krastev, I., Leonard, M. (2024, February 21). *Wars and elections: How European leaders can maintain public support for Ukraine*. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/wars-and-elections-how-european-leaders-can-maintain-public-support-for-ukraine/#european-perceptions-of-the-war-in-ukraine>

¹⁸ *Prezident Pavel a premiér Fiala (ODS) by měli podle předsedy ANO Babiše v Praze zorganizovat mírovou konferenci o Ukrajině* (2024, February 27). Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/minuta/1364133/>

domestic military capabilities inclusive of building an efficient mobilisation mechanism. Both goals are to deter Russia from expanding westward. The minister of defence, in turn, focused on the modernisation of the Czech Armed Forces based on the acceleration of investment and military expenditures on new Western equipment including but not limited to the recent contract on the purchase of the American F-35 aircraft. It is worth noticing that while highlighting the crucial role of NATO for both the Czech Republic and the Atlantic community as a whole, she rejected the idea of the European army.¹⁹

Towards a European army?

It follows that the government is not in favour of European strategic autonomy in the military and defence field as it links this area with US-dominated NATO. In other words, the European security system is seen as inseparable from the US and largely dependent on the transatlantic ally. The support for armament is primarily aimed at the modernisation of national armies in the subcontinent, improvement of interoperability, coordination and efficiency within NATO and change of paradigm in defence thinking and policies rather than moving toward integration of national armies into common armed forces. The aversion to the European army is widespread at the moment. Negative reactions to Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani's January statement about the need for a joint EU army corroborate this observation. A plan for the European army needs a consensus of all 27 member states, which is generally perceived as unrealistic. Most European actors agree instead that NATO is the cornerstone of European collective security.²⁰

Nevertheless, there are a couple of instruments that go in the direction of building joint forces. First, EU Battlegroups which are multinational military units composed of 1,500 troops. Since their establishment in 2007, however, they have not been used yet. Two battlegroups are always on standby for a period of six months based on a rotational basis. The set goals are conflict prevention, initial stabilisation, humanitarian interventions and rescue tasks, crisis management and peacekeeping.²¹ Second, the Rapid Deployment Capacity which is to be made

¹⁹ Gavenda, J. (2024, February 20). *Řehka: Musíme zajistit funkční mobilizační systém*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-rehka-musime-zajistit-funkcni-mobilizacni-system-246129>

²⁰ Gosselin-Malo, E. (2024, February 5). *EU member countries push back on Italy's call for a European army*. DefenseNews. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2024/02/05/eu-member-countries-push-back-on-italys-call-for-european-army/>

²¹ *EU Battlegroups* (2017, October 9). European Union External Action. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/33557_en

fully operational by 2025 when the RDC shall include 5,000 troops. The first military exercise of the unit was held last October in Spain, being attended by personnel from Austria, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Romania and Spain. Unlike the EU Battlegroups which limit themselves to land forces, the RDC is composed of different military branches depending on operational needs. In addition, the RDC will be on standby for 12 months. The new instrument's objective is to respond flexibly to imminent threats and react to crisis situations.²²

Aside from the EU Battlegroups and Rapid Deployment Capacity, the EU launched such initiatives and instruments as the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund, Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) and a plan on facilitated military mobility. These are to boost defence cooperation throughout the subcontinent and accelerate the alignment with NATO. The idea of a “military Schengen” is aimed at the free movement of military units within the EU. In February, Germany, the Netherlands and Poland made an important step in this regard when signing an agreement.²³ Not by coincidence, these countries belong to the leaders of assistance to Ukraine. The “military Schengen” is thus moved ahead against the background of the war against Russia as a chief instrument of military cooperation in Europe. Similarly, the EU has introduced a short-term instrument for the reinforcement of the European defence industry through common procurement which is in force until the end of 2025. It enables member states to jointly purchase ammunition, military equipment and related items based on a budget of 300 million EUR.²⁴

²² *Establishing an EU rapid deployment capacity* (2023, April 12). European Parliamentary Research Service. <https://epthinktank.eu/2023/04/12/establishing-an-eu-rapid-deployment-capacity/>

²³ *Poland signs a 'military Schengen' deal alongside Germany and Netherlands* (2024, February 9). Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/09/poland-signs-military-schengen-deal-alongside-germany-and-netherlands>

²⁴ *Defence: is the EU creating a European army?* (2023, September 14). EU Monitor. <https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vkzmovwegcyp>

Conclusion

The European Union as a whole as well as the Czech Republic continue to provide Kiev with comprehensive assistance. Despite the obvious unsuccesses of the Ukrainian troops in the war against Russia, most Western political representatives refuse to promote a peaceful settlement. It contrasts with the attitude towards the conflict in Palestine. Even though Israel has violated international law for decades and is conducting a military campaign which claimed more than 25,000 civilian lives since October 2023, the West hesitates to adopt active measures against Tel Aviv while imposing new sanctions on Moscow and accelerating the war.²⁵ This inconsistency and double standard will damage Western countries within the global community inevitably.

²⁵ Al-Mughrabi, N. (2024, March 1). *More than 100 killed while seeking aid in Gaza, overall death toll passes 30,000*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/dozens-killed-gaza-aid-queue-overall-death-toll-passes-30000-2024-02-29/>