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# Briefing Paper 16/2015

Czech Debate on Ukraine Since the Euromaidan and Its Aftermath

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## Czech Debate on Ukraine since the Euromaidan and Its Aftermath

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### Introduction

Although Ukrainians constitute the largest national minority group living in the Czech Republic, Ukraine itself has never been of particular interest to the Czech public. Due to clumsy and incongruent statements of some Czech politicians and a part of society on the Euromaidan and subsequent events in Ukraine, the Czech Republic became to be widely seen as a “pro-Russian” country and one of Putin’s “Trojan horses” within the EU.

One of the gravest consequences of such an image is the loss of good credit and reputation in Ukraine. Russian propaganda indeed deeply penetrated Czech public space and perhaps even more politics. But, as I will demonstrate further, the “pro-Russian” character of Czech society and politics ought to be rather viewed as a media image than a reflection of reality. One of the underlying reasons is that disproportionately huge room is provided to a small yet vociferously pro-Russian circle, be it out of ignorance or in order to maintain “balanced” coverage of events. This is an issue that does not only apply to private media, but also to the public broadcaster Czech Television and the notoriously problematic Czech News Agency (ČTK).

Perhaps it was fear of this seemingly strong “pro-Russian” sentiment present in Czech society which prompted many politicians to use “careful” rhetoric of questioning the wise of sanctions and interpreting the conflict in a rather pro-Russian way. The truth, however, is that a vast majority of those interested in the events disapprove Russia’s policy – a claim which can be exemplified by a number of surveys conducted during 2014 and 2015 by the Center for Research of Public Opinion (CVVM), which is part of the Czech Academy of Sciences.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the Czech government, despite any particular individual pressure, has been clearly supportive of the general course adopted by the EU since the annexation of Crimea. The core problem, however, is that there is a huge discrepancy between the governmental and especially the presidential postures. There is also a tremendous gap between verbal declarations of many Czech politicians and real actions taken by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, keeping its uncontroversial line. Nevertheless, a substantial part of Czech society tends to accept the Russian worldview. This inclination is also noticeable among several influential figures, including the incumbent president Miloš Zeman. This is the way Russian propaganda about Ukraine has been spread.

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<sup>1</sup> All surveys dealing with this topic are accessible on the CVVM website <http://cvvm.soc.cas.cz>.



### Russian Propaganda in the Czech Republic

The roots of this vocal pro-Russian undercurrent in the Czech society can be traced back to such historical factors as the very limited direct experience with Russia before World War II, the disillusionment with the West in the late 1930s, and, despite the Soviet occupation in 1968, nostalgia for the Communist era on the part of society for which the fall of the regime had rather negative implications. This can at least partially explain why the Communist party of Bohemia and Moravia (KSČM), has been constantly (with the exception of 2010 elections) able to maintain its position of the third strongest parliamentary party since the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, with stable support of over 10 % or 600 to 900 thousand voters.

This is an extremely important fact taking into account that precisely Czech Communists together with the president Miloš Zeman have served as the most important dissemination channels for Russian propaganda. Openly pro-Russian voices can be, however, also heard from other political parties – most notably the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) with its strong conservative (post-communist) wing, and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), closely related to another uncritical advocate of Russia, the former Czech president Václav Klaus, the party's founder. Conservatives in the ČSSD, on the other hand, maintain ties with the incumbent Miloš Zeman. Among well-known pro-Russian social democratic politicians belong for example MPs Jaroslav Foldyna who was openly questioning anti-Russian sanctions, and Stanislav Huml who even claimed that the MH17 flight was intentionally shot down by the Ukrainian army in coordination with the CIA.<sup>2</sup>

Similar stances have been pronounced by the former Senator Jiří Vyvadil who founded a Facebook group called “Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic”<sup>3</sup>, Senator and the leader of the Party of Civic Rights (SPO) Jan Veleba, or Senator and a former member of the KSČM Jaroslav Doubrava who was observing the so-called elections in Donbas in November 2014, a step which made him persona non grata in Ukraine. Three other Czech political representatives took part in monitoring the illegal March 2014 referendum – another member of the SPO Miloslav Soušek together with two MPs - Milan Šarapatka (Dawn of Direct Democracy), and Stanislav Berkovec (ANO 2011). Last but not least, it is necessary to remind those who were frequently making appearances on the public Czech Television – the Editor-in-Chief of the Russian language weekly “Prague Telegraph” Natalia Sudlianko, and the businessman Alexander Barabanov, a hard-line propagandist who was repeatedly mentioning an alleged “Kyiv junta” in live TV discussions. Despite this quite solid pro-Russian base it seems that many “unfortunate statements” were often made unintentionally

<sup>2</sup> IDNES.cz: „Pád letadla nad Ukrajinou vymyslela CIA, stejně jako 11. září, míní Huml“, [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/stanislav-huml-ukrajina-boeing-11-zari-dwy-/domaci.aspx?c=A140831\\_174836\\_domaci\\_mlb](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/stanislav-huml-ukrajina-boeing-11-zari-dwy-/domaci.aspx?c=A140831_174836_domaci_mlb).

<sup>3</sup> Facebook: „Přátelé Ruska v České republice“, [www.facebook.com/groups/pratele.ruska.v.cr](http://www.facebook.com/groups/pratele.ruska.v.cr).



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due to lack of proper information and incompetence, which is of course not true for the above mentioned individuals.

Taking into account these facts, it cannot be surprising that Russian propaganda had and still has an important place in the Czech public discourse. Many indices suggest that the Czech Republic might be on the list of countries to be targeted by Russian propaganda. The sole fact that the Russian embassy in Prague employs twice as many staff as the US embassy is illustrative. The Czech Intelligence Service (BIS) has also repeatedly warned of activities undertaken by Russian secret services in the Czech Republic. In 2015, three Russian agents were indeed accused of espionage and had to leave country.<sup>4</sup> Russia's official governmental news agency Sputnik (former Voice of Russia), which started operating in the Czech language in March 2014, has been also used as a means of influencing the Czech public opinion. There are also other propagandist websites in Czech. For example, the "alternative news portal" Aeronet.cz, founded in the first half of 2014 with an unclear ownership was also specifically described by BIS as a threat.<sup>5</sup>

## Czech Policy towards Ukraine

First immediate Czech reactions to the events in Ukraine appeared already during the Euromaidan. A few Czech politicians also personally attended Kyiv during the revolution and cheered protesters. The first controversial gesture made by the president Miloš Zeman soon followed. Even during the bloody clashes in Kyiv on February 19, 2014 he was still counting on the state visit of the then president Viktor Yanukovich in Prague, scheduled for April.<sup>6</sup> This was only the first of a series of incongruous statements pronounced by the president who is known for maintaining good relations with the circles close to the Kremlin. One of his advisers Martin Nejedlý also occupies the position of executive of the LUKOIL Aviation Czech. Zeman's close friend Vladimir Yakunin, Russian oligarch and the former director of the Russian Railways, also belongs to Vladimir Putin's associates. Until 2014, Zeman was regularly attending Yakunin's conference called the Dialogue of Civilizations and organized on Rhodes. Precisely at this conference in September 2014, Zeman stated that the crisis in Ukraine was only a flu compared to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and that sanctions against Russia should be lifted.<sup>7</sup> In January 2015, Yakunin repaid Zeman's visit.

<sup>4</sup> Česká televize: „BIS odhalila tři ruské špiony, museli ze země“, <http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/1511004-bis-odhalila-tri-ruske-spiony-museli-ze-zeme>.

<sup>5</sup> Respekt.cz: „Putinův hlas v Česku“, [www.respekt.cz/z-noveho-cisla/putinuv-hlas-v-cesku](http://www.respekt.cz/z-noveho-cisla/putinuv-hlas-v-cesku).

<sup>6</sup> IDNES.cz: „Zeman odsoudil násilí v Kyjevě. Když potrvá, zruší pozvání Janukovyče“, [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/hrad-navstevu-janukovyce-nerusi-dox-domaci.aspx?c=A140219\\_093824\\_domaci\\_jj](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/hrad-navstevu-janukovyce-nerusi-dox-domaci.aspx?c=A140219_093824_domaci_jj).

<sup>7</sup> IDNES.cz: „Zeman bagatelizoval krizi na Ukrajině. Zrušme sankce, vyzval ruský“, [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/zemanuv-projev-na-rhodosu-dcf-domaci.aspx?c=A140926\\_193843\\_domaci\\_wlk](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/zemanuv-projev-na-rhodosu-dcf-domaci.aspx?c=A140926_193843_domaci_wlk).



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Despite earlier denials, he arrived at the conference marking the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi extermination camp in Auschwitz. Until 2014, Zeman had been a regular guest at the celebrations of the Victory Day held at the Russian embassy in Prague on May 9.

At the 2014 NATO summit in Wales, Zeman expressed his belief that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine, sparking a great international controversy. In January 2015, the president commented on traditional marches honoring Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera. Zeman drew a comparison between the event taking place on January 1 in Kyiv (anniversary of Bandera's birth) and "Nazi torch marches", falsely accusing the marching Ukrainians of shouting "death to Poles and Jews".<sup>8</sup> This situation seems paradoxical considering that Zeman often calls himself "European federalist". In April 2014, he even called on NATO to initiate a "strong preventive action against Russia".<sup>9</sup> Even though Ukraine lost much of its attention, controversial statements by Zeman and other Czech politicians continued throughout the 2015. The situation went so far that the Czech ambassador to Ukraine was asked to explain Zeman's behavior at the Ukrainian MFA in November 2014.

Anti-Russian sanctions occupied a prominent place in the Czech debate. Zeman and other Czech critics deem the sanctions regime ineffective and demand its revocation. The same position has been shared by the former president Václav Klaus, but also the Minister of Finance and the leader of the second most powerful political party ANO 2011 Andrej Babiš, who generally comments foreign affairs very rarely. Strong influence exerted by Russian propaganda was also illustrated by the fact that the Czech PM was compelled to react to the distorted public debate and calm down voices stating that sanctions could endanger tens of thousands jobs in the Czech republic.<sup>10</sup> Hysteria around this topic stands in sharp contrast with the Czech position within the EU where the Czech government without any protests supported the sanctions. Such tendencies are closely related to a more general trend of prioritizing business interests above other foreign policy priorities. A common argument therefore was that sanctions would hurt Czech economy and Czech companies would lose their investment opportunities on a growing market. Such a giving greater preference to business ties with Russia over Ukraine, however, does not correspond to the official export strategy issued by the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade in 2012 which names Ukraine among priority countries. This position is even more awkward considering the fact that Ukraine with a successfully implemented Association Agreement and Free Trade Area with

<sup>8</sup> Echo24: „Zemanovi oponenti: Smrt Polákům a Židům? To nezaznělo“, <http://echo24.cz/a/iej8/zemanovi-opONENTI-smrt-polakum-a-zidum-to-nezaznelo>.

<sup>9</sup> Česká televize: „Zeman: Nechci vypadat jako válečný štváč, ale Rusko je třeba zastrašit“, [www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/1039018-zeman-nehci-vypadat-jako-valecny-stvac-ale-rusko-je-treba-zastrazit](http://www.ceskatelevize.cz/ct24/domaci/1039018-zeman-nehci-vypadat-jako-valecny-stvac-ale-rusko-je-treba-zastrazit).

<sup>10</sup> Aktuálně.cz: „Sankce vůči Rusku se Česka zásadně nedotknou, říká premiér“, <http://zpravy.aktualne.cz/ekonomika/sankce-proti-rusku-se-ceskeho-trhu-nedotknou-tvrdi-sobotka/r~63f3a02017db11e49849002590604f2e>.



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the EU could become a much more attractive business partner than Russia. Unfortunately, it does not seem that Czech politicians realize the point.

Not only the above mentioned but also many other statements and activities of the Czech president and other politicians have certainly contributed to damaging the Czech Republic's image. The harm caused has, however, not been of such an importance for the official governmental policy, which was only occasionally forced to react to the controversies sparked by the president. Considering Zeman's activities, the most substantial for the overall Czech foreign policy were his efforts to recall the Czech Ambassador in Kyiv Ivan Počuch as well as his initiative to repatriate Czechs living in Ukraine who were supposedly endangered by the war in Donbas. In fact, the Czechs repatriated from Ukraine came from the village Čechohrad (now Novhorodivka) in Zaporizhzhia oblast which is more than 200 km far from the frontline. Unsurprisingly, the Czech MFA strongly opposed such initiatives, perceived as being aimed directly against it. The repatriation of Ukrainian Czechs was, therefore, carried out by the Czech Ministry of Interior. This fact coupled with statements of Andrej Babiš reveals that discrepancies exist even within the government. The rift is, however, still not that overt to affect the main line pursued by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Passivity represents the greatest drawback of the approach adopted by the Czech government towards Ukraine. The ratification process of the Association Agreement with Ukraine markedly exhibited disinterest in Ukraine on the Czech side. The Czech Republic was one of the last EU member states and by far the last of all post-communist EU members to ratify the treaty in September 2015. The others post-socialist countries (with the exception of Slovenia) managed to ratify the bill already during 2014. One of the main arguments for the constant postponing was the claim that the Parliament had other priorities at the time.

Czech passivity was expressed by limited aid designated for Ukraine. The greatest help was provided during and soon after the Euromaidan when the Czech government within the program MEDEVAC sent doctors to Kyiv and later treated 39 wounded activists in the Czech Republic, which was the highest number after Poland. During 2014, the government also allocated financial support for help with transformation of Ukraine and later supplies of winter equipment had been sent to Ukrainian. This particular decision came, however, late and the aid provided was absolutely insufficient. Any arms supplies, or help with modernization of the Ukrainian weaponry was denied.

Passivity of the government and rhetoric of Zeman stands in contrast to the routine work of the Czech MFA and the position presented at the EU level. Despite many obstacles and negative tendencies in mutual relations, both the MFA and the Czech embassy in Kyiv tried to keep the mainstream EU agenda and clearly supported all the decisions taken by the EU concerning Ukraine and Russia. From this point of view, the Czech Republic is



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incomparable to other EU countries including Slovakia or Hungary. This is mainly due to the fact that the most controversial figure – the president, has, apart from exerting strong influence on the public by its ambiguous statements, very limited possibilities to really affect the governmental posture. In this respect, divergent views of the president and the government should not be by any means exaggerated, because they were present in Czech politics even before the last presidential election and became part of the Czech political folklore.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the Czech attitude towards Ukraine and the conflict with Russia looks on the first sight much worse than how it really is. This is caused mainly by the strong presence of some pro-Russian advocates in the public space. In politics, they are mostly concentrated around the incumbent president Miloš Zeman, the former president Václav Klaus and the KSČM. Similar worldview is even more visible in Czech media including ČTK or the public Czech Television, which is, however, their failure since disproportionately large space is provided to adherents of pro-Russian worldview.

Activities of the Czech president Zeman concerning Russia and Ukraine are disturbing, but Zeman himself has very limited powers to overturn the governmental policy. He can mostly use only his authority derived from his office. Conflicts between the president and government are indeed serious but, as stated above, the president's influence should not be exaggerated. Much bigger problem is that the government's lack of interest in Ukraine. Even though the Czech Republic officially states Ukraine belongs to its priorities – both in terms of its export strategy and transformational cooperation goals. In reality, it remains mostly passive and the support provided to Ukraine has been, therefore, rather limited. It should be appraised though that the government clearly affirms the common EU policy. It seems that these tendencies will not change in the nearest future.

Unfortunately, the harm has been done and despite the official Czech stance, the Czech Republic is generally seen as one of “pro-Russian” proxies in the EU. This is certainly not entirely true. The Czech Republic has not departed from the EU mainstream and its stance is far away from countries like Hungary or Slovakia. In spite of that, the most visible result of last two years of destructive actions and statements was a quite strong disillusion on the Ukrainian side. Limited activities of the government coupled with delaying of the ratification of the Association Agreement would probably do some harm as well, but generally good reputation of the Czech Republic could be maintained. It is precisely good reputation which will be the most difficult to recover.



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