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An authentic priority? Czech Republic's commitment to Eastern Europe before and after the Council Presidency¹

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Abstract:

The paper analyses the Czech foreign policy towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership from the perspective of identity and solidarity. It asks to what extent the focus on Eastern Europe was an authentic expression of Czech long-term policy and to what extent the Council Presidency marked a shift in the Czech interest in Eastern Neighbourhood. It provides an overview of the Czech identity and its impact on the Czech foreign policy priorities prior to and after the EU and NATO accession. It investigates the expressions of solidarity with Eastern Europe in the Czech foreign policy and searches for a link between the practice of policy at various levels and the declared position based on identity. It concludes that there has been a coherent trend in Czech foreign policy of re-focusing on Eastern Europe, which is supported by the foreign policy identity and values. The Czech EU Council Presidency fit well into this trend and helped establishing the Czech Republic as an active player in the region. In that respect, the focus on Eastern Europe must be understood as an authentic expression of long-term foreign policy preferences.

Keywords:

Czech Republic, EU Council Presidency, Eastern Partnership, identity, solidarity, foreign policy.

This paper analyses the Czech Republic's policy towards the countries of the Eastern Neighbourhood before and after the Czech EU Council Presidency in 2009. It asks to what extent the focus on Eastern Europe was an authentic expression of Czech long-term policy and to what extent the Council Presidency marked a shift in the Czech politicians' and officials' interest in Eastern Neighbourhood. The paper approaches the foreign policy from the constructivist perspective, which suggests that actors' preferences are influenced by the values and beliefs that constitute their identity (Wendt, 1999). These values and beliefs can have both a historical and a political origin based on the specific narrative about the actor's history and ideas about what is right and wrong (Marcussen et al., 1999). The Presidency in the Council of the EU can in this respect serve as a catalyst,³ because it provides an opportunity to highlight important issues from the country's perspective and push forward this agenda at the EU level. The values and beliefs can thus easily be searched for in the Presidency programme.

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³ The Czech EU Council Presidency took place before the Lisbon Treaty entered into force. It was, thus, a full-fledged Presidency covering the full range of areas, including foreign policy.

The key attribute of a constructed foreign policy identity is that it is not given. It can evolve in time with a change in the historical narrative or an adjustment of political and constitutional norms of behaviour, which may lead to a re-interpretation of the actor's role in international relations (Mauil, 1990). It can also evolve as a result of an external pressure. One of the most studied external pressures in recent years has been the pressure of the European Union (EU) membership. The EU influences the member states' identities through both of the above channels (the change in the historical narrative and the readjustment of norms). Through written as well as unwritten norms it shapes the notions of what should and should not be done. The embargo on the arms trade with China might serve as an example of a written norm, whereas the practice of pre-negotiating positions in the EU-group prior to meetings of larger multilateral fora represents the unwritten norms. At the same time, the conduct of a common foreign policy influences one's understanding of oneself through actions taken in the past in a longer run. Although probably less visible in foreign policy than in some other policy areas, Europeanisation does have an impact on foreign policy identities and practices of the member states (cf. Manners and Whitman, 2000; Tonra, 2001; Larsen, 2005; Wong, 2006; Moumoutzis, 2011).

The EU Council Presidency has, in this respect, been both a manifestation and a factor of Europeanization. On one hand, the Presidency priorities reveal which values and identities guide the country's foreign policy and to what extent these have changed due to the EU membership. On the other hand, the Presidency is the ultimate tool in bringing the EU closer to the citizens through extraordinary media attention and public debates on the respective country's role in the EU, EU architecture, and foreign policy (cf. Luif, 2006).

At the same time, however, the Presidency may incorporate priorities just for the sake of having priorities and meeting the general expectations of how a "standard" Presidency behaves. The post-Presidency period can thus be understood as a litmus test whether the Presidency programme was based on long-term identity and values of the country or was an artificial construct to satisfy the demand. If the former were the case, the Presidency priorities would overlap with a long-term policy and could be linked to the country's identity and values. Moreover, the priorities would last beyond the six months of Presidency and be reflected in the country's later policy. If the latter were true, the priorities would either not match the long-term policy of the country or would be dropped early after the Presidency was over.

In order to find out which of the two options describes the Czech interest in Eastern Europe better, this paper focuses on Eastern Partnership as the flagship of the Czech Presidency (Král et al., 2009: 32) and it proceeds in the following way. First, it investigates the foreign policy identity of the Czech Republic on the basis of two main sources: the discourse of the elites on 'who we are' and 'what we believe in', and its translation into foreign policy priorities as defined in the key policy documents with the particular focus on the Eastern EU neighbourhood both before and after the Czech Presidency.

There is, however, another source that shapes who we are, and it might be different from what we declare ourselves to be - our actual practices (Tulmets, 2011). Therefore, the second part of this paper focuses on the actual policy of the Czech Republic and asks to what extent the practice has supported the image created by the discourse and foreign policy documents, also before and after the Council Presidency. It focuses on expressions of solidarity with Eastern Europe which can be traced on three distinct levels: the level of political solidarity conducted through statements and motions, that of bureaucratic solidarity in the form of financial and

other assistance, and that of civic solidarity carried out by non-governmental organisations. The last part compares the declared identity with the foreign policy practice before and after the EU Council Presidency, analyses the eventual change, and concludes the article.

I. Investigating the Czech foreign policy identity

A foreign policy identity based on European values

After the 1993 split of Czechoslovakia, the independent Czech Republic and its elites continued in the discourse established right after the end of the Cold War. With the exception of the Communist Party and some right-wing extremist parties, all the mainstream parties have identified with Western Europe and the West in general. If the accession to West European economic, security and political organisations was considered the primary objective of the Czech foreign policy, it was desirable not only as an interest-based action, but also as a confirmation of the West European identity of the Czechs.

The events of the previous five decades were conceptualised as a forced and artificial separation of the Czech nation from the region where the nation and the state had always belonged. The future accession would then be a logical result of the Czech Republic catching up with the luckier nations and ‘returning to Europe’. This was clearly stated in the memorandum that the Czech government attached to its EU membership application in 1996. The government emphasised that the Czech area had been a ‘natural and distinct part of the West European civilisation area’ for centuries (Government of the Czech Republic, 1996). As a result of this dominant conceptualisation, European values such as ‘democracy, respect for human rights, civil society and open market economy’ (Havel, 1994) were taken for granted by the Czech elites as they saw no need for further debate on them. They were, after all, considered ‘traditional’ Czech values as well. Thus, the accession process was considered to be not a transfer of values, but a transfer of institutions (cf. Topolánek, 2009a). The debate focused more on the practical aspects of the integration (especially the integration into the European Union), such as the transfer of sovereignty. The discussion on the EU mirrored the argumentation existing within the Union, as it focused on the question of the relationship between the EU and the national level, the broadening of the Community method to other areas, or the level and extent of regulation in various areas (cf. Marek and Baun, 2010: chapter 2).

The key foreign policy documents have reflected this (re-)internalisation of European values. The First Republic⁴ was routinely used as the point of reference for the values and standards that were abandoned but had to be re-introduced (cf. Zieleniec, 1993). The Foreign Policy Concept of 1999 clearly stated that the Czech Republic ‘recognise[d] the heritage and values of the European civilisation’ (Government of the Czech Republic, 1999). These basic values were defined as the general international law, rule of law and the principle of the inalienability of basic human rights.

From the very beginning the Czechoslovak and Czech foreign policy was shaped by former dissidents. The most influential among them was the President, Václav Havel, who had a profound impact on the Czech foreign policy – occasionally he even overstepped (or almost overstepped) the formal competencies of his office, such as when he signed the letter supporting the military solution to the Iraqi crisis in 2003 without consulting the government

⁴ The First Republic is a label used for the Czechoslovakia of 1918-1938, as it was significantly more democratic and liberal than most of its neighbours during this time.

(cf. Král and Pachta, 2005). Many former dissidents also started building careers in diplomacy after the end of the Cold War – the first Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, Jiří Dienstbier, might be one example, and the current Minister of Defence Alexandr Vondra (who was also a long-time official of the Foreign Ministry and a Foreign Minister) might be another. Václav Havel's influence and vision has persisted even after he finished his terms, because his associates from the President's office, e.g. Mr. Vondra or the current Foreign Minister, Karel Schwarzenberg, continued to occupy the key positions for foreign policy-making.

As a result, the Czech foreign policy has elaborated on values in key foreign policy documents rather than just recognising the European affiliation. In general, human rights and democracy were the two key values that Czech conceptual documents identified as 'principles' of foreign policy (Government of the Czech Republic, 1999; 2003). The general notions have been developed into concrete partial issues by the newly established specialised Department for Human Rights and Transition Promotion at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which the Czech Republic should support in target countries. These partial issues were the issues of civil society and civil rights defenders, media and access to information, rule of law and good governance, election processes, and equality and non-discrimination (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010).

The Council Presidency has not marked any significant change in the human rights policy of the Czech Republic. Some scholars suggest that the unconditional support of human rights and democracy promotion may be giving in to economic and other interests in recent years, shifting towards a 'greater balance' (Drulák, 2009: 377; cf. Drulák and Horký, 2010). The official documents do not, however, acknowledge such a shift in any respect, nor does the policy action at a first glance. Indeed, the Czech Republic ran for, and was elected a member of the UN Human Rights Council in 2011 in a clear confirmation of the country's emphasis on human rights.

Another key issue of the Czech foreign policy identity, which developed only after the country joined NATO and the EU, was the support for further enlargement of both organisations. The support for an 'open Europe' (Šlosarčík et al., 2011: 90-94) stems from an understanding in which membership in the two organisation, especially in the EU, is seen as a stabilising factor. There is also a significant support on the part of the general public for further enlargement. The strong consensual policy is not hampered in its results by the fact that the two biggest political parties differ in their understanding of what influence the enlargement might have on European integration in general. Whereas the Social Democrats simultaneously support both the widening and the deepening of the integration process, the Civic Democrats have often advocated widening but not deepening with the assumption that the more members there are, the more difficult further political integration would be.

The evolution of foreign policy priorities

The focus on good neighbourly relations and transatlantic relations

The Czech Republic has always regarded itself as a middle-sized state in the centre of Europe. The Czech identity has been influenced by the fact that the Czech lands played a part in many European conflicts. Stability in Europe is therefore 'the basic precondition for providing security in the Czech Republic' (Government of the Czech Republic, 1999).

Two Czech foreign policy priority areas of the 1990s result directly from the need for stability - namely good neighbourly relations and the Euro-Atlantic integration. The former was at least partly considered not only a priority in its own terms, but as a precondition for achieving the latter. Issues in relations with neighbours were largely solved through bilateral negotiations (the Czech-German Declaration of 1997) or internal developments (the end of Mečiar's era in Slovakia in 1998). Some issues of this sort still remained, but their impact on foreign policy was limited (the Temelín power plant issue with Austria) (cf. Handl, 2009; Šepták, 2009).

Stability in Europe has been primarily associated with the two main organisations in Western Europe – NATO and the EU. From the very beginning, the Alliance has been considered the more important of the two in political and security terms. This stemmed from the historical memories of 1938/1939 and 1968. The NATO membership (as well as an alliance with the US) has been understood as a guarantee that such events would not happen again. The EU, on the other hand, has been understood more in economic terms than in terms of security. The emphasis on NATO was caused by the existence of the mutual defence clause in the Washington Treaty, which naturally did not occur with the Maastricht Treaty. The pro-American stream in Czech foreign policy has prevailed even after the EU developed its own capabilities and turned into a defence organisation (Král et al., 2008: 70f).

Despite occasional disagreements about particular (albeit important) issues, such as the position of the Czech Republic on the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia or the level of the Czech Republic's participation in the Iraq War in 2003, the Czech prioritisation of the accessions to NATO and the EU was based on a broad consensus between the mainstream political parties. The consensus, however, lacked a proper substance. As soon as the Czech Republic accomplished the declared foreign policy objectives in 1999 and 2004 respectively and was surrounded by military and political allies for the first time in its history (including its history as a part of Czechoslovakia), the political elite started losing interest in foreign policy, as the major problems with foreign policy seemed to be over to some extent. Currently, only very few people in Czech political parties deal with foreign and security policy. The political debate focuses on domestic issues, and foreign policy is sometimes even used as a chip in the domestic political fight. The most visible evidence of the lacking interest has been the process of updating key foreign policy documents: Both the latest security strategy and a foreign policy concept before EU accession were adopted in 2003, with the concept being planned only for the years 2003-2006 (Government of the Czech Republic, 2003a, 2003b). It was only in 2010 that the foreign ministry started working on a new foreign policy concept and a new security strategy (both were adopted in 2011). Consequently, the Czech foreign policy was largely conducted by foreign ministry officials, and politicians become interested in a foreign policy topic only if the topic becomes politicised and has a potential impact on domestic policy (cf. Weiss and Řiháčková, 2010).

Changing priorities after the EU/NATO accessions

Due to the lack of conceptual documents, the priorities of the Czech foreign policy after the EU accession were formulated in less specific terms in various related documents – in particular in governmental programmes (cf. Government of the Czech Republic, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2009; 2010a). In general, all the post-accession Czech governments have pledged that the Czech Republic would be an active member of the European Union and NATO. The programmes put a strong emphasis on conducting foreign and security policy through these organisations together with the partners. The priorities remained rather general on most

issues, as the programmes mainly mentioned the ‘usual suspects’, such as providing security, stability and prosperity, in this respect without specifying the concrete steps to be taken. There are two exceptions to this that are clearly underpinned by the values framing the Czech foreign policy – the promotion of democracy and human rights and the support to the enlargement of the EU. In 2007 the government even combined the two and stated that human rights and democracy will be supported in ‘Europe and especially in its closest neighbourhood’ (Government of the Czech Republic, 2007).

Whereas the support for human rights and democracy carried on from the 1990s, the support to the enlargement appeared in the Czech foreign policy, rather logically, only after the country joined the EU. It soon developed into one of the key Czech issues in EU foreign policy and even became a chip in the domestic/internal EU debate. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty was advocated by the Czech government for the sake of enlargement to a large extent. The then Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek defended the Treaty in the Czech Senate, saying, ‘The failure of the Lisbon Treaty would mean the ultimate end to our key priority, which is the further enlargement of the Union’ (Topolánek, 2009b).

Eastern Europe as a Czech foreign policy priority before and after the Presidency

Eastern Europe was largely missing from the radar of the Czech foreign policy until the mid-2000s. Being separated from the region by other Central European countries, namely Slovakia and Poland, the Czech Republic focused on the relations with the neighbours, the accession process and the Balkans, which was considered the main territorial priority (cf. Kratochvíl and Tulmets, 2007). This ignorance is nicely illustrated by the fact that in an overarching review of the Czech foreign policy until 2004 the researchers from the Prague-based Institute of International Relations focused on Czech-Russian relations to an overwhelming extent in their chapter on Eastern Europe. In the same chapter, Ukraine and Belarus were mentioned in passing only, and the remaining post-Soviet countries did not appear in the text at all (cf. Votápek, 2004).

It can be argued, therefore, that Eastern Europe became a preferred area of Czech foreign policy only in the run-up to the Czech EU Council Presidency (Tulmets, 2008). The Eastern neighbourhood became one of the Presidency priorities – the concrete form of engagement became clearer after the publication of the Polish-Swedish initiative for an ‘Eastern Partnership’, which the Presidency endorsed. With the establishment of the Eastern Partnership, the Czech Presidency aimed at three specific objectives. First, the framework was to provide good working relations with countries which could not be realistically expected to join the EU any time soon. Second, it was to facilitate the cooperation with those countries on energy security, which had been very high on the agenda of both the EU and the Presidency due to the experience with the Russian-Ukrainian disputes. And third, the Presidency aimed at re-balancing the European Neighbourhood Policy, which had swung towards the South with the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008 (Placák, 2010).

The focus on Eastern Europe combined well with the other major area of Czech interest – the democracy and human rights promotion. During the Presidency preparations the government clearly stated that the Czech support to democratisation and transition in post-Soviet republics builds on the country’s ‘own historical experience with a non-democratic regime and the process of political and economic transformation’ (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, 2007: 15). As a result, the final Presidency programme, which identified the role of the EU in the world as one of three key priorities, followed the line of the general Czech foreign policy

with an emphasis on the closest neighbourhood, relations with Russia and the US, and the promotion of human rights, democracy and development (Czech Republic, 2009).

After the Presidency, Czech foreign policy has remained focused on Eastern Europe. Countries of the Eastern Partnership are listed as priority countries of both the Czech development policy (Moldova and Georgia) and the transition promotion policy (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). The focus on this region is comparable only with the attention paid to the Balkans, where both policies target a number of countries as well (Government of the Czech Republic, 2010b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). The Arab Spring has naturally deserved the Czech Republic's attention. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has extended transformation support to the Southern neighbourhood, especially to Egypt. This *ad hoc* reaction, however, has not been translated into a mid- and/or long-term re-orientation from the East to the South (at least for the time being).

To sum up, the Czech foreign policy after the stabilisation of the Central European region during the 1990s and the accession of the country into NATO and the European Union formulated its foreign policy priorities largely in accord with its identity. Two main issues have crystallised as pivots of the Czech foreign policy identity – EU and NATO enlargement and promotion of democracy and human rights. Both build on the specific Czech historical experience in the 20th century. Especially in the European Union the Czech Republic has been very active in both democracy promotion and defence of human rights as well as in the regions that have the perspective of EU membership, the Balkans in particular. Eastern Europe has gained importance in the Czech view only during the 2000s, in particular in the run-up to the Czech Council Presidency. Since then, however, it has remained one of the focal areas of Czech foreign policy documents.

II. Implementation of the Czech foreign policy in the Eastern neighbourhood

Expressions of political solidarity

The practical implementation of the Czech policy vis-à-vis the Eastern partners reflects the position of the agenda in Czech foreign policy in general. Until early 2000s, the Czech Republic was not particularly interested in the fate of these countries. It neither showed much effort in the mutual relations nor expressed much solidarity with them. A shift came in the second half of 2000s and can be shown on various particular cases, such as the introduction of the visa obligation or the Czech behaviour during the Orange Revolution, the 2008 war in Georgia or contacts with the Belarusian opposition.

The Czech Republic's approach to introducing visa requirements for Eastern countries is a point in case of the Czech neglect of this dimension of foreign relations during its accession negotiations. The introduction of a visa regime for nationals travelling from post-Soviet Eastern European countries was one of the accession obligations for all Central European countries. The Schengen membership requires a common visa regime, and as all candidate states were expected to abolish internal border control in the future, they had to introduce a part of the Schengen *acquis* already prior to their accession. Unlike Poland or Hungary, the Czech Republic did not pay much attention to the worries of the Eastern partners and the complications this step might cause for the mutual relations and trade exchange. It introduced the visas very early, already in 2000, and it did not show any effort to limit the burden that the visa obligation imposed on the affected populations. In contrast, Poland and Hungary introduced the visas as late as possible - in 2003 - and accompanied the step with mitigation

measures such as increasing the number of consulates and not charging a fee (Kaźmierkiewicz, 2005).

The Czech reaction to the Ukrainian Orange Revolution was also rather limited. The Czech Foreign Minister, Cyril Svoboda, expressed his dissatisfaction with the second round of the Ukrainian presidential elections and declared his belief that the development in Ukraine would have an impact on the EU-Ukrainian relations (Svoboda, 2004). Otherwise, the Czech Republic kept a low profile, which was later recognised and criticised even within the foreign ministry itself (Vondra, 2006). This also can be put into contrast with the active behaviour of the Polish or Hungarian representatives, leading to declarations about a two-speed Visegrad approach to the East (Zielys, 2009). Finally, the Czech Republic abolished the visa fees for Ukrainian citizens, but it did so only after Ukraine had abolished its visa obligation for the whole EU in 2007.

Czech-Ukrainian relations have been marked by a complex set of factors. On one hand, Ukraine was largely ignored by the Czech foreign policy for a long time and remained in the shadow of Czech-Russian and Czech-Western relations. On the other hand, Ukrainians soon became an important immigration community in the Czech Republic. Lately, they have even become the largest foreign population in the Czech Republic with over 130.000 residents in 2009 (i.e. about 30 per cent of the foreign population) (Czech Statistical Office, 2010). The number of illegal migrants from Ukraine is probably even higher, and Ukrainians have become a common work force in some segments of Czech industry, especially in construction. As a result, the Czech approach to Ukraine always oscillated between the rather cautious position of the Ministry of Interior (and of the population) and the approach of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which initially ignored Ukraine but later came to support it (cf. Král, 2007; see Tulmets, 2010 for the more recent evolution of this issue).

In 2008, the Czech reaction to the war in Georgia was much stronger. The foreign ministry declared its 'deep concerns about the aggravation of the situation and the outbreak of armed clashes in Georgian South Ossetia' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2008). Prime Minister Topolánek declared in a similar vein that the Czech Republic supported the territorial integrity of Georgia (Lidové noviny, 2008). The Czech government also sent humanitarian aid (mainly medical material) soon after the outbreak of violence and opened a special call for reconstruction projects. The extraordinary reconstruction and development aid to the value of 20 million Czech crowns in 2008 and 70 million in 2009 was already approved by the government in the second half of August 2008 (Government of the Czech Republic, 2008). Apparently, the Czech diplomacy also examined the potential for a peacekeeping engagement of NATO or the EU in Georgia during the conflict (Týden, 2011).

The concrete and quick expression of solidarity by the Czech government during the Georgian war was significantly more solid than, for example, its expression of solidarity in the case of the Orange Revolution. And this holds despite the fact that none of the Czech politicians travelled to the country or declared any intention to do that. The condemnation of Russia was also supported by most of the Czech media, which did not hesitate to compare the 2008 war to the 1968 invasion in Czechoslovakia, emphasizing the disproportion between the two parties and the abuse of power by Russia as a regional hegemon (cf. Šimůnek, 2008). However, the Czech foreign policy was not able to maintain a unified voice on Georgia (as has been the case with many issues in recent years). President Václav Klaus criticised Georgia for unleashing the conflict soon after the atrocities started in August 2008 (Klaus, 2008). This unilateral step by the President was criticised strongly by the Prime Minister on the grounds

that the position of the Czech Republic was now blurred when viewed from the outside, and it was stressed that the foreign minister was responsible for the foreign policy of the country (Hospodářské noviny, 2008).

Belarus has been an object of Czech attention much longer than the other East European countries. The Czech declarations of solidarity with the Belarusian opposition or the imprisoned journalists in Belarus were initially limited to the non-governmental sector (Hospodářské noviny, 2002). The minority Social Democratic government, although supporting human rights nominally, focused more on economic issues and attempted (rather unsuccessfully) to re-conquer the lost markets in the East. Since 2002, however, the critique of President Lukashenka and his regime became a standard feature of the Czech foreign policy, with the first crisis occurring in September 2002 when Mr. Lukashenka was not granted a visa to attend the NATO summit in Prague. The decision was justified by the argument that Belarus did 'not protect and respect basic human rights and freedoms' and that the Czech Republic did not want the Belarusian President to 'legitimise his position in Belarus' (Lidové noviny, 2002).

Ever since then, the Czech Republic has actively supported the Belarusian opposition through both declarations of solidarity and direct action. The line between the governmental and the non-governmental sector blurred in the case of Belarus: Civic Belarus, an NGO focusing on democratic transition in Belarus, was founded, among others, by former President Václav Havel and the director of the biggest Czech (and Central European) NGO People in Need, Tomáš Pojar. Pojar later became the First Deputy Foreign Minister and provided for even more coherence between the official and the NGO position in regard to Belarus. This can be illustrated by the activities of Czech diplomats during and after the 2006 elections in Belarus. The Czech Republic financed a translation of a UN report on human rights violations in Belarus into Belarusian and the Czech diplomats distributed the brochure in Belarus, which caused a diplomatic fallout (Mladá Fronta Dnes, 2006). After the elections, which were thought to be rigged, the Czech foreign ministry sharply increased the funds available for transition promotion in Belarus (Bartovic, 2008: 40f). Furthermore, Belarusian opposition leaders are regular participants at the yearly Forum 2000 conference founded by President Václav Havel (Forum 2000, 2011).

The Czech Senate has paid a lot of attention to the situation in Belarus. During the fifth and sixth term (2004-2008) it maintained a 'Temporary Commission of the Senate for identifying persons detained, imprisoned or persecuted in other ways by the Belarusian regime for political reasons' and in the following term it maintained a 'Permanent Commission of the Senate for Democracy Promotion in the World'. The latter discussed the situation in Belarus several times and called on the Czech government, for example, not to invite President Lukashenka for the 2009 Prague Eastern Partnership Summit unless concrete steps were taken in respect to human rights protection in Belarus (Senát ČR, 2009).

These expressions of solidarity continued after the EU Council Presidency in a similar vein. Especially in case of Belarus, the continuity is evident at all levels. The Parliament went on in condemning the regime's crackdowns on demonstrations, e.g. the Czech Senate's declaration of 2011, which also called for the release of all detained persons (Senát ČR, 2011). The Czech executive's support to the Belarusian opposition has gone beyond declarations, as was made evident when the opposition presidential candidate of 2010, Aleš Michalevič, was granted asylum in the Czech Republic in March 2011 (Právo, 2011).

The relationship with Ukraine has also continued to occupy Czech politicians and officials. The government change in Ukraine increased the previous ambiguity of the Czech approach to the country. The Czech Republic granted asylum to people connected with imprisoned former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko, such as the former minister of economy Bohdan Danylyshyn and even Ms. Tymoshenko's husband (cf. Aktuálně.cz, 2011), which was not received well by the Ukrainian government. At the same time, Czech diplomats were quick to interpret the diplomatic controversy between Ukraine and the Czech Republic over an alleged case of espionage as a result of internal turf wars and/or Russian pressure and to decline any doubts about the Czech support to a European option for Ukraine (cf. ČTK, 2011).

Probably the strongest diplomatic expression of interest and solidarity concerned South Caucasus, though. Despite austerity measures in Czech public budgets and optimisation of the Czech diplomatic network, Czech presence in South Caucasus (formerly represented only in Tbilisi in the region) has been on the rise. In September 2009, the Czech embassy in Baku was established. An incipient embassy in Yerevan, established in May 2012, fulfils only basic functions at the moment, but should develop into a full-fledged office in near future.

Besides its bilateral declarations and contacts, the Czech Republic has actively engaged the Eastern neighbourhood in multilateral formats, notably in the Visegrad Group with Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. The V4 address the developments in Eastern Europe on a regular basis. They have consistently supported the EU membership aspirations of Ukraine and Moldova. Furthermore, the Czech foreign priorities, especially the emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion, have been reflected in a consistent manner in the Czech V4 presidency programmes of 2007 and also of 2011 (Czech Republic, 2007; 2011).

Official assistance policy

The Czech Republic has been shaping and re-adjusting its foreign assistance policy for a long time, mostly on the basis of internal reviews and external recommendations from international institutions such as the OECD. The last reform took place between 2008 and 2010 (Sládková, 2011). At the moment, most of the foreign assistance is concentrated under the administration of the foreign ministry. There are two main channels of the Czech foreign assistance – development assistance and transition promotion. The former represents the standard development assistance and humanitarian aid that all EU states provide to developing countries. The latter is a tool of the Czech programmes and activities related to human rights, democracy promotion and finances that should support human rights and democracy in third countries in transition.

The Czech official development assistance (ODA) was impaired by a lack of focus. There were twenty priority countries identified in the development assistance concept of 2002 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002: 7). This high number was reduced by the later reforms – to eight in 2006 and further down to five in 2011 (Sládková, 2011: 6). The countries in the Eastern Neighbourhood have always been present among the Czech priorities, although none of them are, strictly speaking, developing countries. In 2002 it was Ukraine that was prioritised by the Czech development assistance, and in 2006 Moldova became a target country. There was a trend in Czech development assistance to reinforce activity in wider EU neighbourhood at the expense of geographically more distant countries. Thus, Eastern Europe was gaining weight during the 2000s, whereas really poor countries, such as Angola, Yemen

or Zambia made their way to the lower priority countries gradually.⁵ In 2009, the volume of assistance to Eastern Europe even surpassed the volume of aid for the Balkan countries. Also, the aid aimed at the countries of the Eastern Partnership sharply increased in 2009, which is even more remarkable when we consider that the total bilateral aid shrank due to the economic crisis (cf. OECD, 2011).

This trend did not change after the Czech EU Council Presidency. In the newest Development Cooperation Strategy for years 2011-2017, Moldova has remained one of top priorities and Georgia has been identified as a 'project country', which means a second order priority country after the priority countries proper (Government of the Czech Republic, 2010b). The volumes of aid to Eastern Europe did not diminish in 2010 and 2011, placing Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine among top recipients of Czech assistance (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011; 2012). Moreover, practice does not always fully reflect the priorities identified in documents. Ukraine, which does not figure in any official list of priority countries, was one of the top ten recipients of the Czech official development assistance every single year between 2000 and 2011 (Adamcová, 2006; Rozvojové středisko, 2007; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2009; 2011; 2012).

The transition promotion policy of the Czech Republic was officially established in 2005. It had been preceded by assistance programmes for Iraq in 2003-4 that proved useful and consequently, the government decided to found a permanent tool for transition and democracy promotion on the basis of NGO lobbying (cf. Bartovic, 2008: 34). The policy has been predominantly focused on the priority areas of the Czech foreign policy – the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe – but several other countries were also added to the policy (Iraq, Cuba, and Burma/Myanmar). The end of Presidency has not marked any visible shift in the policy focus. Four East European states were highlighted as target countries for the Czech democratic promotion in 2010 concept – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2010). Their share of the dedicated resources has been rising in the last years with a clear predominance of Belarus, which attracts about 20 per cent of the programme's budget. It should be mentioned in this respect that the government has kept or even increased the budget despite the crisis and austerity measures in all sectors, including the Foreign Ministry.⁶

Non-governmental activity

The Czech non-governmental sector is very active in development assistance and transition promotion alike. There are several platforms for NGOs that coordinate and provide support for their activities. They also simplify the contacts between the NGOs and the government. Two major Czech NGO platforms should be mentioned in this respect: the Czech Forum for Development Cooperation (FORS) focuses on development assistance whereas the Association for Democracy Assistance and Human Rights (DEMAS) mainly deals with transition promotion. The two platforms' members are numerous (37 in the case of FORS and 11 in the case of DEMAS with partly overlapping membership) and engage actively in various parts of the world.⁷ As these NGOs, especially in the case of democracy promotion,

⁵ It should be noted, however, that Afghanistan remains the top recipient of Czech ODA. Most resources are channelled through the Czech Provincial Reconstruction Team in Logar province.

⁶ In 2011, CZK 50 million were available for transition promotion projects compared to the CZK 45 million for the preceding years (Interview with an MFA official).

⁷ For an overview of their activities see the websites of the two organisations - <http://www.fors.cz> and <http://www.demas.cz> - and the websites of their respective members.

channel a large part of the Czech official budget, their activities follow to some extent the priorities of the Czech foreign policy. The biggest NGO among them, People in Need, runs special programmes for Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova within its human rights section and also conducts development projects in a number of East European countries, e.g. Ukraine, Georgia or Armenia. However, other organisations also deal greatly with Eastern Europe, providing training for journalists, local administration, or local NGOs (for example, the Europeum Institute for European Policy or the Association for International Affairs). Prague is also the seat of the Policy Association for an Open Society (PASOS), which is a network of NGOs from Central and Eastern Europe providing a platform for joint projects of Central and East European organisations.

The Presidency cannot be traced easily in the activities of the Czech NGOs in Eastern Europe. In any case, had there been any programmes newly established in mid-2000s established because of the Czech government's renewed interest in the region, the focus remained after the Presidency and none of the programmes was closed down. Moreover, Czech NGOs have been active in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, which has operated along the governments-led Eastern Partnership, appointing representatives to the forum's steering committee.⁸

Other Czech civil society institutions have occasionally taken an active part in expressing solidarity with Eastern European countries as well, even if on an ad hoc basis. An example might be the initiative of the Charles University in Prague which established a special programme for students persecuted after the 2006 Belarus presidential elections. These students could continue their studies in Prague, and the university recognised their previous study records and provided them with special scholarships (cf. iForum, 2006).

Conclusions

The Czech Republic's foreign policy identity is based on two basic notions: the support to human rights and democracy and the support to further enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions. The former has been present in the Czech discourse since the beginning of the 1990s. With the accession to the European Union, the emphasis on human rights and democratisation did not change, but just included the EU as another platform for its pursuance. The latter, however, appeared quite logically with the Czech membership in the respective organisations only. Initially, it focused on the rest of Central Europe and the Balkans, but it soon incorporated the countries of the Eastern neighbourhood as well. Since the mid-2000s the Czech Republic has paid ever more attention to the post-Soviet countries in Eastern Europe.

Whereas the human rights and democracy promotion can be considered a policy largely based on values and the Czech Republic's narrative of its recent historical experience, the focus on enlargement and the Eastern Partnership is underpinned by a greater mixture of values and interests. On one hand, the enlargement and assistance to the neighbouring countries is understood as a good thing *per se*. The European Union's main purpose should be the unification and stabilisation of the continent, which quite naturally implies that the Balkans and Eastern Europe should be included. On the other hand, the enlargement and especially the Eastern Partnership have been justified in the Czech Republic by various rational arguments and ideas about the potential profits for the country as well. These justifications include the

⁸ Details on the European Partnership Civil Society Forum can be acquired on the website of the platform: <http://www.eap-csf.eu/en/home/>.

potential benefits that the Czech Republic would receive from a stable neighbourhood and, in recent years, a particular focus on energy cooperation and boosting the energy security of the EU. As a result, the identification of the Eastern Partnership as one of the priorities of the Czech EU Council Presidency clearly falls in line with the previous development of Czech foreign policy priorities. It is also well embedded in the values and identity underpinning Czech foreign policy in general.

The practice of foreign policy and the expressions of solidarity have largely corresponded with the declared foreign policy identity of the Czech Republic as well. Both the political and the bureaucratic/financial solidarity were on the rise in regard to the countries of the Eastern Partnership in the run-up to the Presidency. There was also strong activity on the part of the non-governmental sector. Furthermore, there was a visible shift of the Czech attention to areas in the neighbourhood at the expense of distant countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa. This trend did not change after the Presidency. East European countries still belong to the top recipients of Czech ideational and material solidarity. Moreover, the Czech Republic strengthens the diplomatic presence in the region and continues using both bilateral and multilateral channels to promote its agenda. The Czech commitment to democratization and stabilisation of the region can be demonstrated on the support of anti-authoritative movements in Belarus or Ukraine on one hand and the simultaneous effort to keep Ukraine under current government on European track on the other.

To sum up, the focus on Eastern Partnership fits well with the longer-term Czech foreign policy identity. Also the practical policy is to a large extent guided by the values underpinning the Czech foreign policy. The EU Presidency and the decision to turn Eastern Europe into a key priority of the whole six months can thus be understood as a logical and deliberate move, which has helped establishing the Czech Republic as an active player in the region, and possibly also adapting its foreign policy image/identity. The focus on Eastern Europe was not a “l’art pour l’art” move that would satisfy the demands on the Presidency, but an authentic step in the whole process of re-focusing Czech foreign policy towards the region. The Czech Republic did not decrease its solidarity with the region; rather it has maintained the material level of assistance and strengthened the institutional links.

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