
Chapter 3

The Federal Republic of Germany in the Czech Foreign Policy

POLICY WAITING FOR A NEW GOVERNMENT ON BOTH SIDES OF THE BORDER

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Executive Summary: In 2017 the Czech-German relations were marked by the anniversaries of the Czech-German Declaration (1997) and the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation (1992). Their dynamics in that year were under the considerable influence of the parliamentary elections in both the Czech Republic and Germany. This led to a decline in the development of their bilateral relations at the top political level, both before the elections due to their focusses on their respective domestic political agendas, and after the elections, owing to the demanding post-election negotiations. Nevertheless, their sectoral, practically-oriented co-operation continued intensively at a lower level. It was substantial especially in the areas of defence policy, science and research, and transport infrastructure. In the field of economic co-operation there was the ongoing, exceptionally favourable trend of the growing Czech-German foreign trade. However, the dependency of the Czech economy on the German economy had increased, and the income gap between their respective citizens had not become narrower. In the context of European policy, there was an undesirable rift between the Czech and German standpoints in regard to a number of points on the Union agenda. As regards the issues of the past, there was a continuing trend of normalising the mutual relations and a subsiding of the politicisation of these issues.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The Czech-German relations entered the year 2017 with a truly symbolic event – 21 January marked the twentieth anniversary of the Czech-German Declaration on Mutual Relations and Their Future Development, the 1997 signature of which is rightly

considered to be one of the turning points of the Czech-German relations. The declaration made it possible to “orient [the two countries’] relations towards the future” (Josef Zieleniec) while allowing them to respect their different views of the past.¹ Besides the anniversary of the Czech-German Declaration, 2017 was marked by the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic on Good Neighbourship and Friendly Co-operation on 27 February 1992. The joint statement published to mark the treaty’s anniversary was employed by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek, Miroslav Lajčák and Sigmar Gabriel to emphasise the European framework of co-operation: “*The common goal still remains to boost a Europe in which human rights and basic freedoms are respected and so are the principles of democracy and the rule of law, and in which borders cease to maintain their dividing character thanks to mutual understanding.*”²

Nevertheless, in 2017, the political context of the Czech-German relations was defined above all by the domestic agendas related to their parliamentary elections on both the Czech (20 to 21 October 2017) and the German side (24 September 2017). Even though there were reassuring claims before the elections that the dynamics of the Czech-German relations would not be affected by the elections, it turned out that they represented a crucial turning point regarding both the post-election development and the demanding post-election negotiations in both countries. The situation was burdened especially by the fact that the Czech government led by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, who was, moreover, under investigation for being suspected of a subsidy fraud in connection to his *Čapí hnízdo* (lit. “Stork Nest”) farm, resigned, which increased the insecurity regarding the further direction of the Czech policy. Even though the Czech-German co-operation went on intensively at a lower level of the mutual relations, at the top level there was a substantial decrease of the number of the two countries’ official encounters, both at the level of government and at the level of political parties. Particularly in the second half of 2017 we witnessed restrictions in their bilateral activities and an overall deceleration of their bilateral relations.

In the pre-election campaigns on both sides of the border there were distinct traces of mutual disagreements in the context of the migration crisis, which are very likely to leave long-term scars on the political and social level of the Czech-German relations.³ The pre-election statements of the political actors across the Czech political spectrum re-confirmed that the issue of migration can be reliably politicised. The topic of refusing the Union quotas on the relocation of asylum seekers was present in the pre-election programmes of ODS, KSČM, ČSSD and SPD. Furthermore, the issue of migration was put into context with the threat of terrorism by KDU-ČSL, TOP 09 and ANO. There was a majority agreement among the political parties that when resolving the migration crisis, help must be directed at the countries from which the refugees come. A more conciliatory tone was evident in the Pirate Party, which appealed to a rational approach towards migrants and European solidarity with the overloaded states. A similar stance was taken by the Greens, according to whom the Czech Republic was to increase its share of responsibility in handling the migration crisis.⁴ The

aforementioned shows that, contrary to the high degree of politicisation, the issues of migration (and especially the quotas promoted by Chancellor Angela Merkel) had only a minimal degree of polarisation within the Czech political (and, after all, also social) debate.

A majority of political commentators agreed that the results of the German parliamentary elections neither took Czechs by surprise nor aroused more intense emotions among them. This was due to the fact that they did not mean a major change for the Czech Republic and, despite the Czech criticism of Chancellor Merkel for her way of solving the migration crisis or the sudden turn in the energy policy, it was clear that her victory is in the Czech interest. Had her main challenger, the Social Democrat Martin Schulz won, the Czechs would have had to face an even more accommodating procedure for asylum seekers, a more assertive approach towards states refusing to relocate refugees, and/or the promotion of a tighter co-operation within the euro-zone.⁵ That is also why the majority of top Czech politicians appreciated Merkel's victory. However, more critical voices came from the conservative and Eurosceptical part of the political spectrum (the leader of ODS called attention to the losses of CDU/CSU and SPD in consequence of the Chancellor's migration policy) and also from the leader of KSČM Vojtěch Filip, who highlighted the "*great disillusionment*" of the German society.⁶ While the majority of the Czech political scene condemned the rise of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD), the former president Václav Klaus, who took an active part in the pre-election campaign meetings of AfD, consequently appreciated its "*amazing result*" in the elections⁷ and thus confirmed his position on the Czech political scene as the primary critic of Chancellor Merkel.

The key bearer of the predominantly depoliticised, sectoral co-operation between the Czech Republic and Germany remained the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue, even though it was also affected by the elections in the sense of facing a temporary absence of political leadership and content- and personnel-related uncertainties and changes. Nevertheless, the general positions stayed the same. The working level of the Strategic Dialogue was characteristic of the continuity in the mutual communication and the two countries' solving of practical issues; only occasionally was it necessary to provide space for post-election consolidation. There was a mutual agreement on both sides of the border that the Strategic Dialogue would continue also in the following years.⁸ Moreover, there was a clear effort to move this format of co-operation forward – one of the developed directions aimed at connecting the Strategic Dialogue with the Czech-German Future Fund (CGFF) and the Czech-German Discussion Forum (CGDF), which the bearers of the Strategic Dialogue expected to relate more to both experts and the general public.⁹ Yet at the same time there were voices (rightfully) calling for the politicisation of the Strategic Dialogue and, consequently, the Czech-German relations as such. While the official level of the mutual relations undoubtedly functioned very well, the Strategic Dialogue still showed some deficits as regards implementing the agenda of a strategic character and boosting the European dimension of the Czech-German co-operation.¹⁰

AGENDA AND EVENTS

Official Contacts

During 2017 Czech and German political representatives held talks at all levels of governance, including the presidential one, which was not on the previous year's agenda of contacts. The official visit of the Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier – his first in the Czech Republic after he had taken office – took place on 12 September in Prague. During the visit, while President Miloš Zeman concentrated in his speech above all on practical issues of Czech-German relations, such as the high-speed rail links between Prague and Berlin and Prague and Munich, or the countries' co-operation in industry, President Steinmeier emphasised, in accordance with the long-term German approach, the European aspect of the mutual relations and the need to co-operate within the European Union (EU). During the meeting of the Czech and German president, two conflicting views were displayed: firstly, regarding the issue of quotas for the relocation of asylum seekers, as the German president highlighted the need to respect the decision of the European Court of Justice. And secondly, as regards the issue of the sanctions against Russia, President Zeman called for their abandonment on a long-term basis, while President Steinmeier refused to lift them without achieving progress in the Minsk process.¹¹

At the level of the heads of government, a meeting was held in Berlin on 3 April to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Treaty on Good Neighbourship and Friendly Co-operation between the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany. Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka, Chancellor Merkel and the Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico held joint talks on their countries' mutual political and economic relations and other issues stirring the 2017 foreign-political agenda: the future of the EU, Brexit, migration and security and defence issues. During his visit to Germany, Prime Minister Sobotka also met with President Steinmeier and the leader of the SPD Martin Schulz, and took part in a discussion with students on the future of Europe.¹²

The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Lubomír Zaorálek met with his German counterpart, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Frank-Walter Steinmeier, in Berlin on 25 January 2017 to mark the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Czech-German Declaration and hence he was the last foreign partner to be accepted by the outgoing head of German diplomacy in Berlin.¹³ On 23 and 24 June Minister Zaorálek hosted Sigmar Gabriel, who replaced Steinmeier as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, in Prague. During this working visit, which took place thanks to their personal affiliation, among other reasons, and was carried out in a friendly and informal atmosphere, the leader of German diplomacy was accepted also by Prime Minister Sobotka. Both ministers of foreign affairs also visited Beroun, the partner town of Gabriel's hometown Goslar, where they jointly launched the international skateboard competition Grand Prix Beroun 2017.¹⁴ Thus, Zaorálek fulfilled Gabriel's personal wish and confirmed his overall goodwill toward his German partners.

Of course, encounters between Czech and German political representatives during 2017 took place at the regional level as well. On 7 and 8 February, the Czech Re-

public was visited by the Saxon Prime Minister Stanislaw Tillich, with whom Prime Minister Sobotka negotiated particularly about the construction of the Prague-Dresden high-speed rail line, but also economic co-operation and co-operation in science and research. This meeting, which was already their sixth meeting in the more than three-year functioning of the then Czech government, underlined the intensity of the contacts of the two political representatives.¹⁵ The Bavarian Prime Minister Horst Seehofer came to visit the Czech Republic accompanied by the entire Bavarian government on 2 and 4 May. Nonetheless, his visit was affected by the ongoing political crisis in the Czech Republic following Prime Minister Sobotka's announced intention to resign. However, it is highly remarkable that the visit of the Bavarian delegation took place according to the plan and to its full extent despite the rapid development on the Czech political scene, which can be interpreted as a proof of the importance of the Czech-Bavarian relations.¹⁶

European Policy

As regards the issues of European policy, during 2017 we could observe Germany and the Czech Republic having both similar viewpoints (e.g. regarding the development of a common European market) and relatively profound differences of opinions. The primary starting point was still the approach towards the European Union as such: while Germany is a state that assumes a crucial role in the EU and is prepared (with the support of the majority of the German public) to further boost its European policy, the Czech Republic is characterised by a high degree of Euroscepticism. In accordance with that, the German European policy strove to boost the EU's coherence and its further development, while on the contrary, the Czech European policy showed tendencies towards isolationism. There were a number of stimuli coming from the outside calling for a re-start of the European co-operation, to which it was (and will be) necessary to respond – be it by further deepening of European integration around the enhanced core, as is argued by the French President Emmanuel Macron, or in the form of “*euro for all*”, as is proposed by the president of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker.¹⁷ A breakthrough in the German post-election negotiations returned Macron's proposals presented in September 2017 to the centre of the debates on the future form of the EU. The position of the Czech Republic, however, was further based on rejecting the euro and the establishment of institutions that would function only for the eurozone. Even though no such institution has been founded so far, this could change with the acceptance of one of Macron's proposals.¹⁸

As for the issues of migration that have predominated in the European agenda since 2015, there was a partial weakening of the conflict potential of this issue, even though it was still pervaded by German frustrations and a deteriorated view of Central Europe owing to the negative and non-constructive approach of the Visegrád Four (V4) countries towards solving the migration crisis. Although in this respect, the Czech Republic was perceived by the German side as the *better* partner in comparison to Poland or Hungary, the Czech side insisted on maintaining its negative attitude towards the refugee relocation quotas and hence this issue continued to act as a certain irritant in the Czech-German relations.¹⁹ At the same time, the issues of migration

were further subject to a relatively intensive politicisation, especially in the pre-election campaigns of a number of political actors, including the winner of the parliamentary elections, Andrej Babiš. On the other hand, the Czech side tried to emphasise the existence of a series of common issues for both countries in the context of the migration crisis, such as their emphasis on the necessity to solve the causes of migration in the countries of origin. This direction was taken by the co-operation of the Czech and German sides in the Migration Platform within the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue, as they supported a joint project to improve the life situation of refugees in Jordan.²⁰

Unlike in the debates over the EU's future and the issues of migration, the Czech side took a relatively active part in the field of EU security and defence policy, where the so-called Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was launched and a Czech-German co-operation was established within it (for more on this, see the following subchapter). It is a sector of the European policy in which Germany – in connection to the shifts in its foreign and security policy, but also the so-called Brexit – has assumed the leading role in recent years, but in this, it cannot do without the support of smaller countries. The Czech Republic is aware of this fact and approaches the co-operation with Germany proactively and in line with government and Union priorities.

Last but not least, the Czech and German sides were connected within the EU also by the talks on the conditions of the British withdrawal from the Union. The issue of Brexit appeared on the agenda of the April working meeting of Prime Minister Sobotka and Chancellor Merkel in Berlin.²¹ To communicate the Brexit issues between the Czech and German sides, they employed the Working Group on Foreign and European Policy within the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue.²²

Defence Co-operation

In the realm of defence policy, there was an intensifying trend of boosting the co-operation between the Army of the Czech Republic and the Bundeswehr. The updated Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic, which was approved by the government in March 2017, underlined the defence co-operation with Germany as one of the two pillars of the regional defence co-operation (with the Visegrad Group being the other one) and simultaneously, referring to the mutual economic ties and the importance of Germany within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, identified Germany as the “*natural partner*” of the Czech Republic.²³ Nevertheless, it was the first time that such a conception of Germany was encoded in a governmental strategic document in the area of security and defence policy. Taking into account the historical context, the choice of such a reference to Germany proves there has been a major shift in the perception of the mutual relations and an active approach of the Czech side.²⁴

The culmination of the up-until-then Czech-German defence co-operation was the signing of the so-called Letter of Intent for the affiliation of the 4th Brigade of Rapid Deployment of the Czech Republic with the 10th Armoured Division of the Bundeswehr by the Czech Minister of Defence Martin Stropnický and the German Minister of Defence Ursula von der Leyen in February 2017.²⁵ It is a bilateral agreement contributing to the fulfilment of the so-called Framework Nations Concept

within the Alliance, which aims to build synchronised troops for common defence operations.²⁶ Even though the affiliation lies above all in common training and exchange of experience, it aroused major emotions in the political opposition, a part of the media and the general public. The real content of the agreement was questioned, as were its intent and the legitimacy of the decision on the affiliation. The politicisation of the issue was evident from, among other things, the interpellations to Minister Stropnický during the 57th meeting of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Republic, in which the leader of KSČM Vojtěch Filip interpreted the intent of the affiliation as a recognition of a “*certain form of subordination*” to Germany, “*a loss of control over a part of our defence power*” and “*yielding to the will of the German government*”.²⁷ Filip placed the agreement about the affiliation into the context of the policy and actions of Chancellor Merkel, who, in his opinion, by inviting refugees to Europe in summer 2015, “*absolutely irrationally posed a security threat for Europe and Europeans, which has been the gravest threat since the times when another German Chancellor posed a security threat for Europe and the Europeans*”.²⁸ The emotions evoked around this issue prove that the view of the *naturalness* of the partnership between the Czech Republic and Germany in the area of defence policy, even though fitting into the context of boosting the co-operation within transatlantic security structures, is not shared across the entire Czech political spectrum and produces the need for better strategic communication from the Ministry of Defence.

Other key topics of 2017 in the realm of the Czech-German defence co-operation included the launching of PESCO towards the end of the year, within which the Czech Republic subsequently participated in two out of the three projects led by Germany (the European Medical Command and the EU Training Mission Competence Centre).²⁹ There was also the ongoing Czech-German co-operation in the area of military out-of-area operations, especially those in Afghanistan, Kosovo and Mali. In the context of NATO high readiness forces, the deployment of nearly three hundred Czech soldiers was approved under the auspices of the so-called Enhanced Forward Presence of NATO in Poland and the Baltics, 250 of which will be affiliated with the battle group led by Germany on the territory of Lithuania.³⁰

Economic Co-operation

Economic co-operation has been a long-time major pillar of Czech-German relations. In 2017 the exceptionally favourable trend in the co-operation of recent years continued, confirming the dynamics of the development of both economies and world trade. The Czech-German foreign trade rose to EUR 87.9 billion, reaching the eighth record in a row. The Czech Republic again ranked as the tenth among the top German trade partners and as the twelfth among the top German export destinations, and climbed one place up to become the seventh most important import country for Germany. In 2017 the Czech exports to Germany reached EUR 46.3 billion and grew faster than the country’s imports from Germany. The trade balance in favour of the Czech Republic broke the 2016 record and, with an increase by 12.2%, it had grown to EUR 4.6 billion.³¹ In the same year, there was also a positive development of the Czech foreign trade with other German federal states. The Czech exports had grown

to the point that they were now sent to fourteen federal states, whilst the most important trade partner for the Czech Republic continued to be Bavaria with a 24% turnover share coming from foreign trade, followed by Baden-Württemberg and Northern Rhine-Westphalia.³²

Just as in the previous period, the structure of goods within the Czech-German trade did not undergo a major change in 2017 either. The top ten export and import items remained the same; there was only a growth in the export of optical and photographic devices as products with a high added value. The following items were of key importance in the trade: motor vehicles, machinery and electronics, which accounted for 58.4% of the Czech exports to Germany and 48.9% of the German exports to the Czech Republic; in 2017, the turnover of these commodities rose on average by 10%.³³ Hence, without a doubt, the automobile industry remains the driving force of the Czech-German economic co-operation, which, however, fuels fears regarding the growing one-sided dependency of the Czech economy on this segment of industry and consequently also on the German economy.³⁴ Even though the prognoses anticipate a positive development in the automobile industry, the aforementioned dependency carries along with it a potential vulnerability for the Czech Republic in case of changes in the Eurozone or problems in other countries.³⁵ Moreover, the theme of Industry 4.0, as well as the possible changes it will introduce into the existing setting of the Czech-German trade relations, is being discussed between the two states.³⁶ Due to Germany being a prior European leader of this initiative, the Czech side attaches great importance to it, and just as in previous years, it was subject to a series of meetings among top political representatives of the Czech Republic and Germany in 2017 as well.

Moreover, there still remains the sensitive problem of the high share of German capital in the Czech Republic (it is estimated at 21,9%³⁷). While there are currently approximately 3,500 to 4,000 German companies in the Czech Republic, there are only 150 Czech companies in Germany with an equity participation over 50%.³⁸ The topic was touched upon by President Zeman, among others, during the September visit of the German President Steinmeier in Prague when he expressed his optimistic estimate that “*we could even out this difference within twenty to thirty years*”.³⁹

Coming to Terms with the Past

In the realm of historical agenda, the crucial event in 2017 was the participation of the Czech Deputy Prime Minister Pavel Bělobrádek in the annual meeting of the Sudeten-German Landsmannschaft in Augsburg on 4th June 2017, as Bělobrádek was the highest ranking politician to ever participate in the event. It may be premature to judge whether, due to the continuity with the previous official participation in the meeting of the Minister of Culture Daniel Herman⁴⁰ as the first member of the Czech government to participate in a meeting of Sudeten Germans, this is a newly-established tradition. Deputy Prime Minister Bělobrádek emphasised that he was participating in the meeting as both a citizen and the leader of KDU-ČSL at the invitation of the partnering party CSU⁴¹ and chose a somewhat more cautious tone in defending his participation (“*I haven’t come to either apologise or foster reconciliation*”⁴²) than Minister Herman, who is motivated by personal incentives in this matter and has been engaged in

favour of a reconciliation between Czechs and Sudeten Germans for a long time.⁴³ Nonetheless, Bělobrádek's participation itself was appreciated by the German side and had very positive reactions in Germany and Bavaria in particular.⁴⁴ It must be added that the remarkable improvement of relations between the Sudeten Germans and the Czech side is also affected by the pro-active attitude of the Sudeten Germans, including their decision not to strive for the restitution of the property confiscated from them after the end of World War II. It is good news for Czech-German relations that the politicisation of this issue in the Czech Republic did not exceed a reasonable limit, even though there were also critical voices in regard to it coming from KSČM and a part of ODS, which could have been expected since it was traditionally the case. On the other side, the leader of the STAN movement Petr Gazdík and the Vice-Chairman of TOP 09 Marek Ženíšek approved of Bělobrádek's co-operative step.⁴⁵

Regional Co-operation

Besides developing on the national level, the relations between the Czech Republic and Germany developed also at the substate level in 2017; there further remained two key German federal states in this respect, Bavaria and Saxony. Apart from the traditional topics such as economic co-operation and co-operation in the field of science and research, the dominant issue of 2017 in the substate level relations was transport infrastructure. During the visit of the Bavarian Minister-President Horst Seehofer at the beginning of May, Prime Minister Sobotka acknowledged the co-operation of the Bavarian side in the striving to include the Bavarian part of the railway line connecting Prague and Munich via Furth im Wald to the higher category of "urgent need" within the Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan, which the Czech side had been trying to achieve for a long time.⁴⁶ There were also continuing negotiations with the Saxon side over the key project of a high-speed railway line between Prague and Dresden, which would result in a substantially shorter journey and a reduction of traffic on the busiest route between the Czech Republic and Germany.⁴⁷ Also, similarly to the Bavarian side, the Saxon side tried to get the highest priority status in the Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan.⁴⁸ While the hopes were not fulfilled in the case of the railway link to Bavaria, the German side confirmed in summer 2017 that the project of a new rail line connecting Ústí nad Labem and Dresden obtained a positive result in its economic evaluation and will be included in the Federal Transport Infrastructure Plan, namely in the longed-for top priority category, by which the high-speed rail line between Prague and Dresden will be officially permitted.⁴⁹

Just as at the national level, at the substate level, there was an evident influence of the parliamentary elections, both Czech and German. As a result of the German parliamentary elections, in which the Bavarian CSU lost a great proportion of the popular vote, in early December 2017 Seehofer decided to step down as the Minister-President of the Bavarian government, which he had led since 2008.⁵⁰ Thus the Czech politicians lost a powerful ally on the German side at least in two respects. As regards the migration crisis, the Czech government was of a much more similar opinion to that of Munich than that of Berlin. The CSU led by Seehofer, just like the vast majority of the Czech political scene, did not support the open-door policy promoted by Merkel and

proposed similar tools to restrict migration as the Czech government. Furthermore, Seehofer was also closely bound up with the *smoothing* of the Sudeten-German issue and hence also with the vast improvement of the Czech-Bavarian relations related to it. It was Seehofer who arrived in Prague in 2010 for the first official Bavarian visit to the Czech Republic since the end of World War II and who, three years later, accepted the first official visit of a Czech Prime Minister in Bavaria (the Czech Prime Minister at the time being Petr Nečas).⁵¹ Nonetheless, that does not mean that there was a reversed direction in the Czech-Bavarian relations after Seehofer's resignation from the post of the Bavarian Minister-President. His successor Markus Söder shares Seehofer's critical attitudes towards migration and the policy of multiculturalism and had also established contacts with the Czech side in the past.⁵² For similar reasons as Seehofer, the Saxon Minister-President Stanislaw Tillich also resigned in December 2017; his Christian Democrats lost to the AfD in the German parliamentary elections – even though only very narrowly. Tillich's successor was the up-until-then General Secretary of CDU in Saxony Michael Kretschmer, who had collected numerous contacts with Czech politicians during his political career, with one of the sources for such contacts being the Czech-German Future Fund.⁵³

If we add to the impacts of the German parliamentary elections the development on the Czech political scene, in 2017, at the top political level, the Czech Republic–Bavaria–Saxony triangle lost all the actors who stood behind the development of its mutual relations in the recent years. The resigning Prime Minister Sobotka was connected with both of the German Minister-Presidents via very intensive contacts – during the three years of the functioning of his government he had met with both the Bavarian and the Saxon Minister-President six times.⁵⁴ Due to the predominantly depoliticised agenda and practical issues of co-operation characterising the present-day Czech Republic's relations with Bavaria and Saxony, the change in the post of the Czech Prime Minister should not take more crucial twists; yet the Czech side should make sure that the deepening of the mutual co-operation will not subside.

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KEY ACTORS

The year 2017 did not bring any crucial changes in the distribution of competences and roles on the field of the Czech policy towards Germany or a substantial shift of opinions among the key actors in this field. However, it was extremely rich in terms of staffing changes, not only in connection to the Czech parliamentary elections. On 6 December Prime Minister Babiš, the leader of the political movement ANO, which won the elections, took office, and subsequently, on 13 December another ANO member, Martin Stropnický, who until then was the Minister of Defence, took up the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. With the arrival of the government of ANO, the top political floors of the Czech-German relations were left by Bohuslav Sobotka, Lubomír Zaorálek and Vladimír Špidla (ČSSD), who stood at the origin of the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue and saw Germany as an absolutely crucial partner. Even though these changes are very recent and, moreover, problematic due to the fact that

the newly appointed government subsequently lost the confidence vote of the Chamber of Deputies and hence lacked the mandate to (not only) implement foreign policy, it can be anticipated that the bilateral relation with Germany will keep functioning at the top political level based on the continuity with the preceding period. The top Czech political representatives are aware of the economic importance of Germany and see Germany as a partner with whom they must get on very well.⁵⁵

In August 2017, the Czech side gained a prominent partner in the form of the new German ambassador in Prague, Christoph Israng. In the past, Ambassador Israng worked in the German Federal Chancellery as the head of the department for Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and later on as a German ambassador in the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons in The Hague. The arrival of Ambassador Israng was perceived as good news for the Czech Republic since he is regarded as a person close to Chancellor Merkel, well-acquainted with Czech culture and institutions, and unaffected by the two countries' mutual problematic past. In connection with the last mentioned quality we must emphasise his part in preparing the 2010 visit of the Bavarian Minister-President Seehofer in Prague, which led to the reconciliation in the Czech-Bavarian relations.⁵⁶

Just as in the previous years, the Czech-German Future Fund, which was founded upon the signing of the Czech-German Declaration in 1997, is still a major actor of the Czech-German relations. The CGFF's theme of the year is traditionally determined by the CGFF in connection with the current social situation in both countries, and this time it was the promotion of media competence. During 2017, the Fund supported a total of 584 projects connecting the Czech and German societies, and the financing provided for them amounted to CZK 80,253,891.⁵⁷ In 2016, the CGFF also started to award the Czech-German Journalism Prize; the prize for 2016 was awarded in January 2017 and the prize for 2017 in November of that year.⁵⁸ 2017 was a very significant year for the CGFF, as its functioning, which was originally planned to continue for a ten-year period, was prolonged for the second time, which led to the provision of finances in the proportion of EUR 10 million from the Czech side and EUR 25 million from the German side. This decision on providing finances for the next ten years of the CGFF's functioning was seen by the Czech side as a great success.⁵⁹ At the same time, 2017 saw the development of a strenuous effort to interconnect the CGFF with the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue, and individual working groups were asked to come up with project proposals that could be financed from the means of the CGFF.⁶⁰

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

To mark the 20th anniversary of the Czech-German Declaration, a comparative public opinion survey was introduced in January 2017. It focussed on the mutual perception of both countries, showing that Germans are much more reserved in their assessment of the mutual relations than Czechs and do not pay so much attention to the issue of the mutual relations as their eastern neighbours. 43% of Germans regarded the Czech-German relations as somewhat good or very good, 15% considered them to be some-

what bad or very bad, and as many as 42% of the German respondents claimed they did not know whether they are good or bad. A more positive assessment of the Czech-German relations was observed among the inhabitants of the former East Germany: 51% rated the relations as somewhat good or very good, 12% as somewhat bad or very bad, and again a relatively high percentage of the population – 37% – did not have an opinion about the given question. The assessment of the Czech-German relations was generally favourable also in the cross-border federal states – 50% of the respondents in Bavaria rated the relations as somewhat good or very good; in Saxony it was 51%. On the other side of the border, 84% of Czechs perceived the mutual relations as somewhat good or very good, while only 12% rated them as somewhat bad or very bad. In contrast to the German partners, only 4% of the Czech respondents had no opinion on the relations. At first sight surprising results were observed in the survey of the Czech-German relations in the Czech borderlands, which are characterised by a high density of mutual co-operation with Germany; despite that, in comparison with the national level, there were more people among those living in the area of the border that saw the Czech-German relations as somewhat bad or very bad (16%).⁶¹ Nonetheless, if we take into account the social structure of the borderlands, the results of the survey there were generally seen as positive.⁶²

In the examined period of 2017, the results of the Czech public opinion surveys in relation to Germany did not give a uniform picture. According to an investigation of the Public Opinion Research Centre (CVVM) conducted in October 2017, Germany had another drop in popularity among the Czech respondents at the time. According to CVVM, while in 2015 and 2016 50% of the respondents expressed a liking for Germany, in 2017 the number decreased to 41%. Hence the popularity of our western neighbour dropped to the lowest level since 1997.⁶³ Nevertheless, more positive data was presented by the Centre of Empirical Research (STEM), which observed in a 2017 survey on the popularity of selected countries among Czechs a higher proportion of favourable marks in the case of Germany than in the previous year. A positive attitude to Germany was expressed by 59% of the respondents; with that figure, Germany nearly reached the corresponding values it had before 2015, when there was a major drop in them owing to the migration crisis.⁶⁴

Unsurprisingly, the Czech public's attitude towards Germany copies its attitude towards refugees and opinions on solving the migration crisis. As was evident from the December 2017 survey of CVVM, over half of the respondents (54%) regard refugees as a major security threat.⁶⁵ According to 69% of the respondents questioned in October 2017, the Czech Republic should not accept refugees at all, 25% agree with their acceptance until they are able to return to their country of origin, and only a mere 2% are convinced that the Czech Republic should accept refugees and let them settle on its territory. Also, a major part of the Czech public (80%) refuses the immigration quotas promoted by Germany, even at the cost of losing money from the EU structural funds.⁶⁶

As is traditionally the case, Germany was relatively strongly represented in the Czech media in 2017 as well. The usual attention was paid to Germany in fields such as economic issues (particularly the automobile industry), the Union agenda (above all

the attention was related to the issue of the migration crisis and the quotas for the relocation of refugees, although to a substantially smaller extent than in previous years), or transport infrastructure (especially in connection with the railway link to the Bavarian and Saxon sides). In addition to these issues, Germany found itself at the centre of Czech media attention in connection with its September parliamentary elections, as it was given a detailed analysis of the election results and their causes (with an emphasis on the decline of the two largest traditional parties and the growth of the right-wing populist party AfD), the subsequent post-election negotiations and the possible impacts of the development on the German political scene on the Czech Republic, and consequently also on Central Europe and the entire EU. Moreover, the anniversary of the signing of the Czech-German Declaration was commemorated relatively intensively; the media broadcast numerous testimonies of actors participating in the talks about the declaration. The tone of the reporting about Germany in serious media was mainly matter-of-fact and without emotions. However, a somewhat different picture was presented by Czech tabloids and the so-called alternative media, as they gave a great amount of space to the criticism of the deepening co-operation between the Army of the Czech Republic and the Bundeswehr or the participation of a member of the Czech government in a meeting of the Sudeten-German Landsmannschaft (a traditional target of criticism for less serious Czech media sources).⁶⁷

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the period under examination, Czech-German relations were affected by the anniversary of the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation (1992) and particularly by the anniversary of the Czech-German Declaration (1997), which had largely contributed to the pacification of the two countries' conflicts over controversial issues from the past and to focussing the mutual relations towards the future. Meanwhile the dynamics of the Czech-German relations were mainly influenced by the the two states' respective parliamentary elections. Owing to the focussing on the domestic political agendas during the pre-election campaigns and the subsequent demanding post-election negotiations on both sides of the border, the elections meant a decline in the activity of the Czech (but also the German) side at the top political level. Nonetheless, there was an ongoing sectoral, practically-oriented and depoliticised co-operation between the two states, the bearers of which see the approach of the Czech side as active. Just as in the previous year, the strategic dimension was taken on by the Czech-German co-operation in the field of defence policy; there was also a significant Czech-German co-operation in the realm of science and research, Industry 4.0 and transport infrastructure. In the sphere of economic development, there was an ongoing favourable trend – that of the growing Czech-German foreign trade. Yet on the other hand, there was also an increase in the problematic dependency of the Czech economy on the economy of Germany (especially in the automobile industry, which is the shop window of the Czech-German economic co-operation). As regards the issues from the past, there was an ongoing trend of the normalisation of

the Czech-German mutual relations and a subsiding of the politicisation of this issue. In the sphere of European policy, despite the existence of many common interests for the Czech Republic and Germany, there was an undesirable divergence between the Czech and German positions on a number of points of the Union agenda. Regarding the strategic importance of Germany, which the Czech side itself repeatedly attributes to its neighbour, the Czech Republic's weak and unclear European policy remains the most problematic part of the Czech policy towards Germany.

In conclusion, the Czech Republic should clearly formulate and fulfil its priorities in the area of European policy and boost the European dimension of various areas of Czech-German relations. Similarly, it should act pro-actively and constructively in regard to the issues of migration and build upon the common approach (i.e. solving the causes of migration in the places of their origin). It should also fully employ the potential of the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue, move it beyond the framework of depoliticised sectoral co-operation and aim to enhance the European dimension of activities taking place within its framework. Next, the Czech Republic should continue in its emphasis on deepening the Czech-German partnership in the field of defence policy (at the bilateral level, as well as at the multilateral level in the context of NATO, the EU and the United Nations), where it is able to be an effective partner for Germany and develop a mutually beneficial co-operation with it in accordance with the priorities of the government, the Union and the Alliance. And last but not least, it should pay attention to and take care of its relations with the borderland federal states of Bavaria and Saxony and continue in the successfully developing trend of normalising the Czech-Bavarian relations and the depoliticisation of the Sudeten-German issue.

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