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Conference Report 6/2015

What do the Czech foreign policy makers think?

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December 2015

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Introduction

The public roundtable titled [“What do the Czech foreign policy makers think?”](#) aimed to present and discuss the Czech results of a unique poll-based international survey [“Trends of Visegrad Foreign Policy”](#), conducted simultaneously in all V4 states.¹ By examining the opinions and visions of those who make, implement, or on a professional basis evaluate the Czech Republic’s performance in its external relations, the Prague event sought to help spark a well-founded deliberation and debate about the direction of Czech foreign policy as well as about the cohesion and continued utility of the Visegrad Group.²

The discussion, organized by the Association for International Affairs (AMO), took place on November 11, 2015, in the premises of CERGE-EI, Prague. The research project was kindly supported by the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, the Open Society Foundations and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

¹ Overall, the survey approached 1,711 foreign policy experts (civil servants, researchers/ experts, journalists, business representatives and politicians), of whom 429 persons filled the questionnaire out. In the Czech Republic, 440 foreign policy stakeholders were addressed, of whom 149 responded, thereby reaching a response rate of 33.9%.

² Apart from comparing the Czech findings with the perceptions and assessments of other V4 partners, the latest results were also contrasted with the data obtained by the AMO’s 2011 [“Trends of Czech Foreign Policy”](#) project, using the same methodology.



Conclusions and recommendations

- The wave of refugees fleeing to Europe cannot be curbed without stabilization of the situation in conflict zones. With air strikes largely ineffective and NATO paralyzed, any potential anti-ISIS coalition will be a European matter. So as long as the Czech Republic's security, due to long-term budgetary constraints, remains dependent on the performance and efficiency of its allies, it cannot afford to be viewed as a saboteur of efforts to create a common migration policy.
- There cannot be any bargaining or concessions on Ukraine over Syria. Instead of doubting the continued usefulness of the sanctions regime against Russia and treating Moscow as a potential ally in the fight against ISIS, Russia should start to be seen as a strategic problem. Russia's involvement in the Middle East has limited the West's scope for action, while further aggravating the risk of escalation. The only conceivable way how to mitigate the conflict in the Middle East, and thus curb the inflow of refugees, lies not on easing the sanctions, but using the lever to make Russia draw back.
- Instead of an automatic presumption that transatlantic ties will be tightening, further emancipation of Europe in the sphere of security and defense should be expected. The EU's ability to take an effective action is, however, limited. Therefore, the Czech Republic, just as its allies, should invest in developing their military capabilities and take on more responsibility for collective defense.
- To avert ending up on the EU's periphery in the future, the Czech Republic should systematically focus on joining the system of Eurozone, which will likely form the integration core of the EU, where key decisions will be made and further direction of the European project will be set.
- The Czech Republic's inability to speak with one voice on the international scene, reflecting the absence of a clear vision where its interests lie and the tendency to hold foreign policy hostage to domestic party competition, have pushed the country on the verge of the EU. The Czech Republic is in a dire need of devising a new mechanism for arousing a genuine debate about foreign policy matters, and building a new national consensus.



Grappling with unstable surroundings: The ISIS conundrum

The rapidly changing international security environment, Europe finds itself in, is breeding a growing sense of uneasiness, V. Dostál stated, pointing to the results of the opinion poll among foreign policy experts. Whereas in 2011, the issue of controlling global financial markets was expected to top the future foreign policy agenda, at present, economic challenges have been overshadowed by security concerns. Respondents argue that in the coming five years, the Czech Republic will be preoccupied with securing its energy supplies, managing illegal migration, coping with persistent instability in the EU's neighborhood and fighting international terrorism. The other V4 partners share largely the same dim predictions.

Serious repercussions emanating from the unrest on Europe's southern flanks have already transcended the immediate region, inevitably necessitating closer attention to be paid to and well-thought-out steps to be taken by the EU. V. Dostál stressed that already in 2011, a vast majority of foreign policy professionals anticipated that the Arab Spring could eventually worsen the state of security in the EU's proximity and illegal migration might be an important foreign policy topic in the coming years. Yet the refugee crisis that hit Europe made almost everybody convinced that the migration issue will remain one of the gravest challenges the Czech Republic will be grappling with in the coming years.

When directly asked how the Czech Republic should preferably contribute to the fight against ISIS, the survey showed that the prevalent view held by foreign policy community does not always fully correspond with the governmental position. Apart from providing humanitarian aid, a narrow majority of respondents would also approve sending weapons to back the war-effort against ISIS. Interestingly, neither the option of contributing Czech troops to an eventual anti-ISIS international coalition has been dismissed, as 53% of foreign policy experts spoke in its favor.

According to K. Šafaříková, the support for a direct military involvement in the Middle East could be partially explained by a natural need of foreign policy stakeholders to be actively engaged in international affairs. I. Gabal noted that the inclination towards an armed solution is rather pronounced by the political community than by military circles. Both stressed that a factor which is absolutely crucial to understanding the perceived urge to act is that ISIS is not only viewed as a threat for the region itself, but it is increasingly seen as an absolute antithesis of what Western civilization represents.

On the other hand, the disapproving argument, publicly voiced by many experts, rests on the conviction that attempts to solve the complex Middle Eastern conundrum by an intervention on the ground would eventually fail, Šafaříková underlined. Considering religious, tribal and ethnic tensions, unconventional-warfare tactics used by a non-state



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adversary and Russia's military presence, the West would only risk being entangled into another virtually endless struggle.

I. Gabal elaborated on the practical aspects of the issue, pointing to the fact that there might be a pressing need to act, but the underlying question is whether we are truly capable of both taking an action and sustaining the stability. A year-long intensive air strikes against ISIS have proven to be ineffective. Yet, in Gabal's viewpoint, an eventual military operation would most likely exclude both Washington – due to the upcoming presidential elections – and NATO. Given the membership of Sunni Turkey in the alliance and Moscow's siding with the Shiite front, NATO's involvement would presumably aggravate the proxy war between the US and Russia, and, consequently, further escalate the conflict.

As a result, any prospective anti-ISIS operation would be a purely European matter, Gabal argued. The ability of the Czech armed forces to take part and effectively contribute to the war-effort is, however, severely limited due to long-term unfavorable budgetary conditions. Conversely, the simplistic view that the migration flow could be stopped without stabilizing the situation in conflict zones ignores the fact that such a goal cannot be attainable without providing the people fleeing the Middle East with a perspective for a safe refuge in their home countries. So as long as the Czech Republic's security remains dependent on the performance and efficiency of its European allies, it cannot afford to be seen as hampering or undermining a common migration policy.

Friends and foes: The Russia dilemma

Mapping out who is perceived as the Czech Republic's long-standing ally with whom it aims to cherish its ties, and who is rather treated with caution and restraint, helps shed more light on the nature of the system in which the country operates.

V. Dostál accentuated that despite occasional discrepancies, Germany is undoubtedly regarded as the Czech Republic's foremost foreign policy partner, a view shared also by other V4 states. The high importance attached to the partnership with Poland, which ranked second, manifests a traditional asymmetry in the assessment of each other's significance whereby Prague is much more attentive to Warsaw than the other way round. I. Gabal expressed his conviction that the lesser interest on the Polish side is connected with the Czech image of an unreliable partner, receptive to Russia. Strengthening of Polish-German relations and focusing on the cooperation within the Weimar triangle was, at least initially, motivated by the impression that the Visegrad Group's unity fractured and its capacity for action waned.



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Slovakia's fourth place behind the US in the chart of the Czech Republic's allies is not only a sign of an enduring closeness between the two nations and their trouble-free relations, but also of their multilayered cooperation, increasingly extending also to the sphere of defense and security, discussants argued. K. Šafaříková, nevertheless, remarked that a certain renaissance or reinvigoration at the highest political level could be noticed. The unusually tight, even intimate, cooperation and coordination between the prime ministers, and more recently also between the ministers of interior, is a perfect illustration of this trend, she explained.

Within the V4, the stances on the relationship with Russia exhibited the greatest divergence of opinions, V. Dostál pointed out. Whereas Poland remains highly critical and skeptical of Moscow, Hungary rated Russia as its third most important foreign policy partner. K. Šafaříková wondered, what kind of partnership Hungarians could have in mind, appraising its ties with Moscow that highly. Rather than seeing mutual relations as a rapport between two equals, the nuclear energy deal, in her viewpoint, makes Budapest Moscow's long-term vassal.

As for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the survey confirmed the determination of the Czech foreign policy community to continue the sanctions policy for the time being. Yet the resolve to keep the sanctions in force until Russia withdraws from Crimea and Ukraine's territorial integrity is fully restored turned up to be relatively low, taking into account the fact that it was precisely the annexation of the peninsula which prompted the imposition of the sanctions in the first place, V. Dostál opined. The willingness to lift the sanctions regime already after Moscow fully complies with the Minsk II agreement proved to be somewhat higher. Moreover, 35% of interviewees would favor facilitating cooperation between the West and the Kremlin in the fight against ISIS, Dostál added.

I. Gabal underlined that sanctions are the only leverage the West has in its disposal to moderate Russia's behavior. There cannot be any bargaining or concessions on Ukraine over Syria, he stressed. The only conceivable way how to mitigate the conflict in the Middle East, and thus curb the inflow of refugees, lies not on easing the sanctions, but using the lever to make Russia draw back. But such an action necessitates a robust European consensus, he admitted.

Transatlantic ties: United in a changing world?

In 2011, the prevalent view was that due to the declining US military presence in Europe, the transatlantic bond would be loosening. Nowadays, on the contrary, mutual ties are expected to intensify both in the field of economy and trade, and security and defense, V. Dostál pointed out.



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The changing security environment has also boosted the belief that NATO's role would be augmented in the coming years. In 2011, the alliance was anticipated to gradually decline in stature. At present, such a development is not presupposed by anybody. Moreover, the visions of the future shape of transatlantic relations and NATO were nearly identical across the V4, Dostál stressed. Only Hungary diverged from the rest of the group in its self-critical assessment of the state of its relations with the US.

According to I. Gabal, the intensification of economic links across the Atlantic is highly probable not only owing to the currently negotiated Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) treaty, but also a general cultural and civilizational leaning towards each other. In Gabal's view, cooperation in the area of economy will be, however, soon outweighed by the need to cope with climate change challenges.

Contrary to expectations, Gabal argued that in the realm of security and defense, further emancipation of Europe should be expected. The Middle East, where the growing European responsibility is undeniable, proves the point. Washington is undergoing a certain catharsis or depression connected with the developments in Iraq and ISIS. Moreover, as long as the US retains its energy self-sufficiency, it will not have any vital interest in engaging in the EU's neighborhood, Gabal underlined. But the EU, absent any common European military capabilities and, even more importantly, a decision-making mechanism for a quick, informed and effective deployment of such forces, is not capable of taking a decisive action on its own.

In a similar vein, K. Šafaříková assumed that the belief in the continued strengthening of mutual ties should be rather seen as wishful thinking or a mechanical reaction than a reflection of ongoing processes. In her viewpoint, NATO will be gradually decreasing its executive function and moving towards the UN model of cooperation.

Nonetheless, there is an integrative factor, conducive to NATO's cohesion, which is Russia's assertive policy towards Ukraine and the realization that Moscow ceased being NATO's strategic partner and turned into a strategic problem, Gabal stressed. The outbreak of the armed conflict has given a serious impetus for strengthening the eastern flank of the alliance, a goal which is likely to be pushed forward at the 2016 NATO summit in Warsaw.

Czech European policy puzzle

Reflecting upon crises the EU is surrounded by and its own daunting internal challenges, respondents suggested that the EU's future foreign policy agenda would encompass topics ranging from energy policy, immigration and the single market to managing the Eurozone and bolstering the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). There is, however,



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no consensus within the V4 whether the EU's future course will be increasingly determined by large member states, or the power will be shifting in favor of joint institutions, V. Dostál concluded.

From K. Šafaříková's point of view, recent developments indicate that the EU will most likely take the path of multi-speed integration. It will be the Eurozone core, where key decisions will be made and further direction of the European project will be set. Therefore, it would be advisable for the Czech Republic to systematically focus its effort foremost on joining the Eurozone, Šafaříková suggested. She, nevertheless, admitted that under the current governing coalition and with the Fiscal Compact still unapproved, attaining the goal does not seem to be probable in the nearest future.

I. Gabal skeptically noted that despite all the verbal declarations that the Czech Republic strives to belong the European gravity center, it is not capable of reaching the goal. The cumulative character of the European crisis necessitates formulating a complex answer, which the Czech Republic is not able to generate. Whereas in the 1990s, Czech foreign policy was elevating and invigorating internal policy, nowadays, on the contrary, foreign policy has slumped into the sphere of domestic policy, which is constantly pulling it down. Speaking about a differentiated Europe, Gabal opinioned that the Ukrainian crisis has actually reinforced the trend of passing more decision-making powers into the hands of large member states, which could be exemplified by the way Germany and France co-determine next steps to be taken. Conversely, the European Commission was not able to address and handle the problem. Also a closer Polish-Czech cooperation proved to be impossible due to a determination and capacities gap between the two states.

The Czech Republic is currently going through a completely new stage in terms of foreign policy formulation. Gabal explicated that the country was too preoccupied with its internal transformation and geopolitical reorientation. After the Czech Republic with relative ease achieved its initial goals, it found itself incapable of conceiving and clearly articulating where to head next and what to further strive for. The country has already touched the European periphery. The inability to speak with one voice externally has reached the stage when governmental and presidential narratives stand in an overt opposition against each other. The Czech Republic is in a dire need of devising a new mechanism for arousing a genuine and sober debate, and building a cross-party consensus on its foreign and security policy aims and priorities.



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Speakers

Vít Dostál, Director of the Research Center, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

Ivan Galal, MP, non-partisan elected on the list of the KDU-ČSL

Kateřina Šafaříková, Journalist, Newsweek

Chair

Vladka Votavová, Director, Association for International Affairs (AMO)



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AMO is a preeminent independent think-tank in the Czech Republic in the field of foreign policy. Since 1997, the mission of AMO has been to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs through a broad range of educational and research activities. Today, AMO represents a unique and transparent platform in which academics, business people, policy makers, diplomats, the media and NGOs can interact in an open and impartial environment.

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- organize educational projects;
- present critical assessment and comments on current events for local and international press;
- create vital conditions for growth of a new expert generation;
- support the interest in international relations among broad public;
- cooperate with like-minded local and international institutions.

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