

Czech Foreign Policy and EU Integration: European and Domestic Sources

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the impact of EU integration on the foreign policy of the Czech Republic. It surveys Czech foreign policy since 1989, focusing on five distinct periods of the Czech Republic's relationship with the EU. The paper concludes that EU integration has had only a limited impact on Czech foreign policy in comparison to domestic political factors. EU membership also does not appear to have altered basic perceptions of Czech foreign policy interests, which remain largely determined by (pre-1989) historical experience and perceptions of geopolitical vulnerability. However, the Czech Republic has also sought to use the EU to achieve its key foreign policy goals, especially during its EU presidency in the first half of 2009, and EU membership has influenced the development of Czech policy towards Eastern Europe. In these regards, at least, Czech foreign policy can be said to have been 'EU-ised'.*

KEY WORDS: Czech Republic, foreign policy, European Union, Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

European Union membership has many important consequences for the domestic policies, politics and institutions of the former communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. However, it also has a potentially significant impact on the foreign policies of these countries. As a condition of membership, the Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs) had to adopt the EU's *acquis politique* and align themselves with Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) statements and positions even before accession. As member states, the CEECs help shape foreign policy decision-making within the EU's supranational first (or Community) pillar. They also take part in intergovernmental CFSP and European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) deliberations and are expected to coordinate their national foreign policies with other EU governments. It is unclear, however, exactly what the impact of EU integration on the national foreign policies of the CEECs has been. To what extent, in other words, has EU membership and participation in common

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decision-making mechanisms influenced the foreign policies of the new member states, as opposed to domestic and other (non-EU) international factors?

This article helps answer this question by examining the impact of EU integration on the foreign policy of the Czech Republic. It proceeds chronologically, investigating the development of Czech foreign policy in five distinct periods of the Czech Republic's relationship to the EU, beginning with the initial years of post-communist independence following the 1989 Velvet Revolution and the 1993 separation from Slovakia, and continuing through the Czech EU presidency in the first half of 2009. On the basis of this analysis, the article concludes that the EU influence on Czech foreign policy has thus far been rather limited, compared to the much greater influence of domestic political factors such as changes of government and the beliefs and actions of key national leaders. It also argues that EU integration has not significantly altered basic perceptions of Czech foreign policy interests, which continue to be determined by (pre-1989) historical experience and perceptions of geopolitical vulnerability. On the other hand, EU membership has provided the Czech Republic with new multilateral instruments and opportunities for achieving its foreign policy objectives, and it has influenced the development of Czech policy towards Eastern Europe. In these regards, at least, Czech foreign policy can be said to have been 'EU-ised'.

The Post-Revolutionary Period (1990–1992)

In the immediate aftermath of the November 1989 Velvet Revolution, the main foreign policy priorities of the Czechoslovak government were establishing the country's full independence and sovereignty and securing its integration into European and Euro-Atlantic institutions. Achieving the former goals meant securing the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovak soil (accomplished in June 1991) and abolition of the Warsaw Pact, which occurred in July 1991 due to joint pressure from Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary. The idealistic political leadership of post-revolutionary Czechoslovakia – composed mainly of former dissidents and Charter 77 members such as President Václav Havel and Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier – also initially argued for the elimination of NATO and the replacement of Cold War military structures with a new pan-European security framework based on a reformed Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) (CSFR 1990). This idea gained almost no support among other European states, however, and by the end of 1990 Czechoslovak officials had already scaled back their plans for a new pan-European security system and turned their attention to existing international institutions (Šedivý, 1995, pp. 61–69).

The main vehicle of post-communist Czechoslovakia's 'return to Europe' was membership in the European Community (EC), which the new government began to pursue as early as December 1989. One year later, Prague and the governments of Poland and Hungary opened negotiations on association agreements with the EC. The 'Europe Agreements' that were eventually signed in December 1991 offered the CEECs the gradual liberalisation of trade and increased economic and political cooperation, but they did not offer these countries a firm prospect of EC membership. In this regard, and in others (the EC's maintenance of trade restrictions in 'sensitive' sectors such as agriculture and steel), the agreements were a disappointment.

To increase their joint prospects of success in negotiations with Moscow and the EC, the Czechoslovak government sought closer cooperation with Poland and Hungary. An initial meeting between the three governments – initiated by Havel and Dienstbier – took place in April 1990 in Bratislava, and in February 1991 the ‘Visegrad Group’ (named after the Hungarian town in which the meeting took place) was formally established as a framework for Central European sub-regional cooperation (Rhodes, 1999, p. 51). While formed for pragmatic reasons, the Visegrad Group also reflected the general preference of the early Czechoslovak leadership for cooperative and multilateral approaches to foreign policy and international relations.

Overall, in the first years after independence the Czechoslovak government pursued an ‘ambitious and idealist’ foreign policy. This included unsuccessful attempts to mediate international conflicts in the Middle East, Cambodia and elsewhere; pleas for the West to increase its economic assistance to Russia; and support for German reunification, with Havel even issuing a controversial apology for Czechoslovakia’s expulsion of ethnic German after World War II. This agenda essentially reflected the idealistic (and moralistic) orientations and beliefs of Havel and the other former dissidents who were the major foreign policy decision-makers at this time (Šedivý, 1995, p. 63; Wallat, 2001, pp. 17–18).

Czechoslovak foreign policy began to take a more ‘realist’ turn after 1990, however. The main reason for this reorientation was the broad rejection of the Czechoslovak government’s idealistic proposals for replacing NATO and the Warsaw Pact with a new European security architecture. The Persian Gulf War in 1990/91 also led to a positive re-evaluation of US power and NATO’s effectiveness, while the inability of the CSCE to deal with the conflicts in Yugoslavia led to a diminished view of that organisation’s ability to provide security (Šedivý, 1995, p. 68; Wallat, 2001, pp. 18–19). Thus, the Czechoslovak government began moving away from its initial flirtation with European security alternatives and towards a focus on obtaining NATO membership.

The Klaus Era (1992–1997)

The turn towards realism in Czech foreign policy was accelerated by the June 1992 election of a new Czech government (which became the government of the Czech Republic after the Velvet Divorce with Slovakia in 1993). In contrast to the idealism and multilateralism of the Czechoslovak dissidents, the new Civic Democratic Party (ODS) Prime Minister Václav Klaus favoured unilateralism, bilateralism and a generally more narrow and pessimistic foreign policy approach (Šedivý, 1995, pp. 67–69; Wallat, 2001, p. 20). This new approach included a more sceptical view of the EC (after October 1993 the EU), which the neo-liberal (and Thatcher admirer) Klaus perceived as being too socialistic and bureaucratic, and posing a threat to national sovereignty and identity. Thus, while the government’s official goal of EU membership remained, Czech government actions (or lack of them, more precisely, when it came to making legal and institutional preparations for membership) led some to doubt the sincerity of this goal (Pehe, 1995, p. 15).

The Klaus government’s unilateralism (which prevailed despite the more multilateralist inclinations of Foreign Minister Josef Zieleniec) was also reflected in changing attitudes towards sub-regional cooperation within the Visegrad frame-

work. In contrast to Havel and the previous government, Klaus was basically opposed to closer cooperation within the (since 1993, with the addition of Slovakia) four-country Visegrad Group, which he derided as a 'poor man's club'. Instead, and also because of his economic neo-liberalism, Klaus favoured the development of a regional free-trade zone within the framework of the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA) as the preferred vehicle for sub-regional cooperation. In January 1994, Klaus provoked the ire of other Visegrad governments by rejecting a joint approach at the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) summit in Prague, insisting instead on bilateral meetings with US President Clinton (Rhodes, 1999, pp. 52–53).

A major reason for the Czech government's scepticism about sub-regional cooperation was its coincidence with the French approach to Central and Eastern Europe, which argued that the CEECs should first intensify ties among themselves before the EU made any decisions on enlargement. This approach, which was eventually rejected by the EU, was widely viewed as being aimed at delaying enlargement, and thus it negatively coloured the Czech government's views of cooperation within both the Visegrad Group and CEFTA.¹

Another reason for the Klaus government's rejection of Visegrad cooperation was its belief (mistaken, as it turned out) that the Czech Republic's economic transformation was more advanced than that of other post-communist states, and thus it was a front-runner among these countries in the race for EU membership. Cooperation with less advanced countries, the Klaus government felt, would only hold the Czech Republic back and delay its accession to the EU. The split with Slovakia, by detaching the Czech Republic 'from the economically and politically unstable and potentially conflict-ridden regions in eastern and southern Europe' and shifting its geopolitical centre of gravity further to the west, also seemed to favour early EU entry for the Czech Republic and thus supported a unilateral approach (Winkler, 1996, quote on p. 9; Šedivý, 1995, p. 67; Barany, 1995, p. 56).

The Czech Republic's internationalist president, Václav Havel, was highly critical of the 'go-it-alone' foreign policy of the Klaus government, and he sought to counterbalance it by inaugurating a new series of informal discussions among the presidents of the four Visegrad countries plus Germany, Austria and Slovenia. The so-called Litomyšl meetings – named after the Czech location of the initial meeting in April 1994 – never amounted to much, however, mainly because the figures involved occupied largely ceremonial positions with little substantive executive power. Nor were the Litomyšl meetings successful in reviving the Visegrad process. If anything, their existence underscored the stagnation of the Visegrad forum and the Klaus government's disinterest in sub-regional cooperation, which the prime minister himself derided as 'empty regionalism' (Rhodes, 1999, pp. 52–53).²

Havel's efforts notwithstanding, the uncooperative and sometimes arrogant foreign policy approach of the Klaus government led to a deterioration of the Czech Republic's relations with most neighbouring countries. This included relations with Germany, whose support the Czechs needed in order to secure the key goal of EU membership. While Czech–German relations were heavily freighted with mutual historical grievances, Klaus' Euro-pessimistic views also clashed with the more pro-European views of German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Bilateral relations only began to improve with the signing of a new Czech–German declaration of goodwill in January 1997, following two years of contentious negotiations initiated by President Havel. Relations with Poland – the Czech Republic's other large neighbour – also

suffered, especially after the January 1994 Pfp summit. Czech–Polish relations improved somewhat after 1995, but only once the Czech government began to view this as necessary to secure a place in the first waves of NATO and EU enlargement (Wallat, 2001, p. 23; Pehe, 1998).

In the end, the Czech Republic was formally invited, along with Poland and Hungary, to join NATO in July 1997, with formal accession occurring in March 1999. A major goal of Czech foreign policy was thus accomplished. However, reflecting the Klaus government's ambivalence about NATO membership, there was not much public discussion of this objective domestically, and public support for NATO membership in the Czech Republic remained somewhat below what it was in Poland and Hungary.³ Replicating the EU situation, the Czech government's official support for NATO membership was also not matched by military reforms and other preparations necessary for membership, generating some uncertainty about the country's NATO bid until it was formally invited to join (Wallat, 2001, p. 21).

The Accession Process (1998–2002)

With the beginning of accession negotiations in 1998, Czech foreign policy was increasingly shaped by the goal of EU membership. Because it is a matter of intergovernmental agreement, CFSP does not involve the legal instruments (directives, regulations) that exist for other EU policies. As a consequence, unlike other aspects of the *acquis communautaire*, there was no body of CFSP legislation and rules that had to be transposed into national legislation and implemented by the candidate states. Instead, the *acquis politique* consisted mainly of previous joint actions, common positions, statements and declarations, all of which the candidate states were expected to accept. Alignment with CFSP thus proved to be a relatively easy task since it was for the most part merely a rhetorical exercise, and the CFSP chapter was among the first to be 'provisionally closed' by most CEECs in formal accession negotiations with the EU.

The beginning of the accession process coincided with a sharp change in the style and substance of Czech foreign policy, but this was largely the product of domestic politics rather than external influences. The fall of the Klaus government in late 1997 led to an interim caretaker government under the leadership of National Bank Governor Josef Tošovský. New national elections in June 1998 then resulted in the formation of a minority coalition government led by the Social Democrats (ČSSD), who continued governing until 2006 (after winning re-election in 2002). Both the Tošovský and ČSSD governments rededicated the Czech Republic to the goal of EU membership, and they sought to improve Czech relations with the EU, which had been strained under Klaus. The two governments gave renewed emphasis to multilateralism and participation in international organisations. They also revived the process of Central European sub-regional cooperation within the Visegrad format, and they endeavoured to improve relations with neighbouring countries.⁴

The change in governments also led to a change in the style of foreign policy decision-making. The new ČSSD Prime Minister Miloš Zeman (1998–2002) was generally uninvolved in foreign policy, with the exception of his strong pro-Israel views, leaving decision-making in this area to his foreign minister, Jan Kavan. Subsequent ČSSD prime ministers (Vladimír Špidla, 2002–2004, Stanislav Gross,

2004–2005, and Jiří Paroubek, 2005–2006) also focused mainly on domestic politics, while ODS Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek (2006–2009) only became seriously engaged in European policy in the run-up to the Czech EU presidency in 2009.

In March 1999, the Czech Republic became a member of NATO and was immediately faced with a dilemma posed by the alliance's decision to launch air strikes against Serbia in defence of the Kosovar Albanians. After some hesitancy, and initial denial that it had agreed to the air strikes, the Czech government finally voiced its support for NATO's actions. However, it also launched an unsuccessful mediation attempt with Greece, another pro-Serbia country, in an effort to end the air strikes and reach a peace agreement. The Czech hesitancy over the Kosovo campaign reflected widespread public sympathy for Serbia, as well as underlying uncertainty about NATO among some parts of the governing ČSSD and a split in the party between 'Europeanists' and pro-NATO 'internationalists'. ČSSD voters were generally not very enthusiastic about NATO, while foreign minister Jan Kavan was a former pacifist. But the determination of other governments to conduct the campaign was high, and US pressure proved irresistible. Also influencing the government's position were the country's internationalist president (Havel) and the more Atlanticist views of the ODS – even though party leader Klaus was critical of the strikes – which was supporting the minority government through an opposition agreement (Drulák, 2008, p. 8).

Reflecting both strong national interest in the Balkans and increased integration into NATO and EU foreign policy, the Czech Republic became an increasingly active player in this region after 1998 within various multilateral frameworks. Having already supplied troops for NATO operations in Bosnia (IFOR/SFOR) beginning in 1996, the Czech government also contributed to the NATO forces in Kosovo (KFOR) in 1999 and Macedonia (Operation 'Essential Harvest') in 2001. In late 2002, it agreed to contribute officers to the new EU police mission (EUPM) in Bosnia. The Czech Republic was also an active participant in the EU-led Stability Pact for the Western Balkans that was launched in 1999, initially as an observer and from 2001 as a full member. It also contributed to OSCE election observer missions in Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia.

Even though it was not yet an EU member, the Czech Republic also became an active participant in efforts to develop ESDP beginning in 1999. At the first ESDP Capabilities Commitment Conference in November 2000 and the follow-up Capabilities Improvement Conference in November 2001, it offered 1,000 troops for the planned EU Rapid Reaction Force and 100 policemen for the EU police force. By contributing officers to the EU police mission in Bosnia, it became a part of the first ESDP operation. Even so, the Czech government remained somewhat ambivalent about ESDP, fearing that it might compete with and undermine NATO.

The Czech Republic also took on a more active role in other international organisations after 1997, including the OSCE, Council of Europe and the UN. In particular, the Czech Republic began to carve out for itself a prominent role in promoting human rights, viewing this as an area in which it could add value due to its experience as a former totalitarian country that had successfully managed the transition to democracy (Šedivý, 2003, p. 9). The country's active role in this field was strengthened by the distinctive reputation of President Havel as a worldwide human rights campaigner. Indeed, in focusing on international human rights, the

Czech government returned to an issue that had been a hallmark of the first post-communist government of Czechoslovakia.⁵

The Post-Negotiation Interlude (December 2002–May 2004)

Efforts to develop a common European foreign policy encountered a major setback with the intra-European split on Iraq that occurred in early 2003. In this dispute, the Czech Republic and nine other CEECs joined several Western European countries (and a number of prospective candidates for EU membership from the Western Balkans) in backing the US position on Iraq, which endorsed the possible use of force against Saddam Hussein's government without a further UN Security Council Resolution. The split first emerged into the open with a letter published in the *Wall Street Journal* on 30 January that expressed solidarity with the US position, which was signed by President Havel and the leaders of Poland, Hungary and five EU member states (the UK, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Denmark). This was followed one week later by the release of a memorandum backing US policy that was signed by the governments of seven other CEECs (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and Slovenia) as well as Croatia, Macedonia and Albania.

The letter and memorandum provoked an immediate and strong response from some EU countries, especially the French government, which was leading the anti-war bloc. One consequence was that the candidate states were barred from attending an emergency EU summit in Brussels on 17 February, whose goal was to forge a united EU position on Iraq. France and Germany in particular felt that the presence of these governments would only strengthen the pro-US position of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Then, at a post-summit press conference French President Chirac launched a memorable tirade against the CEECs, calling their actions 'dangerous, reckless, not very well behaved'. The behaviour of the CEECs, he continued, was 'childish' and showed that they were 'badly brought up'; they 'had missed a great opportunity to shut up'. Moreover, Chirac warned the CEECs that their entry into the EU was not yet assured, with the national parliaments of member states still required to ratify the Accession Treaties for each of the candidate countries (which, in fact, had not yet been formally signed) (Dempsey, 2003, p. 4).

Prague's initial response to this attack was equally sharp, with Czech Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda declaring 'We are not joining the EU so we can sit and shut up' (Parker & Blitz, 2003, p. 4). Moreover, the Czechs and other CEECs defended themselves against the accusation that they had not properly aligned themselves with EU policy by pointing out, quite correctly, that prior to the 17 February joint declaration (which itself represented a fairly loose compromise), there was no common EU position on Iraq for the CEECs to ignore or break from. What existed instead was a collection of diverse national views that were coalescing around two poles: an anti-war position championed by France and Germany (with Belgium also playing a vocal role), and a pro-US view endorsing the possible use of military force that was advocated by the UK, Spain and Italy. In siding with the latter position, the CEECs were not breaking from an established common position of the EU, but from the Franco-German position that was consolidated at the 40th anniversary celebrations of the Élysée Treaty in mid-January 2003. Indeed, Chirac's pique over the behaviour of the CEECs was probably as much a response to this overt rebellion

against Franco-German leadership as anything, since it substantiated the fears of many French political elites that enlargement would undermine traditional Franco-German (read French) leadership of Europe and lead to the emergence of a more loosely governed and less cohesive EU. At any rate, after the February summit, after being briefed by the EU, the Czech Republic and other CEECs uniformly endorsed the joint declaration on Iraq that was agreed to by the member states (RFE/RL, 2003a).

In the days and weeks following the emergency EU summit the Czech government backtracked to a more centrist position, trying to place itself, as Czech Prime Minister Špidla put it, 'precisely in the middle between the US and EU'. While the Czech government contributed troops to the US-led coalition in Iraq, the Czech forces played only a supporting role and did not directly participate in combat operations.⁶ The Czech government also avoided making strong public statements of support for the war. This repositioning no doubt reflected a desire to repair relations with France and Germany, but it also took into account intense public opposition to the war in the Czech Republic.⁷ It also reflected the circumstances which had placed Prague in the pro-US camp to begin with: the January letter had been signed by President Havel, not the Czech prime minister or any other representative of the Czech government, and he had done so on his own initiative, without prior consultation with the government.⁸ Moreover, Havel was in his final days as president, to be succeeded in February by Klaus. The rebalancing of Czech policy on Iraq, therefore, was perhaps inevitable after the government was bounced into its initial strong support for the US by a lame duck president. This new position was also reflected in the views of President Klaus, who on an April 2003 trip to Germany argued that while he was personally opposed to the Iraq war he did not want a confrontation with the United States, nor did he want the Czech Republic to be forced to choose between the Franco-German or US-British camps (EUobserver, 2003).

The Czech government's effort to find a balanced position between the Franco-German and Atlanticist camps was also evident in its views on the future of ESDP. Prague was critical of Franco-German efforts, at a 29 April mini-summit in Brussels (also attended by the leaders of Belgium and Luxembourg), to create new military planning structures for the EU outside of NATO. The Czech government also criticised a compromise plan agreed to in November 2003 by the UK, France and Germany for a separate EU military headquarters, arguing that it would be a wasteful duplication of resources and could undermine NATO and the transatlantic alliance (RFE/RL, 2003b). However, it regarded the agreement that was eventually reached in 2004, on the creation of a small EU civil-military planning cell linked to NATO, as an acceptable compromise.

At the 2002–2003 Convention on the Future of Europe, tasked with developing guidelines for a new constitutional treaty for the EU, and in which the Czech Republic and other accession states participated as observers, there was general Czech support for strengthening CFSP, including merging the functions of the High Representative for CFSP and the Commissioner for External Relations to create the new post of European Foreign Minister, and the use of 'enhanced cooperation' procedures to make decisions when not all member states were in agreement. However, the Czech government continued to have concerns about the development

of ESDP. Along with most other CEECs, the Czech Republic opposed creating independent European defence structures outside the NATO framework, something which they feared would undermine NATO and weaken the US security commitment to Europe (Mot'ková & Khol, 2003). Instead, the Czech government preferred the development of a stronger EU defence identity within NATO, as foreseen by the December 2002 'Berlin-Plus' agreement permitting the use of NATO assets by EU security operations (Cameron & Primatarova, 2003, p. 5).

After formally signing the Accession Treaty on 17 April 2003, the Czech Republic and other accession states graduated to the status of 'active observers' in the CFSP. This allowed them to participate in CFSP meetings at all levels, giving them the chance to shape CFSP from the inside rather than simply being informed about decisions after they had been made. Full voting rights in CFSP decision-making would have to await formal accession in May 2004, however.

The Initial Years of Membership (May 2004–2008)

Since becoming a member state the Czech Republic has sought to maintain its 'careful balancing act between Atlanticist and European security profiles' (Khol, 2008, p. 84). It has remained a strong supporter of NATO, and Czech forces have participated in NATO operations in Kosovo, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan. The Czech Republic also contributes troops to, and is a strong supporter of, the NATO Response Force.

However, Czech–US relations were affected by the controversy over American missile defence plans that ignited in summer 2006, with reports that the Pentagon had requested money for the construction of missile defence facilities in Central Europe and a visit by US experts to survey potential radar sites in the Czech Republic. While discussions with the United States on the missile defence plans were begun by the ČSSD-led government, the project was also supported by the ODS-led coalition government that was formed in early 2007 after parliamentary elections the previous September. However, the missile defence plans faced substantial public opposition, as well as opposition from the main non-government parties (the ČSSD and the Communists), which was only reinforced by a tardy and heavy-handed government campaign to secure approval of the plans.⁹ Many in the EU were also upset by the Czech (and Polish) government's decision to negotiate bilaterally with the United States without consulting other European countries. An agreement on the construction of new radar facilities was eventually signed by the US and Czech governments in July 2008, but was not ratified by the Czech parliament before the ODS-led government fell in March 2009. In the end, the new US administration of President Barack Obama decided to abandon the Central European plans in favour of an alternative missile defence system that was both more technologically feasible and less objectionable to Russia, generating tensions in US–Czech relations and domestic political repercussions in the Czech Republic (see below).

While NATO remained the primary security reference for the Czech Republic after 2004, Prague has also gradually warmed to the idea of a stronger ESDP, especially one more engaged in the tasks of conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict resolution. The Czech Republic has participated in all ESDP operations in the Balkans: Concordia and Proxima in Macedonia; the EU police

mission in Bosnia; Althea in Bosnia, where the EU took over from NATO; and the EU's civilian mission in Kosovo beginning in December 2008, so far the largest ESDP operation ever launched. It has also participated in the EU's effort, initiated in 2004, to create a number of multinational 'battle groups', agreeing with Germany and Austria to form one such unit by 2009 (later postponed to 2011), and with Slovakia on another that was formed in 2009, and it has played an active role in the European Capabilities Action Plan, aimed at improving the resources available for ESDP activities (Khol, 2008, pp. 92–93).

Czech support for ESDP increased under the leadership of the centre-left government that was formed after the June 2002 parliamentary elections, with strong public opposition to the US-led war in Iraq also spurring increased interest in EU security and defence cooperation.¹⁰ Czech support for ESDP dissipated somewhat after the 2006 parliamentary elections and the formation in January 2007 of an ODS-led government that was decidedly more Atlanticist in orientation. However, a sharp swing in policy was blocked by the inclusion in the government coalition of the Christian Democrats and Greens, both more favourably disposed to increased EU cooperation on foreign policy and defence. While overall Czech support for ESDP has grown since accession, the Czech Republic nevertheless continues to view NATO as the main security framework for Europe, although it favours a stronger EU identity and role within NATO.

Since becoming a member state, the Czech Republic has sought an active profile within CFSP and attempted to promote its interests in EU external policy. Key regional priorities for Czech foreign policy are the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, including the Southern Caucasus. Prague has been a strong supporter of the Stabilisation and Association process in the Western Balkans, and all Czech ESDP deployments have been in this region. It also strongly supports further EU enlargement in the Western Balkans, with its preferred candidates for membership being Croatia, Serbia and Montenegro. The Czech Republic followed the lead of the United States and major European powers in recognising Kosovo's independence in February 2008, although not without some hesitation – the result of traditional ties to Serbia, sensitivity to neighbouring Slovakia's critical position due to concerns about separatism within its own borders, and historically-based objections to large powers deciding the fate of smaller countries (analogy with Munich 1938). The government's recognition of Kosovo was also opposed by President Klaus because of his pro-Serbian sympathies. While the Czech Republic is generally in favour of further enlargement, there is division on the question of Turkey's EU membership, with the ČSSD and ODS for (ODS leader and former Prime Minister Topolánek has spoken in favour of Turkey, as has President Klaus), and the Christian Democrats and the majority of public opinion against Turkish membership (EU Consent, 2008, pp. 75–76).¹¹

Since accession the Czech Republic has also become more active in Eastern Europe. Czech Eastern policy has developed a geographic focus on Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and Georgia, and a thematic specialisation in the promotion of democracy and human rights (Kratochvíl & Tulmets, 2007, pp. 6–7). The Czech Republic has forged particularly strong bilateral ties to Ukraine, including regular consultations between the foreign ministries of the two countries and projects that assist Ukraine in aligning its legislation with EU rules (for instance, nuclear safety

and phytosanitary standards). It has also played a key role promoting democracy and human rights in Belarus, through the EU and other multilateral forums. In both its bilateral and multilateral aid programmes, the Czech Republic has sought to draw on its own experiences of democratisation and EU accession to assist the transformation and integration of its eastern neighbours. Prague has also become a strong supporter of the EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the follow-up Eastern Partnership Initiative (see next section), in general arguing that the EU has not paid enough attention and devoted sufficient resources to its eastern neighbours compared to its southern (North Africa and Eastern Mediterranean) neighbourhood.

A key instrument of Czech Eastern policy has been the Visegrad Group (V4), which Prague and the other three Visegrad governments have reinvigorated since 2004 as a means of exerting greater joint influence within the EU (Dangerfield, 2008). A major focus of V4 activities has been the improvement of ties to the eastern neighbours. During its one-year presidency of the Visegrad Group (June 2007–June 2008), the Czech Republic pursued a special liaison programme with Ukraine that had previously been launched in 2005, as well as ongoing programmes aimed at improving relations with Moldova and promoting democratisation in Belarus. It also prioritised building stronger ties to and encouraging reform in the Southern Caucasus, where Georgia is an especially important partner (EU Consent, 2008, p. 117).¹² Czech Eastern policies within the V4 were later elevated to the EU level, as priorities for the Czech EU presidency in the first half of 2009.

The Czech Republic has adopted a generally critical or cautious stance towards Russia common to the CEECs, although it is not as hostile towards Moscow as Poland and the Baltic states. Some improvement in Czech–Russian relations began in autumn 2003, with a visit by President Klaus to Russia, followed by Russian President Putin's visit to Prague in March 2006. However, Czech–Russian relations cooled under the impact of successive natural gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine (in 2006 and 2009) that affected Czech energy supplies and Russia's military incursion into Georgia in August 2008. The Czech government condemned the Russian military action against Georgia, comparing it to the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. However, President Klaus was more sympathetic to the Russian view that Georgia bore substantial responsibility for the war (Drulák, 2008, pp. 26–27). Czech–Russian relations were also negatively affected by the Czech government's decision to participate in the Bush administration's missile defence plans in Central Europe and by concerns within the ODS about the increased Russian investment presence in the country, especially in the energy sector (CES, 2009a, p. 4; CES, 2009b, p. 5).

Continuing a trend established after 1997, as an EU member state the Czech Republic has continued its active engagement in international human rights issues within the UN and other international organisations. As the government stated in its 2005 Report on Czech Foreign Policy, 'Promoting human rights principles in multilateral forums ... has become an enduring priority of Czech foreign policy' (MFA, 2005, p. 327). Successive Czech governments have been especially vocal over the human rights situation in Cuba. In 2005, the ČSSD-led government supported the view that EU sanctions applied to Cuba in 2003 should be prolonged. Although Prague failed to convince other member states on this issue and the sanctions were

suspended, it successfully pressed for a toughening-up of the EU communiqué to the Cuban government, which appealed for the release of political prisoners and condemned the persecution of political opponents and foreign visitors. Despite being in the minority on this issue, the Czech Republic has continued its critical approach toward the EU's dialogue with Cuba in subsequent years. In June 2008, the ODS-led government unsuccessfully opposed the formal lifting of EU sanctions against Cuba, although it was able to secure the attachment of a number of 'political conditions' to this action (Euractiv, 2008a).

The Czech EU Presidency (January–June 2009)

Under the slogan 'Europe without barriers' the Czech Republic assumed the EU's rotating presidency in January 2009, becoming only the second Central and Eastern European new member state to do so (following Slovenia, in the first half of 2008). Among the benefits of the EU presidency is the opportunity to set (or at least greatly influence) the EU's policy agenda for the six-month period, including in the area of external policy. In its 'Work Programme' for the EU presidency, the Czech government set three key priorities, the so-called three E's – Economy, Energy and EU in the World (Czech EU Presidency, 2009a). While the latter priority explicitly targeted external policy, the other two also had important international dimensions that reflected Czech foreign policy interests.

Under the first priority (Economy), the Czech Republic had assumed the EU presidency in the midst of a global economic and financial crisis. It therefore sought to achieve coordinated European action to restore economic growth, but also to ensure that the EU made a coordinated contribution to global efforts for financial system reform, especially at the April G-20 summit in London. The Czech government also pledged to fight against protectionist impulses in the EU and globally, and to push for the extension of the global free trade system.

Under the second priority (Energy), the Czech government sought to promote both internal and external EU measures to improve energy security. Externally, this included efforts to improve relations with foreign energy suppliers, and to diversify sources and suppliers of energy. In this context, the Czech government placed special emphasis on advancing plans for construction of the 'Southern Corridor', a pipeline system for transporting oil and natural gas from the Caspian region to Europe that would bypass Russia. This goal was a clear reflection of Czech national interests, given the country's heavy dependence on Russian oil and gas.¹³ The Czech government also pledged to help build an international consensus for a new global climate change treaty, possibly to be signed in December 2009 in Copenhagen.

Regarding the EU in the World, the Czech government promised to support further enlargement, with a primary focus on advancing Croatia's membership negotiations. It also emphasised support for the Stabilisation and Association process in the Western Balkans. While indicating continued support for the Southern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, Prague declared that it would give special emphasis to the ENP's Eastern dimension, promising to push forward the Eastern Partnership Initiative that had been proposed by Poland and Sweden in May 2008 (following a Czech 'non-paper' on this issue in 2007). The Czech government also pledged to help develop a unified EU approach to Russia. Improved transatlantic

relations were also high on the external policy agenda of the Czech EU presidency, especially given the recent election of a new US president, as well as more effective cooperation between the EU and NATO on defence. The Czech government also pledged support for EU efforts to promote international development, human rights, democracy and the rule of law, as well as the EU's work in the areas of conflict resolution, nuclear non-proliferation and the struggle against terrorism.

Overall, the Czech EU presidency priorities reflected an internationalist orientation with an Atlanticist tinge that was characteristic of the ODS–Christian Democrat–Green government in Prague (Drulák, 2008, p. 23). However, the Czech presidency began amidst considerable doubt over whether Prague could handle the job, particularly in the midst of global economic crisis and with Europe facing the challenge of an increasingly assertive Russia, due to the country's small size and its relative inexperience in the EU and on the global diplomatic stage. Also creating doubt was Czech domestic politics and the fragile situation of the Topolánek government, which enjoyed only a narrow margin of support in the Chamber of Deputies and faced sharp domestic disputes over ratification of the Lisbon Treaty and the US missile defence plans as well as socioeconomic issues such as healthcare. On top of everything else, there was the uncomfortable presence of President Klaus, one of Europe's most outspoken Eurosceptics and a vocal opponent of the Lisbon Treaty, as well as a prominent critic of efforts to combat global climate change. Despite his limited constitutional powers the unpredictable Czech president was nonetheless capable of embarrassing the Czech government and the EU, which in fact he succeeded in doing at times throughout the next several months.¹⁴ Reflecting these doubts, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose country had just concluded a dynamic EU presidency in the second half of 2008, openly questioned the Czech government's capacity to lead the EU and suggested continued French leadership, on economic issues in particular, through Paris' chairmanship of the Eurogroup (the 16 EU countries using the Euro) (Euractiv, 2008b; Traynor, 2009a).

The Czech EU presidency also had the misfortune of beginning amidst twin international political crises – as if the global economic crisis was not enough – that severely tested the Topolánek government's leadership skills while deflecting attention and effort from its stated priorities.¹⁵ In early January, the Israeli incursion into Gaza sparked international condemnation and outrage; simultaneously, another dispute between Russia and Ukraine over natural gas payments caused sharp drops in supplies to many EU countries. Prague's initial response to these crises was inauspicious: a government spokesman excused the Israeli attacks as 'defensive', prompting criticism from other member states and a correction by Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg,¹⁶ while another dismissed the Russia–Ukraine gas dispute as a 'bilateral' matter for the two governments to resolve themselves, despite its obvious impact on European consumers (Peel, 2009, p. 3). Czech efforts to lead an EU response to the Gaza crisis were also undercut by Sarkozy's separate diplomatic initiatives. Nevertheless, the Czech government soon regained its footing and made a credible effort to intermediate the Russia–Ukraine gas dispute, with a final resolution occurring in late January. Soon afterwards, however, it had to endure further criticism from Sarkozy, who claimed that the Czech presidency was too passive and slow in its response to the economic crisis (Erlanger, 2009).

Ultimately, the biggest failure of the Czech EU presidency was the fall of the Topolánek government after losing a confidence vote in the Chamber of Deputies on 24 March. This surprising development, the outcome of political score-settling and partisan manoeuvring in a still-maturing political system, profoundly embarrassed the country and undermined the Czech government's ability to conduct an effective EU presidency in its final months. Indeed, some Czech experts went so far as to argue 'that due to the fall of the government during the presidency, the Czech Republic for some time even resigned from its role as an international actor' (Drulák, 2009, p. 373).

Following the resignation of the Topolánek government, the parliamentary parties agreed in early April to appoint a technocratic caretaker government that would govern through the end of the EU presidency (30 June) and until new parliamentary elections could be held.¹⁷ The non-partisan head of the Czech Statistical Office, Jan Fischer, was nominated to be prime minister of the caretaker government. At the insistence of ČSSD leader Paroubek, Schwarzenberg was forced to resign as foreign minister and Social Democrat Jan Kohout, the deputy foreign minister and former Czech ambassador to the EU, was named as his replacement. The ČSSD also named a new deputy minister for European affairs, meaning that the Social Democrats would control the main foreign policy positions in the caretaker government outside of the prime minister. After being confirmed by parliament, the caretaker government formally took office on 9 May.

In workmanlike fashion and without further incident, the Fischer government was able to complete the Czech EU presidency. A major concern at the time of the Topolánek government's collapse was that the absence of a strong government would give President Klaus the opportunity to place his own stamp on foreign policy and the remaining days of the Czech EU presidency. In the end, this did not happen, among other reasons because the two main parties, the ODS and ČSSD, were able to dictate the main cabinet appointments and thus prevent Klaus from exerting more influence over the interim government (CES, 2009c, p. 2).

In the end, while the Czech EU presidency was widely portrayed as weak or disappointing, the Czech governments were able to point to some accomplishments in the foreign policy arena.¹⁸ Regarding the international economy, the small size of the Czech economy meant that much of the initiative in dealing with the global economic crisis would come from the larger EU member states, especially Britain, Germany and France. Nevertheless, the Czech government played a key role in resisting emerging protectionist trends within the EU, while also helping to secure agreement on the overhaul of EU financial regulations. Prague also achieved some progress on energy security, beyond helping to mediate the Russia–Ukraine gas crisis. In late March, as part of a broader EU stimulus package, the Czech government overcame initial opposition from Germany and secured funding (€200 million) for the proposed Nabucco pipeline, which would provide an alternative route for Caspian basin energy that bypassed Russia (Euractiv, 2009). On 8 May, the Czechs hosted a successful Southern Corridor summit in Prague that resulted in the signing of an agreement between the EU, Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Egypt to speed construction of the Nabucco pipeline (Bilefsky, 2009, p. 8). The Czech government also managed to achieve agreement between the Council, European Parliament and Commission on the Commission's proposed third energy legislative

package, aimed at liberalising the internal market for gas and electricity and promoting greater solidarity among member states in the face of energy supply threats (Czech EU Presidency, 2009b).

Progress was also achieved on the Eastern policy front, where the Czechs succeeded in gaining formal approval (and funding of €600 million) for the Eastern Partnership Initiative in late March. The Czech government also succeeded in launching the initiative at a summit meeting in Prague on 7 May, an occasion which was nevertheless marred by the absence of the presidents of Belarus (Lukashenko) and Moldova (Voronin) amidst EU criticism of their poor human rights records, as well as the failure of several top EU leaders (including French President Sarkozy) to attend. The Czechs also succeeded in bringing the Western Balkans back to the forefront of the EU's agenda, securing a Council decision to request a Commission opinion on Montenegro's membership application, and making progress on visa liberalisation for the citizens of Western Balkan countries; however, it was unsuccessful in pushing forward accession negotiations with Croatia because of that country's dispute over common borders with Slovenia. Also on the minus side, a unified EU approach to Russia failed to materialise during the Czech EU presidency.

Czech efforts to strengthen transatlantic relations were buoyed when the government succeeded in persuading President Obama to visit Prague for a US–EU summit in early April, following his previously scheduled visits to London for the G-20 summit and Strasbourg/Kehl for the NATO summit. However, Czech efforts to seize the initiative on US–EU relations were undercut by the collapse of the government just days before the president's visit, as well as by Prime Minister Topolánek's unfortunate description, in a speech to the European Parliament on 25 March, of Obama's economic stimulus plan as the 'road to hell' (Traynor, 2009b). Even before this point, however, relations between the US administration and the Czech government were strained by signals that the Obama administration was reconsidering US missile defence plans in Central Europe, which the Topolánek government supported and had invested much political capital in defending against substantial domestic opposition. When the US government eventually announced in September 2009 that it was scrapping the Bush-era plans, ODS leaders, including Topolánek, reacted with dismay. By contrast, the decision was welcomed by the ČSSD and accepted with equanimity by President Klaus, while the Fischer government also reacted calmly and expressed its hopes that the move would not affect cooperation between the United States and the Czech Republic (CES, 2009d, pp. 2–3).

The Czech EU presidency also failed in its efforts to launch a major declaration on human rights on the occasion of the Prague summit. The text was prepared by former president Havel at the request of Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra, Havel's close friend from their pre-1989 dissident days and his former foreign policy advisor. In the document, Havel wrote that 'the EU and USA are determined to thoroughly monitor the present situation in China – among other [issues] also in relation to Tibet – the Russian Federation, Belarus, Burma, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Sudan and in other countries where many free-thinking and honest people suffer for their views'. In the end, however, the government, which had already been voted out of office, did not have the strength or courage to convince its EU partners

(many of whom opposed strong criticism of Russia) to support the text. Havel had the opportunity to present his ideas to President Obama, however, with whom he met for a private conversation at the end of the summit (Nosálková, 2009).

Conclusions

EU integration has had only a limited impact on Czech foreign policy compared to domestic political factors. Among the latter, changes in the partisan composition of government have been particularly important, with notable foreign policy shifts occurring after governmental changes in 1992, 1998 and 2006/07. Prominent individuals, especially the two Václavs – Havel and Klaus – have also utilised their constitutional positions (the former as president from 1989 to 2003, and the latter as prime minister from 1992 to 1997 and president since 2003) and personal prestige to exert a strong influence on Czech foreign policy. Czech foreign policy has often been subordinated to domestic political interests as well, the most notable example being the March 2009 collapse of the Topolánek government which undermined Prague's ability to conduct an effective EU presidency and use it to achieve key foreign policy objectives.

Nor does EU integration appear to have significantly altered basic perceptions of Czech foreign policy interests, which for the most part continue to be determined by the (pre-1989) historical experience of external domination by larger European powers and perceptions of geopolitical vulnerability. This fact – along with the pro-US sentiments of key actors in the Czech government – helps explain the Czech government's support for US policy on Iraq in early 2003, and its later decision to negotiate unilaterally with Washington on the placement of missile defence facilities on Czech territory without consulting fellow EU member states. It also helps explain the Czech Republic's continued preference for NATO over ESDP as the main foundation for European security and defence.

On the other hand, since becoming a member state the Czech Republic has sought to influence EU external policy and use it to achieve its own foreign policy goals. In particular, the Czech Republic has pushed for EU action on each of its main foreign policy priorities, including the stabilisation and integration of the Western Balkans, increased partnership with Eastern Europe, enhanced energy security, improved transatlantic relations and greater cooperation between the EU and NATO, the expansion of free trade and the promotion of international human rights. All of these issues were priorities of the Czech EU presidency in the first half of 2009, which gave the Czech Republic its best opportunity to influence the EU's foreign policy agenda. EU membership has also influenced the development of Czech Eastern policy, providing a strong platform and new multilateral resources for its external assistance initiatives in this region. In both its bilateral and multilateral initiatives (i.e. in the EU and V4), the Czech Republic has drawn on its own experiences to promote democratisation and the alignment of Eastern European countries with EU norms and standards. In these important regards, at least, Czech foreign policy can be said to have been 'EU-ised'.

Moreover, Czech perceptions of foreign policy interest could eventually change as a result of the increased 'socialisation' of Czech policy-makers and politicians within EU structures.¹⁹ The passage of time and pull of geography could also move the

Czech Republic towards greater reliance on the EU, as could the growing capacity and effectiveness of EU security and defence structures, or future US actions which undermine trust in the reliability of US security guarantees. For now, at least, EU integration does not appear to have supplanted the Czech Republic's *reflexe atlantique* with a *reflexe communautaire* when it comes to protecting core foreign policy and security interests.

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Notes

- ¹ Interview with Petr Ježek, former director-general of the EU section and deputy to the state secretary for European integration at the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, November 2009.
- ² The Visegrad cooperation was also undermined by intensification of the Slovak–Hungarian dispute over the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam and tensions over the position of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Interview with Petr Ježek, November 2009.
- ³ Public support for NATO membership in the Czech Republic was only slightly above 50% in the period preceding the country's accession to the alliance (STEM, 2003, p. 5).
- ⁴ For the views of the Tošovský government's foreign minister on the foreign policy priorities of the Czech Republic, see Šedivý (1998). For the foreign policy priorities of the first ČSSD government, see MFA (1999). On the revival of Visegrad Group cooperation after 1997, see Dangerfield (2008, pp. 643–647).
- ⁵ On Czech government activities in the UN, especially in the area of human rights, see the annual reports on Czech foreign policy issued by the MFA and posted on its official website: http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/reports_and_documents/reports_on_the_czech_foreign_policy/index.html. In all of the annual reports since 1998 there has been a section dedicated to Czech foreign policy and human rights.
- ⁶ The Czech government initially contributed a small chemical weapons defence unit that was based in Kuwait to support the US-led invasion. It later set up a field hospital in Basra and sent a military police unit to train Iraqi forces.
- ⁷ In March 2003, 70% of Czechs opposed the Iraq war (CVVM, 2005). For a detailed analysis of the Czech position on the Iraq war, see Handl (2003) also Král & Pachta (2004).
- ⁸ The (pro-US) Deputy Foreign Minister Alexandr Vondra is said to have forced President Havel to sign the letter after Prime Minister Špidla refused to do so. Vondra thus virtually kidnapped Czech foreign policy on this issue, moving it far away from the official policy line of the government. The Czech government's subsequent backtracking to a more centrist position was thus also a return to its original 'non-hawkish' position.
- ⁹ According to Petr Ježek, one factor contributing to public opposition was the 'arrogant behaviour' of the Czech government, which rejected an open-ended public debate on the missile defence issue. It thus demonstrated how a government could fail to promote a (not necessarily-wrong) idea because of disastrous communication. Interview in November 2009.
- ¹⁰ On the security views of the 2002–2006 ČSSD-led government, see MFA (2003, especially pp. 8–9). Also facilitating increased Czech support for ESDP was the departure of Deputy Foreign Minister Vondra – a strong supporter of NATO and an opponent of a more independent European defence capacity – from the foreign affairs ministry in July 2003.
- ¹¹ According to a spring 2008 Eurobarometer poll, only 34% of Czechs supported Turkey's EU membership, just slightly above the 31% EU average.
- ¹² The priorities of the Czech V4 presidency are available on the Visegrad Group website: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=942&articleID=9497&ctag=articlist&iid=1>. On the role of the V4 in EU Eastern policy, see Kratochvíl (2007, p. 193).

- ¹³ In 2005, the Czech Republic depended on Russia for 71% of its oil imports and 78% of natural gas imports (Czech Statistical Office, 2005; cited in Khol, 2008, p. 97).
- ¹⁴ On 14 February, Klaus prompted Members of the European Parliament (MEP) to walk out in protest after he compared the EU to the Soviet Union in a speech (Chafin 2009). Klaus also refused to fly the EU flag over his official residence, the Prague castle, during the Czech EU presidency. Before the beginning of the Czech presidency, Klaus had an explosive meeting in Prague with MEP leaders, who were critical, among other things, of his controversial meeting with an Irish Eurosceptic leader, Declan Ganley, during a state visit to Ireland in November (Booker, 2008). Klaus also played a key role in engineering the no-confidence vote that brought down the Topolánek government in late March.
- ¹⁵ According to Petr Ježek, however, the twin crises may ironically have been a 'blessing in a disguise' for the Czech presidency, as they deflected attention from the not always well-prepared routine agenda and further diminished expectations for good results. Interview in November 2009.
- ¹⁶ On Czech Television, Schwarzenberg termed the statement a 'mistake': 'It was his mistake, everyone makes mistakes', said Schwarzenberg, in reference to the spokesman's remark (Czech Press Agency, 2009).
- ¹⁷ Initially, the plan was to hold new parliamentary elections on 9–10 October, but this was postponed to November following a successful challenge of the early elections before the Constitutional Court. On 15 September, the Social Democrats unexpectedly announced that they would not vote to dissolve parliament and approve early elections, and that they instead preferred to hold them as regularly scheduled in May 2010 (Aktuálně.cz, 2009).
- ¹⁸ For a midterm assessment, see Král *et al.* (2009, pp. 51–71).
- ¹⁹ According to Khol (2004, p. 43), one explanation for the Czech preference for NATO over ESDP may be that key Czech security policy actors were already socialised within NATO, which the Czech Republic had joined in 1999.

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