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CZECH REPUBLIC, EU PRESIDENCY AND THE PROJECT OF "EASTERN PARTNERSHIP"

From the perspective of European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the year of 2009 was looked forward to as a possible turning point in terms of expanding its eastern dimension. In the first half of this year, the EU presidency was passed over to Czech Republic, in the second half Sweden will take over. Both countries rank themselves among the member states, which participate in the activities of deepening the relations with states eastward from the EU, i.e. the states of former Soviet Union. In 2008, Sweden joined Poland in initiating the project of so-called Eastern Partnership and as the presiding country had a chance to bolster this concept fundamentally. In case of CR – a subject to pre-1989 Soviet sphere of influence and experienced and principle actor in European "Eastern policy," this would be a logical activity. Owing to the this all, since its early preparatory stages Czech presidency has been perceived as major opportunity to further building of mechanisms of assistance, aid and cooperation with the states of Eastern Europe and Caucasian area.

Some facts of Czech presidency, however, deviate from these original notions. This article attempts to briefly analyze the Czech presidency and Czech attitude in general, utilizing some historic trends and parallels with other states. This analysis should contribute to a more profound comprehension of some peculiarities, curiosities, as well as the afore-mentioned inconsistency.

Conventional attitude of Czech politics and society to European integration and to the "East"

Firstly, the "Czech experience" with European integration or Czech politics' relation to the countries eastwards from EU must be delineated.¹ After 1989, Czech Republic

¹ One cannot refer to purely Czech experience though; in general this can be applied to all candidates. Naturally, in this respect CR had the most in common with Visegrad countries. Numerous aspects are nevertheless typical for Czech milieu, which will be duly emphasized in the text.

and other countries of former Eastern bloc became part of so far the biggest long-term project of so-called Eastern enlargement of EU. Already at the very beginning, this process proved to be the most challenging and most discussed of all the enlargement stages, that is in context of EU as well as global politics.² The situation of candidates called for a creation of very specific mechanisms, which would on one hand proceed from the existing experience of European institutions, on the other hand necessarily responding sensitively to the needs of individual countries. For the authors of pre-accession programs, these needs were an unheard of concern since the Western democratic states integrated into EU until then were not familiar with the real state of society and economics of post-Soviet area. Their approach to candidates during early association talks and creation of related aid programs can thus be called "on the hoof learning." On the other hand, states of Central and Eastern Europe, which meanwhile became part of EU, gained substantial experience with EU instruments for forming any kind of partnership with third countries, in whose position they themselves were during pre-accession activities. At the same time, they remained aware of their own past when "on their way to Europe" they had to overcome difficulties in many respects so similar to the problems of states eastward from the current EU. For the initiators of Eastern Partnership, it was this prerequisite what made the Czech presidency no less than promising even before it actually started.

A crucial problem of Eastern enlargement was new "Eastern" EU frontier. However, this very debate did not affect Czech republic much; it was the only candidate state not being in a position of "buffer" state, that is state partially bordering on EU non-members. This fact did much to influence Czech perception of new EU projects eastwards. Czech political elites traditionally consider these projects secondary within "European" policy – as compared to essential matters of EU orientation and working – a fact determined among others by the lack of necessity to deal with relations to non-member neighbours. Vice versa, all the other states participating in the Eastern enlargement consider this problem crucial since the first moment of their accession because it affects them directly.³

For the sake of completeness, let us mention the crucial importance of this type of debate on Poland, which through its EU entry should become a "bridge" between the West and the East. Polish as well as CSFR/CR entry was strongly endorsed especially by Germany, that is Chancellor Kohl, who after somewhat contentious German unification worked hard to make sure that German would not border on EU non-members. German initiative meant a significant impulse in the process of Eastern enlargement and among other things demonstrated the associated states that not only the backing by EU central institutions, but also by individual states or group of states may be of great importance, even though these supporters follow their own interests.⁴

² Putting aside for instance British experience with repeated French veto, largely a consequence of personal bias of one man rather than persistent and widely-discussed problem of British entry on a general level.

³ This perception by EU peripheral states was further bolstered by their entry to Schengen area.

⁴ A mere breaking point for CEE candidate Countries was the summit under German presidency in Essen in December 1994 where the Pre-accession strategy for associated countries was presented. For his support of Eastern enlargement, Kohl even got to certain conflict with French president Mitterrand, who expressed his concerns and

Certain indicator of Czech politics' relation to Eastern states and the East in general would be the majority views and positions in Czech society. The fall of Soviet empire and emancipation from Soviet bloc meant an absolute breaking with anything resembling the recently finished era. This turn quickly transformed into rejecting of all Eastern, disregarding the extent of "Eastern" historic context of Czech statehood, including the recently past history. Thus, within Czech society certain middle class mainstream preserved. This position which could be quite openly termed "since now on only to the West" was widely reflected by Czech politics as well as Czech science.⁵

All the afore-depicted aspects of "Czech experience" and Czech perception of the East must be taken into account at the moment of starting any circumstantial research on Czech EU presidency and its preparations. Next to this general level related more or less to the majority of Czech society, the development of Czech presidency was also conditioned by the political mindsets of individual actors. Czech political scene – even in terms of foreign policy – is distinctive for its high rate of inconsistency.⁶ This inconsistency is also the result of political parties' rivalry among other things. These do not assume foreign policy positions doctrinally, but more often in response to the current mood of their political opponents.⁷

A significant aspect of presidency preparations was the mounting conflict of government and president Václav Klaus, which took place largely on foreign policy level. This conflict started already with ČSSD government in the office, but after ODS took up, this discrepancy not only failed to be resolved, it even mounted and on the whole became a neuralgic point of Czech presidency and its preparations. These requisites are also to be considered while rethinking the Czech activities in EU.

Preparation, priorities and beginning of Czech presidency vs. EU Eastern policy

Preparations for Czech presidency were started by the second administration of Mirek Topolánek symbolically in January 2007, at that time facing the vote of censure. Unlike other EU countries' practice of having Ministry for European affairs, there was no such resort introduced in Czech government. It was supplied for by a strange

fears of "dilution" of Europe and of Europe becoming impoverished as a consequence of ill-considered admission of new members.

⁵ Among others, one can mention restricting or even closing down of scientific institutions specialized in Eastern Europe. "Intermezzo" or even "interregnum", which thus resulted in Czech "Eastern" studies affects and conditions the Czech bonds with Eastern states and societies and their perception until today.

⁶ These fundamental disagreements in foreign policy are in fact Czech particularity, which kept revealing itself even over the period of association and preparation for EU membership. Unlike other states, here the support/non-support were during all the association process almost equally loud, which to certain degree lowered the bargaining position and power of CR.

⁷ An example would be the ODS (Občanská demokratická strana) and ČSSD (Česká strana sociálně demokratická) relation to two principal topics of Czech foreign policy – Treaty of Lisbon and radar base – during and after the 2006 elections. ODS (or better to say its part) during the preparation for presidency changed its mind on "Lisbon" to "soft Yes." As opposed to that, ČSSD, which still as a governing party in the pre-election period initiated the first radar talks and negotiations with USA, started to oppose this issue after the elections, while ODS became a sound supporter of radar.

and transitory office of vice-premier for European affairs,⁸ given in charge to senator and former ambassador to USA Alexandr Vondra. These two politicians also became unambiguous leaders of the presidency preparations.⁹

Presidency program and priorities were officially introduced on 6 January 2009, six days after its commencement.¹⁰ The central concepts of program were termed "Three E's": Economy, Energetics, Europe in the world. This summary insinuated that the presidency's primary aim is to react to deteriorating economic crisis which in the preceding years heavily afflicted the integrated Europe and slowed down or even stooped its economic growth. The second "E" would stand for a shift in EU energetic needs' solution. When the priorities were created, few expected how highly topical the energetics matter will turn at the beginning of presidency. An onset of "natural gas crisis" not only temporarily paralyzed EU eastern countries but also brought into the open the third "E" – Europe in the world. In terms of relations-building among EU and the other countries, Czech priority since the very beginning was a solution to EU-Russia relation; doing so CR merely picked up the threads of antecedent presidencies. A preliminary problem in January 2009 was naturally settling the dispute and reconciling the situation after the Russian military intervention in Georgia. This matter moreover proved the above-noted disagreement of Government (or premier Topolánek) and president Klaus – Czech president being one of the few European statesmen indirectly lent support to Moscow in Russian-Georgian conflict.

The onset of gas crisis not only launched a new dimension in EU-Russia relations but resulted in overall updating of the topics delineated by Czech presidency as essential in the "Europe in the world" topic. In fact, it originally comprised three geographic areas considered by Czech government the most important in terms of relations with EU: Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and transatlantic relations. One can say that a truly unexpected agenda related to gas crisis and issues related to it – not only in terms of Europe's energetic future, but also the very organization of Eastern Europe – resulted in focus on "Eastern" matters, that is at the expense of Czech presidency's interest in other afore-mentioned areas. This holds at least for first months of Czech presidency.

This is, in fact, how the scope for further developing and elaborating of Eastern Partnership project activities came into being. Czech government reflected on this initiative since it was proclaimed as Polish-Swedish project by European Commission. Although initially – as suggested above – it should not play any major role, Czech presidency in fact could not "evade" it. On the other hand, it must be noted that this project was still far from being insignificant for Czech government. The interest at first did not stem from a special concept of new cooperation of EU and Eastern countries however; paradoxically, it arose rather from long-range "European" policy of the government's strongest party ODS. This policy is based on what is nowadays traditional approach of numerous European conservative parties – that is "prevent further deepening of integration by being more active in its enlarge-

⁸ The agenda of this office would however shrink to no more than EU presidency and its preparation.

⁹ Premier and vice-premier are ODS members.

¹⁰ 'Tisková konference: Představení programu a priorit prez 6. ledna 2009', at <<http://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/tiskove-konference/tk---predstaveni-programu-a-priorit-cz-pres-51281>>.

ment." This attitude resembles the British policy since its very EC entry; after Czech admission this position was taken over by a substantial part of ODS.¹¹ If the Czech presidency attempted to implement some new steps towards establishing new relations with Eastern states, then it did so also partly under this influence.

The original motto of Czech presidency before its commencement should be "We will dulcify Europe" and no one was left hesitating that conceals at least a hint of traditional Czech "eurorealism" if not even "europessimism".¹² Later, however, as a consequence of above-noted events, it was reevaluated and changed to "Europe without barriers." Czech presidency thereby proclaimed the necessity to break down the existing obstacles which within the Common market hinder a truly free movement of all four liberties.¹³ In correspondence with the project of Eastern Partnership, entering the EU market should be gradually made possible for all the participating states, which can meet the demands set by the Union.

Long before Czech presidency's commencement, its gradually evolving interest in Eastern dimension of ENP created apprehension that in long term perspective CR need not be able to defend this course on EU level. An immediate forerunner of Czech presidency over EU was France, the foreign policy of which is largely determined by president, currently more than noticeable Nicolas Sarkozy. He made it more than clear already during his mandate that he did not consider CR an equivalent successor and by numerous diplomatic acts tried to do maximum to weaken Czech influence during presidency.¹⁴ That is why at least the first weeks of Czech presidency were subjected to a would-be "surveillance" of Elysian palace over Straka academy.¹⁵

During its presidency, France became an instigator of so-called Mediterranean union, an instrument to bolster the EU neighbourhood policy with states around Mediterranean Sea. This enterprise logically ran into conflict with deepening the Eastern policy, because amplifying both ENP dimensions at the same time – the Southern as well as the Eastern – was beyond the strength of any presidency as well as EU agenda in general. Even though at least this type of conflict or constraint by France was merely expected, nothing like this actually happened. French attempts on "rival surveillance" over Czech presidency rather surfaced in solving up-to-date problems like new war in Gaza area or the above-noted gas crisis. Seen from this perspective and as far as the Eastern dimension of Neighbourhood policy is concerned, Czech presidency remained spared from the toughest French attacks.

To conclude this it can be noted that EU Eastern policy or the project of Eastern Partnership ultimately found its scope in Czech presidency's agenda, even though

¹¹ It should be noted that since ODS itself entered the European Parliament, it negotiated the eventuality to form an "eurosceptic" club with the British Conservatives.

¹² Note the deliberate use of term "Europessimism" instead of the expected "Euro scepticism", the meaning of which lately and unjustifiably shifted towards almost vulgar designation for those, who are not open to every new integration activity.

¹³ From Czech perspective, the concern was some EU countries' obstructions with admittance of new member states' labour force on their labour market.

¹⁴ Among all others we can mention Sarkozy's comments on the stability of Topolánek's government and Czech political scene as a whole or frequent reiterating of the fact that CR is not yet a member of Eurozone, etc.

¹⁵ French-Czech relations and/or confrontations especially in terms of EU's external policy will be discussed in more details in the following parts of the text.

not a fully privileged scope. A major turn in its favour is clearly represented by gas crisis and the matter of future relations with Russia. However it equally holds that the most activities related to Eastern Partnership were pre-arranged by the European Commission in cooperation with its instigators and Czech presidency was supposed to do a little more than just supervising that everything goes as it should and could not exert major influence over their direction.

The progress of Czech presidency in terms of activities in Eastern Partnership dimension

The preceding chapters were an analysis of certain general prerequisites of Czech presidency for activities in ENP's Eastern dimension development. At the same time, some concrete preliminary problems were outlined – the so-called long-term and short-term conditions affecting Czech presidency's relation to the new project of Eastern Partnership. The last part of this contribution will be devoted to the analysis of the course of presidency and its actions within the examined initiative.

As suggested earlier, the planned activities of Eastern Partnership agenda were integrated in Operational Program of Czech presidency,¹⁶ which did not introduce much more than a paraphrase of the already prepared program of European Commission. In terms of EU foreign relations, the project of Eastern Partnership is quoted on the very first place, before the relations to Russia, transatlantic relations etc. Formulation of specific steps is however somewhat vague and not presenting clear solution to some of the problematic aspects. An emphasis is naturally put primarily on Ukraine, in terms of EU relations primary of all the six states participating in the project.¹⁷ Czech presidency intends to continue negotiating "new and more profound agreement on mutual relations."¹⁸ In case of Moldavia, the negotiations of similar agreement are still to be commenced. And this is where we witness the first of the whole array of consequences of the above-noted vagueness: as what is missing is a slightest reference to Moldavian territorial integrity, which could do much complicate the planned negotiations.

South Caucasian countries are quoted here as a somewhat peculiar group in terms of Eastern Partnership after all. The dominant features here should be new agreements producing a greater stability of the whole region, which is particularly delicate for EU in terms of its energetic safety. The primary goal then is a solution to Georgian crisis while "observing the principals of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia." Similar terms and conditions are pursued by the part of Operational program devoted to relations to Russia, where the countries included in Eastern Part-

¹⁶ 'Pracovní program českého předsednictví', at <<http://www.eu2009.cz/cz/czech-presidency/programme-and-priorities/program-a-priority-478>>.

¹⁷ The term "primary" is used here for denoting the position among the given countries; in terms of the general view of EU-Ukraine relations, it would definitely seem overrated.

¹⁸ 'Pracovní program českého předsednictví', p. 21.

nership are specifically mentioned as an "important theme in terms of relations to Russia" in the area of EU's energetic safety.¹⁹

The separate and ultimately most complicated chapter of Eastern Partnership would be Belarus. Czech government and media traditionally conceive it as "the last totalitarian state in Europe", which would appear as somewhat strict assessment when compared to other usually more benevolent European countries. One can say that president Lukashenko did not see Czech presidency as contributive to his country's relations to EU; this would prove true later on in the course of the presidency. The program of presidency then speaks of the "gradual development" of EU-Belarus relations and opening a constructive dialogue, provided that Belarus government would assist in "encouraging the civic society in Belarus."²⁰

After successfully entangling the January gas crisis – although reaching of the agreement left many questions of future development opened – in February Czech republic won praise by European Commission's president J.M. Barroso, who suggested that unlike the others, Czech presidency had to cope with extremely "brisk start."²¹ This reaction and similar ones by other European politicians could be one of the causes of Sarkozy's Spring tempering of "anti-Czech offensive." Owing also to that, Czech government would enjoy a lot more favourable conditions for continuation with the presidency's negotiation.

A large part of further negotiations related to Eastern Partnership was more or less bound to the solution of gas crisis' consequences. Thus already in January, premier Topolánek visited Budapest and held talks with Georgian and Azerbaydzhan representatives on the perspectives of strengthening EU's energetic safety, and in Polish Wrocław discussed the Russo-Ukraine dispute over natural gas supply²² with Polish and Ukrainian presidents Kaczyński and Juśczenko.

A proof to the rising importance of "Eastern question" for Czech government was inclusion of Eastern Partnership among the key topics of Spring Brussels summit on 19-20 March.²³ That is where and when the new anti-crisis measures and further actions over Eastern Partnership were agreed on. Firstly, the Council confirmed the preparation of Eastern Partnership summit on 7 May 2009. At the same time, the way of forming these relations was set: through a deepening of bilateral relations to integrate these countries into a multilateral framework, which would accelerate reforms, convergence of legal regulations and further economic integrations. Finally, the Council called upon Commission as well as present and succeeding presidency to make progress in effecting the partnership; the Commission was supposed to present in due time a report on the first year of project's duration.²⁴

Despite the positive conclusions drawn by European Council, a persisting problem of the project of Eastern Partnership would be a matter of Belarusian par-

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 'České předsednictví v poločase – přehled významných akcí', at <<http://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/tema/ccsk-predsednictvi-v-polocase---prehled-vyznamnych-akci-55784>>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Besides the said topic, the others were economic situations, energetics and climate changes.

²⁴ 'Evropská rada v Bruselu 19. a 20. března 2009. Závěry předsednictví', at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/CS/ec/106808.pdf>.

ticipation. Numerous issues related to CR-Belarus and EU-Belarus relations were resolved already three days before opening the summit by the Council for external relations presided over by Karel Schwarzenberg, which blocked the restriction on visa for some Belarusian representatives for another nine months. However, along with it the restrictive measures taken against Belarus were extended for another twelve months, after which the Council would inspect the situation in Belarus again.²⁵ Problem with Belarus then became one of the most pressing and delicate in the course of preparations of Summit for Eastern Partnership, which was planned for Prague, 7 May 2009.

This summit's preparations took place during April under the influence of two events or problems. In the first place, it was an unexpected and unforeseen Czech Parliament's vote of no confidence to Mirek Topolánek's government and arrangements for new caretaker government among others by the main opposition party, which made no secret of having totally different views of presidency conduction. The second problem was an emotive statement by Belarusian president Lukashenko on behalf of Czech presidency that he himself will not participate in the Summit and that Czech republic should not be entrusted to organize it. Not only premier – at that time in demise – became part of this affair, but also president Klaus, whose effort to exert influence over foreign policy was described earlier in this text. That is to say, Lukashenko's final "no" to the Prague summit was expressed after Klaus's words that he "would not shake Lukashenko's hand in Prague."

The actual Summit for Eastern Partnership on 7 May was the last activity of Topolánek's government, which was two days later succeeded by the caretaker government of Jan Fischer. Although this summit reached some premised decisions, it was equally marked by an absence of leading European politicians. Major problem, of course, was nonattendance of the above-mentioned Lukashenko, who was nevertheless represented by Belarusian first vice-premier. The head of the state of Moldavia did not attend the summit either and his place was taken by the Minister of Foreign affairs and European integration. Some anticipated guests from EU countries failed to arrive too; most notably the British and Italian premier or French president. The absence of the latter was however a more or less logical outcome of the relations depicted above.

The negotiations' final act, the so-called Joint declaration of Prague Eastern Partnership summit is a culmination of not only the first preparatory phase of this project but also the activities of Czech presidency under Topolánek administration in general. The declaration's message picks up the threads of former plans and agreements resulting from the project and one can say that the summit's major importance was a personal contact of the representatives of all EU countries and six countries included in this project. All agreed on heading towards multilateral framework for EU relations to the given countries, which would simultaneously act as a forum for information exchange. The Eastern countries would thereby report on their progress in transformation and reforms; that would make it possible for the EU members to

²⁵ Tisková zpráva: 2933 zasedání Rady – Vnější vztahy, Brusel 16. března 2009, at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/CS/gena/106700.pdf>.

potentially learn them a bit more in the process. Work groups would be set up in support of individual reform topics. Provided the problems relate to Eastern Partnership, the Eastern states would be authorized to participate in the concrete projects and negotiations of EU. EU would endorse that all by providing increased financial support and focusing on the encouragement of modernization and investing activities in the given countries.²⁶

Eastern Partnership was termed successful and considering the situation on Czech political scene the successor and continuator would be the next presiding state, Sweden.

Concluding remarks

For this study was for better comprehension of the course of Czech presidency started by detailed analysis of Czech positions towards the East, the conclusion only very briefly summarizes the course of presidency under Topolánek's administration.

Following the problematic, by gas crisis affected, though more or less successful step into EU presidency, Czech government had to focus quite closely on the Eastern problem. Considering the goals set in advanced by the EU institutions, Czech government can be said to meet the demands and expectations and accomplish most of the planned actions, most importantly the Prague summit. Nevertheless, although there existed a strong need to put emphasis on Eastern problem and many of them were mentioned above, one has to note this project's lack of something what can be termed a "Czech trace", that is a distinctive and peculiar ideological contribution for the concept of ENP's Eastern dimension. Czech presidency under Mirek Topolánek is still being assessed as rather positive; however, the final assessment can be made only after all the projects' preparations are finished and the real operation of Eastern Partnership is commenced.

Summary

This contribution deals with the problem of Czech presidency's EU activities under the administration of Mirek Topolánek, more specifically activities in the so-called Eastern Partnership project, a brand new dimension of European Neighbourhood Policy. In addition to the appraisal of purely governmental activities led perhaps by handling the gas crisis of January 2009 and its consequences or the preparation and management of Eastern Partnership summit in Prague, an emphasis is put on a more general elucidation of the position of Czech politics and public towards the Eastern Europe or post-Soviet area problem. Although Europe perceives Czech Republic as a country generally more than favourable to Eastern European countries and linked to them through a common experience Soviet dictatorship, the reality is somewhat different. Czech government in fact did little more than follow the beaten track, tra-

²⁶ 'Společná deklarace z pražského Summitu o Východním partnerství, Praha 7. května 2009', at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/CS/en/107617.pdf>.

ced out by Poland and Sweden as the project's instigators and European Commission in particular. One can therefore state a lack of particular "Czech trace" in the project, although it remains disputable whether leaving such trace was possible and feasible at all. Despite certain negatives in Czech relations to European East in general, an overall assessment turns up to be rather neutral – with regards to indeed rather low contribution of own conceptions but with respect to meeting the demands and accomplishing of all major pre-designed and pre-assigned tasks.