
Chapter 5

The Visegrad Cooperation, Poland, Slovakia and Austria in the Czech Foreign Policy

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The Czech foreign policy (CFP) towards Central European countries will be analysed as a single (more or less) coherent dimension of the Czech foreign policy where the multilateral and the bilateral cooperation are closely intertwined. This chapter analyses the Czech Republic's involvement in the Visegrad cooperation and its bilateral relations with Poland, Austria and Slovakia. However, to be sure, the next chapter (Vladimír Handl) analyses the CFP towards Germany, which, from the Czech foreign policy point of view, is considered to also be a part of Central Europe.

CENTRAL EUROPE IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY: BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The newly formed government of M. Topolánek (January 2007) entered into the Central European politics with all the bilateral relationships essentially settled (but with several exceptions in the case of Austria, as will be seen below) and with an above-standard level of communication within the Visegrad group (V4 – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia). Similarly to the the case of the CFP in general, there is no strategic grasp on the Czech Central European policy. Traditionally, governmental programme declarations confined themselves to generally sounding declarations of the need of good neighbourhood relations. Neither the *Conception of the foreign policy of the Czech Republic for the years 2003–2006*¹ nor the government programme declaration from early 2007 stepped beyond this general meaning. This is rather unfortunate because the state of the Central European relationships is unprecedentedly good and it creates a great potential for further mutually beneficial cooperation in great many fields. Yet, capitalizing on this potential requires looking at the Central European politics from a broad, politically determined strategic point of view, but such a view has been missing so far. There is absolutely no political discussion on Central European

issues as if the state of affairs were taken for granted without any need to go much further. This is not to say that political actors would have no interest in Central Europe. Rather on the contrary – both executive and parliamentary diplomacy is very active in this matter, there is a dense network of communication on the top political level, and each and every successive government recognizes the importance of Central European diplomacy. Thus, traditionally, all Czech top political actors (e.g. the prime minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the president, the chairmen of the chambers of the parliament) meet with their Central European counterparts several times a year and this fact greatly contributes to the exceptional level of the Central European relations. The intensity of the diplomatic contacts can even be said to have an increasing tendency. This is especially due to the EU membership, the Czech EU presidency, and the financial and economic recession in 2008 and 2009.

This intensive diplomatic involvement of the top political actors partly counterweights the lack of a political framework but the problem that there is no other politically motivated discussion which would provide the Czech Central European policy with a firm political background persists. The Central European policy is thus mostly driven by the MFA and its specialized departments that act without much of a strategic framework. Under these circumstances it is hardly possible to fully exploit the potential of the favourable conditions in the Central European region for deep strategic cooperation. Also, despite the unproblematic running of the Central European politics, from time to time conflict situations appear. Lacking a comprehensive strategic and political framework, the Czech Republic has a tendency to act in an emotional way and rather on the basis of short-term considerations instead of taking into account long-term interests (see below). With a more deeply ingrained sense of the strategic political framework of the Central European politics, such situations would be easier to manage or would not appear at all.

The new comprehensive debate and strategy should above all consider the following questions. First, how can we best utilize the existing good bilateral neighbourhood relations and the V4 cooperation in order to advance Czech interests in European and security politics and world politics (which, of course, also requires the so far equally non-existent discussion about the Czech interest as such)? Second, what can the Czech Republic contribute to the Central European space in terms of capabilities, ideas and inspirations, and why? Third, what role should the entire region play in the European and world arenas, and what should be Central Europe's contribution to world affairs? This last point is of a special importance because so far the so-called 'new EU members' mostly came up with a reactive approach to European politics without any real positive programme (which even applies to the EU's Eastern policy, which has so far been the most 'positively' defined priority of the Central European region).

THE VISEGRAD GROUP IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY IN 2007–2009

The EU membership (2004) of the V4 countries prompted numerous politicians as well as political analysts to disbelief regarding the future value of the V4 coopera-

AUSTRIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY

The Czech relationship with Austria is the most troublesome of all the relations covered in this chapter. Yet, this is not to say the relationship deviates from the overall positive framework of the Czech Republic's good neighbourhood relations. There are two major issues that have the potential to negatively affect the relationship. First, there is the use of nuclear energy, which Austria refuses while the Czech Republic considers it as a growingly important element of its energy mix. Second, the Czech-Austrian relationship is still heavily burdened by the historical reminiscences of the transfer of Austrians from Czechoslovakia (Sudetenland) after World War II and of the related confiscations of their property based on the so-called 'Beneš decrees' (the decrees were a series of laws enacted by the Czechoslovak government during and shortly after WWII, when the Czechoslovak parliament was not organized). The gravity of both issues is amplified by the fact that they are rooted deep in the domestic politics of both countries and as such it is difficult to solve them on a foreign policy basis. For example, in January 2009, 80% of Austrians said they wish the Czech nuclear power plant to close down, while 72% of the Czech population claimed to have no trust in the nuclear energy.²³ Thus, as we can see, the political potential of this issue is enormous. Due to the troublesome nature of the bilateral relationship, it is also true that the level of mutual confidence and frankness has been considerably lower than in the cases of other countries in the region. This factor contributes to the fact that other areas of potential cooperation (like regional cooperation or cooperation within the EU) are rather limited as well. Yet, it has to be pointed out that during 2007–2009 the mutual relationship underwent a positive progress towards greater normalization.

In both countries a new coalition government was formed in January 2007. This fact could have resulted in both negative and positive consequences. The negative factor lay in the fact that the new Austrian government was formed by a 'grand coalition' with the Social Democrats (SPÖ) of A. Gusenbauer (chancellor) as the leading party and the previously ruling Christian Democrats (ÖVP) as a junior coalition partner. When in opposition (2000–2007) the SPÖ presented itself as a strong defender of Austrian interests *vis-a-vis* the Czech Republic, and it exerted a permanent pressure on the centre-rightist governments of W. Schüssel (ÖVP) to adopt a tougher approach towards the Czech Republic namely in the area of nuclear energy. Besides that, the new Austrian government instantly came under a strong pressure from domestic activist groups (namely Atomstopp Temelin), the regional government of Upper Austria, and the Austrian parliamentary Green Party.²⁴ These actors demanded (among other things) that the Austrian government urge the Czech Republic to completely suspend energy production in the nuclear power plant Temelín (the so-called 'zero option'). This was – obviously – completely unacceptable for the Czech Republic. Besides that, the Austrian side continuously called attention to the supposed security risks of the Temelín power plant and to the lack of will on the Czech side to keep Austria fully informed about the actual situation in the power plant. Austrian activist threatened to blockade the Czech-Austrian borders, and these threats were subsequently carried out (to the great frustration of the Czech population and regional

authorities). The potential positive effects of forming new governments in both countries at the same time stemmed from the fact that the Czech-Austrian relationship offered plenty of room for improvement, and the new governments could consider this challenge as an opportunity for a 'fresh start'.

Indeed, both positive and negative forces were at play during 2007–2009. The new Austrian government chose to include the so-called null option into its program declaration, which was very critically accepted by the Czech side. On the other hand, both sides agreed in a strikingly short amount of time on a visit of the new Austrian chancellor to Prague (February 2007). Both sides tried to divert the attention to other topics such as cooperation in the Western Balkans, the transport infrastructure between the two countries, the Czech entry into the Schengen area (which Austria accepted only half-heartedly), the Czech EU presidency in 2009 or the transborder cooperation. Still, Temelín remained the main issue of the February meeting in Prague. And the outcome of the meeting was surprising and promising. The Czech Prime Minister M. Topolánek came up with a plan of establishing a joint parliamentary commission which would thoroughly go through all open questions related to Temelín. The proposal can be, in a way, characterized as a Czech concession because the Czech side for many years insisted that the issues of Temelín require no special bilateral treatment and should be discussed under the so-called Melk agreement (see below) and standard international treaties.²⁵ On the other hand, Austrian Chancellor A. Gusenbauer agreed to speed up the long clogged process of the negotiation of the so-called 'information agreement' which was intended to establish the standard means of communication about the nuclear energy production in the Czech Republic. The new 'information agreement' replacing an outdated agreement from 1989 was signed in December 2007 and finally ratified by the Austrian parliament (but not without controversies) in March 2008.

The creation of the commission resulted in a considerable reduction of the tensions between the two governments and indeed presented a unique opportunity for a 'fresh start'. The border blockades continued very intensely but when the first meeting of the commission approached in the first half of 2007, the blockades ended and almost never occurred since then (what also helped was the fact that the Czech Republic entered the Schengen area and it would be more difficult to realize blockades under the Schengen regime). The joint parliamentary commission met three times in 2007. There have been some controversies, though. For example, the deputies from the extreme rightist Freedom Party of Austria left the commission followed by the Austrian Greens in the fall of 2007. Yet, before the end of 2007 the commission successfully closed the majority of the issues, and the most controversial ones (the integrity of the pressure containment, the high pressure pipelines and some legal issues) were postponed till 2008. The last meeting of the commission was held in Melk (June 2008), which bore a special symbolic meaning, and the two above mentioned issues remained unresolved. Still, the Chairmen of the Commission (J. Kasal on the Czech side and A. Konecny on the Austrian side) agreed that the commission successfully fulfilled its mission.

It cannot be said that the Temelín issue diminished completely with the start of the work of the commission. There were moments in 2007 when this topic surfaced with

an unimpaired force, and the controversies touched mostly upon the differing interpretations of so the so-called Melk agreement, which was signed by the Czech Prime Minister M. Zeman and Austrian Chancellor W. Schüssel in December 2000. During the rest of 2007 there were fierce discussions about whether the Czech Republic fulfilled the commitments of the Melk agreement and whether it was possible to enforce these commitments under international law. While the Czech Republic insisted (more and more openly) that the Melk agreement was already concluded and outlived, the Austrian side argued that the Czech Republic might be put under international investigation because it does not fulfil its obligations (Austria mostly complained that the Czech Republic does not live up to its promises to inform Austria about emergency situations in Temelín in time).

While differing interpretations have persisted, the overall situation in 2008 and 2009 did not resemble the quarrels of the previous years and it has to be stressed that it was a result of a conscious political will and the diplomacy of both sides. In November 2008 a new Austrian government was formed, and eloquently the almost obligatory provision demanding the 'zero option' for Temelín was left out while only the need to continue in an intensive dialogue was stressed instead.²⁶ Yet, it is important to note that the disputes over nuclear energy were not only a matter of a political tradition or a cliché. The different stances of the two countries stem from their deeply rooted approaches towards energy in general. While Austria argues in favour of economically more demanding ways of investing in the search for new ways of producing energy, the Czech Republic opted for economically more accessible nuclear energy. It is in this context where the nuclear energy disputes should be placed, especially during 2008 and 2009, when it became clear that the Czech Republic would sooner or later decide to expand its nuclear energy sources (possibly by enlarging both of its nuclear power plants – Dukovany and Temelín). During 2008 and 2009 Austria sought to stop the process of enlarging these nuclear power plants through many different ways. But it is crucial that so far the Austrian activists and politicians have used only standard means for doing this – for example, turning to Austrian or European courts – and this issue was largely left out of the top political meetings.

While the nuclear energy controversy became more sober during 2007–2009, since late 2008 and especially during 2009 we could witness symptoms of the intensifying assertiveness of the Austrian side regarding the so-called Beneš decrees. Historical questions belonged among the most contested issues of the Czech-Austrian relationship prior to the Czech EU accession. Since the Czech Republic joined the EU this agenda largely remained outside of the highest political level. It is a longstanding position of the Czech Republic that it should focus on the future in its politics while leaving the past to the historians and experts. The truth, however, is that the Czech Republic has not settled the historical questions with Austria, in a way it has solved them with Germany (via the *Czech-German Declaration* from 1997). Thus, the conflict potential remains. The intensification of the political attention devoted to the historical agenda was clearly visible already in 2008, namely due to the activities of the Christian Democrats' speaker for expatriated Germans Norbert Kapeller (ÖVP's deputy) and traditionally also due to the activities of the *Sudeten German Homeland Associ-*

ation (SLO). These actors strove to make the historical agenda a political issue – for example, at the highest bilateral meetings.²⁷ During 2008 these efforts failed. However, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Michael Spindelegger (ÖVP), who assumed his office in the new government of Chancellor W. Faymann (SPÖ) in December 2008, made it clear that he would not shy away from bringing the historical issues to the top level meetings. Thus, the so-called Beneš decrees were (among others) a topic of Mr. Spindelegger's visit to Prague in January 2009, and in a response to a parliamentary interpellation (November 2009) the Minister of Foreign Affairs defended himself against accusations of inactivity by arguing that he regularly brought up this agenda at his bilateral meetings. In his response, Mr. Spindelegger even opened up the question of compensation or the legal pretensions of the transferred Germans, which could certainly evoke harsh responses on the part of the Czech Republic. Till the end of 2009, however, this issue did not escalate. It should be added that the Czech side also contributed to opening up historical questions when the Czech President V. Klaus argued in favour of the Czech exclusion from the European Charter of Fundamental Rights precisely because of his alleged fears that the charter would enable the transferred Germans to reclaim their confiscated property.

The common history of the two countries did not bring only negative moments as we could see in 2008 when several memorials and cultural events devoted to the 40th anniversary of 1968 were held. During the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by the Warsaw pact armies, countless Austrians as well as the Austrian government acted in a heroic and empathic ways when they accepted a number of Czechoslovak exiles. A positive example of a pragmatic cooperation that can contribute to enhancing the mutual confidence is the project in which the two countries share consulate capacities in third countries – the first such project was carried out in Podgorica (Montenegro). A more positive atmosphere was also felt during 2009 when the top representatives from both countries did their best to preserve a high intensity of relations. For example, Minister of Foreign Affairs M. Spindelegger chose the Czech Republic to be his first foreign trip instead of Switzerland, which is the usual first destination for Austria's new Foreign Ministers. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs agreed to meet regularly at least twice a year. Intensive contacts are also maintained between the presidents of the two countries – V. Klaus and H. Fischer. The two countries closely cooperated during the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain. What might also bring potentially positive consequences is the agreement to establish a Commission of Historians (based on a memorandum of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs from September 2009), which will provide a platform for an academic exchange on various historical issues (including the controversial events shortly after WWII).

It was mentioned that the overall atmosphere of the Czech-Austrian relationship is unfortunately imbued with scepticism and suspicion. This is also the case with several other bilateral issues. Austria and Germany remain the only EU member countries – despite the Czech diplomatic efforts – that did not open their job markets to Czech workers and chose to make full use of their exception from the EU rules. Mainly during 2007 Austrian representatives (namely Minister of Interior G. Platter and Minister of Defence N. Darabos) raised the question of whether the Czech Schengen zone

accession would bring with it the threat (among others) that the border controls would remain till July 2008 (because of the European Football Championship), which was completely unacceptable for the Czech side. Austria compensated for the lack of border controls by intensifying police controls at the border regions, which provoked critical responses on the Czech side. During 2009 the situation calmed down as it became clear that the experiences of the Czech Schengen accession have been positive. Yet, these tensions reflect the anxieties ingrained in the society, which are easily exploited by politicians. This makes for a situation that does not provide many favourable conditions for a mutually enriching relationship. To complete the list of controversies during 2007–2009, we should not forget the fact that Austria belonged to the most vocal European critics of the U.S. plans to place the AMD radar on the Czech territory²⁸, and this issue was – surprisingly – also a subject of meetings between the Ministers of Foreign Affairs K. Scharzenberg and U. Plassnik and meetings between the Austrian Chancellor A. Gusenbauer and the Czech ex-Prime Minister J. Paroubek. Austria's negative stance could be informed by its traditional neutrality, by the ideological affinity of the Chancellor to the Czech Social Democrats, who strongly opposed the project, or by Austria's generally more accommodating approach to Russia, which also fiercely rejected the AMD project. In any case, this example also proves the differences in the overall foreign policy vectors of both countries during 2007–2009.

Transborder Cooperation and Transportation

Transborder cooperation is a similarly vital element in the relationship between the Czech Republic and Austria as in the relationship between the Czech republic and Poland. The operational program *Transborder Cooperation Czech Republic-Austria* has 107.5 million Euro at its disposal. The priorities of the program are enhancing the accessibility of border regions, environmental protection, development of transborder infrastructure and tourism, development of education and social integration, support of technology transfer, and support of local authorities' transborder contacts and cooperation. One of the most ambitious projects is the *Centropa region*, which includes 7 regions from Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Besides that, there is a growing tradition of transborder police cooperation. Transborder and regional cooperation with Austria enjoys the highest level of political support. In March 2009, for example, the Czech president V. Klaus received the governor of Lower Austria Erwin Pröll, and the two discussed the potential of the transborder and regional cooperation.

As in the case of Poland, the Czech Republic lacks a quality transport connection to Austria. This is a topic that is almost always discussed at the high political and diplomatic meetings. There are three major issues involved – the freeway connection between Brno and Vienna, and the railway and highway connections between České Budějovice and Linz. The Czech Republic is the only country that is not connected with Austria through a freeway. For a long time, Austria displayed a lack of interest in investing finances into a freeway connection between the two countries. Since 2006 this situation changed and Austria declared the Brno-Vienna connection as one of its priorities. Since then, however, delays in this process have mostly been caused by the Czech side. A memorandum and an agreement were signed (in 2007 and 2008

border controls would (onship), which was for the lack of border controls which provoked criticism down as it became been positive. Yet, are easily exploited any favourable conditions of controversies during to the most vocal of the Czech territory²⁸, between the Ministers of Transport between the Austrian J. Paroubek. Austria, by the ideology of the Czech Republic strongly opposed to Russia, which also proves the difference during 2007–2009.

relationship between the Czech Republic and Poland. The Czech Republic–Austria has been enhancing the achievement of transborder integration, support contacts and cooperation, which includes 7. Besides that, there is a need for closer and regional cooperation. In March 2009, for the Lower Austria Erwin Schmidhuber regional cooperation. The transport connection between the Czech Republic and Austria with political and diplomatic free-way connection between České Budějovice and Linz that is not connected by a railway line. It is a lack of inter-connection between the two countries. Since the lack of connection as one of the main reasons has mostly been caused by the lack of funds (in 2007 and 2008

respectively), committing both parties to finish the project. Yet due to administrative problems, a lack of finances and protests by environmental groups, the Czech Republic has not been able to guarantee the project's completion, and thus this situation lasted well into 2010. The Brno-Vienna connection is part of a planned Trans-European transit network called TEN-T. The České Budějovice-Linz connection is part of the same network, and this project is even farther away from being launched despite the fact that both projects are declared to be priorities of the Austrian government.

Economic Relations

The dynamics of mutual trade growth between the Czech Republic and Austria are weaker than those between the Czech Republic and other Central European countries – between 2000 and 2006 the mutual trade grew only by 50%. The balance is slightly positive for the Czech Republic. The Czech surplus has been on a slow decrease during 2007 and 2008 and returned back to the original levels in 2009. The economic recession of 2008 and 2009 also negatively affected mutual trade, which dropped to 81.7% of the previous year's volume in 2009. The Czech export to Austria traditionally depends on the condition of the German economy as Austria is to a great extent a sub-supplier of Germany. The most important Czech exporters to Austria are Megalimex, Škoda Auto, and the Unipetrol refinery. The largest Austrian exporters to the Czech Republic are ÖMV and Baumax. It is important that the economies and markets of the two countries are highly interconnected. Thus, for example, companies like Bosch Diesel or Škoda rank high as both exporters and importers. Austria is traditionally the third largest investor in the Czech Republic (after Germany and Japan). The most important Austrian investors in the Czech Republic are traditionally banks (Erste Bank, Bank Austria Creditanstalt and Raiffeisen Bank). One of the most important investment events during 2007–2009 was the acquisition of the *Prague Stock Exchange* by the *Vienna Stock Exchange* in 2008. In 2009 four stock exchanges (Vienna, Prague, Budapest, and Ljubljana) created a *CEE Stock Exchange Group* with a market value of around 128 billion Euro. The Czech investors in Austria have been less active (which stems, among other things, from the weaker economic power of the potential Czech investors). But in 2008 there were, for example, talks about the possibility that the Czech company ČEZ would take part in the privatization of the Upper Austrian company Energie AG.²⁹

One of the most important trades was the planned Czech acquisition of a number of Pandur II armoured personnel carriers from Austria. The agreement stipulating that the Czech Republic would buy 199 of the carriers for roughly 850 million Euro was signed by the then Minister of Defence Karel Kühnl shortly before the end of his governmental term in the summer of 2006. Many questions were raised already at the time when the deal was made, and in late 2007 the agreement was cancelled by the Czech side (to the great frustration of its Austrian counterpart). During the entire year 2008 many negotiations took place over a possible renewal of the agreement, which the Austrian government openly supported. In March 2009 the Czech government approved a new agreement for an acquisition of only 107 carriers for ca. 576 million Euro (that is 70% of the original price for 53% of the original number of armoured

carriers). The deal has been accompanied by obscurities and surmises of corruption, and it can be expected that in the near future there will be some follow-up and maybe even a scrutiny of the trade.

SLOVAKIA IN THE CZECH FOREIGN POLICY

The relations between the Czech Republic and Slovakia are usually described as extraordinarily good and this description suits them well. There are no unresolved issues in the relationship, the highest level meetings take place at least once every year and the cooperation and communication between particular ministries and other administrative bodies are dense, regular and standardized. The bilateral agenda is thus determined mostly by multilateral issues (namely EU, NATO and the V4) and the current international and regional development. This means that the bilateral agenda has largely disappeared. What makes the bilateral relation more interesting is the fact that positions towards the multilateral issues and international development are informed by the particular foreign policy and ideological orientations of the governing parties. In the period 1998–2010 the ideological profiles of the respective governments were always adverse. Yet it has to be stressed that the exceptional nature of the relationship has endured during these years in spite of the adversities.

During 2007–2009, these adversities largely came out of the Czech government being centre-rightist and the Slovak government being dominated by the leftist party Smer. Differing ideologies, which in the Central European region also often entail differing foreign policy orientations³⁰, meant that the two governments adopted diverging views on some of the hottest issues during 2007–2009, especially the issue of the U.S. anti-missile radar. Relatedly, Slovakia also promoted a more cheerful approach to Russia (this approach was embodied foremost in the person of the Prime Minister R. Fico /Smer/ but it was shared by the entire government). During 2007 and 2008 Slovak representatives repeatedly and on various occasions expressed their disagreements with the U.S. plans for the missile defence radar in the Czech Republic to the annoyance of the Czech policy makers. In January 2008 the Slovak Prime Minister refused the AMD project at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and similar words were used also during his bilateral visit to Russia. Similarly, the Slovak President I. Gašparovič loudly voiced Slovak concerns about the radar base during the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.³¹ It is crucial that Slovakia never opted for a more assertive approach and did not directly attack the U.S. plans in the Czech Republic. During the second half of 2008 this topic gradually disappeared as the Czech Republic (and its relationship with Slovakia) was more concerned with the upcoming EU presidency and with the ever growing possibility that a new U.S. administration would reconsider its AMD plans in Europe. Also, the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs played an important moderating and balancing role as it carefully differentiated between the official Slovak positions on the one hand and the more or less personal opinions of the Slovak representatives on the other. For quite some time, dissimilar approaches towards Russia also meant dissimilar approaches towards the promotion

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Czech Foreign Policy in 2007–2009

ANALYSIS

Prague 2010