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# The Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic

## *Domestic Politics Back with a Vengeance*

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The Czech Republic is facing, today, a more challenging international environment and a more pressuring European context that it has ever experienced since its accession to the EU in 2004 or, even, its return to independence in 1989. The international normative and legal orders are increasingly contested by the rising ambitions of new powers and by the return of nationalist tendencies across the board. In the United States, which since 1989 had been regarded by Czech elites as providing both a strategic compass and a cultural model for their own country, the new president has expressed views on NATO and Russia that are antithetical to the Czech Republic's long-held positions. The EU and Russia are profoundly at odds with each other since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis, and Prague is said to be one of the targets of Moscow's attempts to influence the internal politics of member states. The EU has itself been confronted by several internal trials, such as terrorist attacks, the rise of populism, the refugee crisis, and the exit of the United Kingdom (which was regarded in Prague as a like-minded country inside

the bloc). The European context is not only challenging but also pressuring, in the sense that the EU integration project very much stands at a crossroads and individual member states will have to make decisive choices in this regard. Germany and especially France are pushing for deeper integration around the eurozone core, and the prospect of a “multi-speed Europe” (with countries having different status and levels of integration) is becoming more likely. The Czech Republic is not a member of the eurozone, and its population remains widely opposed to adopting the common currency, but its high dependency on Germany in terms of trade and investments also means that remaining outside of these new integration frameworks—if they materialize—could turn out to be costly for its domestic economy. The Czech Republic teamed up with its Central European partners from the Visegrad Group in refusing to take in refugees and in rejecting the relocation quotas previously agreed on at the EU level by member states. In response, the EU Commission has launched an infringement procedure against Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic.<sup>1</sup> At the same time though, on topics other than migration, Prague has been—like Bratislava—wary to avoid being too closely associated with the populist governments in power in Warsaw and Budapest, which find themselves in open confrontation with the EU institutions over their domestic reforms eroding the rule of law. As all these examples illustrate, Czech foreign policy faces significant challenges and dilemmas; it very much finds itself at a critical juncture.

Anticipating Czech Republic’s choices in this context appears particularly difficult, however. No clear direction has emerged in Czech foreign policy over the past years; if anything, this policy has in fact often been characterized by its indetermination and paralysis, mainly due to political infighting.<sup>2</sup> As emphasized by a former senior Czech diplomat, who served in the EU Commission and as ambassador to NATO, the “ambiguity of Czech positions” weakens the country and causes “unease among its allies over the extent to which it can be relied upon.”<sup>3</sup> This sense of confusion is only reinforced by the fact that some of Prague’s recent decisions go in the opposite direction of what had come to constitute the country’s traditional foreign policy stance since 1989. The previous emphasis on human rights and democracy promotion, which had for long constituted a defining feature of Czech foreign policy, is increasingly being replaced by a more pragmatic and trade-oriented approach: While the Czech Republic used to be known as the staunchest critic of the Cuba regime in the EU, it recently singularized itself by being the only EU country that kept its embassy open

in Syria and even somehow improved its trade relations with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad in spite of the war raging in the country. Similarly, while two presidents of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel and Václav Klaus, had cultivated privileged relations with Washington, the former regarding the United States as a political model and the latter as an economic one, current Czech President Miloš Zeman came to ban the U.S. ambassador from Prague Castle in April 2015 after he had criticized Zeman for being the only EU leader to attend the World War II commemorations in Moscow. Finally, following an opposite evolution than that of the EU mainstream, the Czech Republic stood among the member states wishing to impose sanctions on Russia after the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and among those rather reluctant to impose them following Russia's 2014 intervention in Ukraine, although Moscow's responsibility in the outbreak of the latter conflict was much greater than in the former.

This evolution prompts the following questions: What drives Czech foreign policy and what prompted the changes noted above in particular? Are these changes the mark of a profound change of direction in Czech foreign policy or simply punctual contradictions resulting from domestic politics spilling over into foreign policy? What are Prague's diplomatic priorities and foreign policy preferences at the EU level? How is the Czech Republic likely to position itself in the changing international and European contexts? This chapter purports to shed some light on these questions by contrasting Czech foreign policy then and now. It begins by presenting the historical background, domestic sources, and past traditions in this policy. It then focuses in turn on three issue areas of key importance for Prague in EU foreign policy—namely, relations with the United States, relations with Russia, and policies toward the Eastern neighborhood—and traces the evolution of Czech positions on these dossiers. The conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses the likely future direction of Czech foreign policy.

### **Historical Background, Domestic Context, and Czech Foreign Policy Traditions**

In 1989, after decades of seeing its foreign policy determined by outside factors, the Czech Republic was led to radically rethink its foreign policy in a peculiar regional context. The collapse of the bipolar geopolitical configuration left a security vacuum in Central Europe, a heterogeneous

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region that had been embedded in the frame of successive empires (whether Habsburg or Soviet). To protect and consolidate their newly regained statehood, the Czech Republic and other Central European countries have strived to anchor in the novel continental architecture in which the EU and NATO served as the two pillars. In the 1990s, Czech foreign policy was almost exclusively devoted to joining these two organizations.

The process of laying the foundation for a new foreign policy coincided domestically with a period of national reconstruction. The strategic need to anchor the country in regional security structures, and the ontological need to reestablish the state in its Western identity, came together in the “return to Europe” paradigm. The Czech Republic did *return* to Europe eventually by completing its accession to both NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. As such, it achieved the overarching foreign policy objective that monopolized its attention and resources for fifteen years. This irremediably created a void in Czech foreign policy thinking. As the political class grew disinterested in—and largely tuned away from—foreign policy matters once these memberships had been achieved, this void has been filled by a small number of foreign policy entrepreneurs, who shaped the diplomatic course of the country.

Two figures have dominated Czech politics in the two decades following the return to independence: Václav Havel and Václav Klaus. Havel, who served as president from 1989 to 2003 after having been the leader of the dissidence (the underground intellectual opposition movement to the communist regime), played a crucial role in molding the ideological basis of Czech foreign policy. His aura facilitated relations with Western powers and institutions. He made foreign policy his *domaine reserve*, and he did not hesitate to impose his own choices, even sometimes against public opinion or government members’ positions, on the topic of reconciliation with Germany. Havel’s imprint has been profound and perennial, because he and his advisers essentially laid the foundations of the country’s foreign policy (and oversaw it through most of the 1990s). Translating dissidents’ philosophy into international relations, he established, for instance, the human rights and democracy promotion pillar in Czech foreign policy.<sup>4</sup> It became a cornerstone of Czech diplomacy that was promoted as a specialization at the EU level.<sup>5</sup> Havel’s foreign policy positions should not simply be summed up to this aspect, however, as is too often done. He was also a convinced Atlanticist and a firm believer in the European project.

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This last aspect in particular distinguishes him from the other prominent political figure of that period, Václav Klaus, who was prime minister between 1993 and 1997 and then president from 2003 to 2013. Klaus manifested much less interest in foreign policy and, one could add, less diplomatic abilities. Nevertheless, because he had a durable impact on the Czech political debate, installing notably at its core a strong attachment to the free market economic model and a sense of sovereign exceptionalism feeding a skeptical attitude toward the EU integration process, he influenced the domestic context in which foreign policy was formulated, as well as the country's international image. This is true not just about his ideological orientation but also his governing practice: Klaus was known for using the presidential springboard to voice his personal views in a provocative manner. He did not hesitate, for instance, to draw a comparison between the EU and the old Soviet Union *inside* the European Parliament or to travel to conferences abroad to promote his book refuting climate change theories. As will be illustrated below, his successor, President Miloš Zeman, has adopted a comparable maverick posture in foreign policy since he took office.

In the 2000s, a third group of foreign policy entrepreneurs came to occupy key positions in the Czech foreign policy system. These entrepreneurs could be designated as Atlanticists (they were also sometimes referred to as “hawks” in the Czech debate). In addition to a strong pro-American orientation and a critical stance toward Russia, they assumed the democracy promotion agenda from Havel and reproduced Klaus's lukewarm approach to the EU. Sociologically, this group is mainly composed of former dissidents who have turned hawkish as well as policymakers who specialize in strategic affairs. Both strands had been socialized to American worldviews in the 1990s and enjoy strong links with the U.S. epistemic and policymaking communities. The leading figure of this group, Alexandr Vondra, minister for European affairs between 2007 and 2009 and minister of defense between 2010 and 2012, fits both profiles: He is a former member of Charter 77 and was ambassador to the United States around the time of NATO accession. This group's imprint was notably manifest on certain key decisions in the 2000s—such as support for the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, participation in the Ballistic Missile Defense scheme conceived by the George W. Bush administration, or the tough reaction to the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008—that led the Czech Republic to be closer, in EU foreign

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policy debates, to Poland and the Baltic states than to Slovakia and Hungary. The influence of the Atlanticists progressively decreased after the early 2000s, however, due to generational change and as a new Social Democratic government that came into power in 2014, sidelining some key figures.

In examining the domestic context, it is important indeed to distinguish between the foreign policy elite and the political class. The latter is rather inconsistent and largely inconsequential in terms of foreign policy doctrine, but it affects foreign policy practice nonetheless. International issues rank very low on parties' and politicians' agendas; they occasionally pick on some issues to score points in the domestic political debate but rarely articulate a coherent vision in international affairs. In the 2000s, the two main parties—the Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)—have adopted declamatory postures when in the opposition but have, by and large, followed similar foreign policy lines when in government. Similarly, ANO, a party that emerged in the early 2010s and entered government by forming a coalition with the ČSSD following the 2013 legislative elections, did not have any section on foreign policy in its program. Václav Klaus, the former president, and Miloš Zeman, the current president, have further complicated the picture by voicing singular views and adopting stances antagonistic to the government. Overall, the strategic course of the country in international affairs has long been set by the foreign policy elite while domestic politics mainly played a mediating role, by derailing, paralyzing, or boosting specific policies. For instance, the two preferences that have been installed at the heart of Czech foreign policy after 1989, Atlanticism and democracy promotion, have been mainly pushed by the foreign policy and strategic elites but not endorsed to the same extent by the political class or public opinion. After 2013, however, divisions within the party leading the governing coalition, the ČSSD, and the growing influence of other political actors with populist inclinations led foreign policy to be overtaken by domestic politics. The ČSSD found itself consumed by political infighting between its pro-European faction and its members advocating a more sovereign and conservative orientation.<sup>6</sup> Two political figures capitalized on this situation and filled the rhetorical gap on international affairs: Zeman, who himself is a former member of ČSSD and retains a power of nuisance in the party, and Andrej Babiš, the current prime minister and leader of ANO, the party that won the legislative elections of October 2017. Both politicians resorted to populist strate-

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gies and discourse—in the context of the refugee crisis in particular—that led for the foreign policy elites to be less audible.

### **Significant Actors and Regional Focus: The Case of the United States**

Among non-EU actors, the United States is by far the most significant for the Czech Republic. Maintaining a strong and functional transatlantic link has been the cardinal priority of Czech foreign policy since the 1990s, pursued within multilateral frameworks such as the EU and NATO, as well as through constant endeavors to upgrade bilateral ties with Washington where possible. Throughout the 2000s, the Czech Republic stood out as one of the staunchest Atlanticists in Europe, with successive governments not hesitating to go against public opinion in supporting U.S. policies. In more recent years, Czech Atlanticism has become much less vocal but remains largely unquestioned.

A sustained American military presence in Europe has long been seen by Czech policymakers as a way out of the geopolitical dilemma that placed the country between two overly powerful neighbors (Germany and Russia) and that, historically, often determined the fate of their country. Czech support for the U.S. campaign in Iraq, a region beyond its traditional zone of geopolitical interest, can be understood in these terms. The rationale was to follow the Americans in the Middle East in order to try to preserve U.S. involvement in Middle Europe.<sup>7</sup> Yet Prague's allegiance to Washington does not derive solely from security considerations: A significant share of the country's elite regard the United States as a political and economic model. Washington is also praised for its role in pushing for the Czech Republic's integration into NATO and for its proactive democracy promotion agenda. In other words, for Czech foreign policy elites, Atlanticism has been normative and not just strategic. This was notably manifest in the discussions around the Czech Republic's participation in the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) project envisaged by the Bush administration. In the early to mid-2000s, the Czech Republic and Poland were to participate in the Bush administration's plan for a third BMD site by hosting on their soil a radar station and ten interceptor missiles, respectively. The first negotiations began in 2002, they became official in 2007, and in the summer of 2008

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the first agreements were signed.<sup>8</sup> For the Czech foreign policy elites, their country's participation in the BMD system amounted to an upgrade of its strategic status: The opportunity to get even a few American boots on Czech soil was welcomed as an additional security guarantee. But some of the advocates of the project also cast it in identity terms, presenting it as a way to strengthen the country's anchor in the Euro-Atlantic civilization as well as its Western identity. In fact, Prague did not ask for any material compensation in return for hosting the BMD and seemed content merely with the opportunity to strengthen its alliance with Washington. This clearly contrasted with Poland's utilitarian and business-minded approach to the BMD negotiation. The domestic opposition to the project was much smaller in Poland than in the Czech Republic, and thus it should have been easier to sell internally. Yet, Warsaw asked for much more from Washington in return for hosting components of the system, such as financial and technical assistance in modernizing its army and the deployment of several Patriot missiles on its territory. In other words, in contrast to the Czech stance, Polish Atlanticism seemed more strategic than normative.<sup>9</sup>

In the Czech Republic, the foreign policy and security elites, the center-right parties of the governing coalition, and the mainstream media were overall supportive of their country's participation to the BMD system. The majority of the population, an active share of civil society, and political parties outside government were opposed to it, however. The ČSSD, which was the main opposition party at the time, decided to capitalize on popular discontent; contrary to most foreign policy issues in this period, what came to be designated in Czech debates as the "radar" thus became heavily politicized.

This party and other opponents from both the political class and civil society criticized the BMD project for unnecessarily putting the Czech Republic at risk and for encroaching on its sovereignty. Opposition parties delayed the ratification of the July 2008 agreement in the lower house of parliament, where the governing parties did not have a majority. In September 2009, anyway, the new U.S. administration of President Barack Obama announced that it was dropping the project in light of its financial cost and technical uncertainties.

For this decision and other features of its positioning in international affairs (such as the 'reset' with Russia or the "pivot" to Asia), the Atlanticist coterie in the Czech Republic largely resented the foreign policy of the Obama administration for it was not corresponding to their preestablished



ideological conceptions. This transpired in the “Open Letter to the Obama Administration” of July 2009, signed by preeminent political figures from Central and Eastern Europe, including Alexandr Vondra and Karel Schwarzenberg, who had been the two most influential decisionmakers in Czech foreign policy since Václav Havel.<sup>10</sup> The text bemoaned “that Central and Eastern European countries were no longer at the heart of American foreign policy” and warned against taking the region’s stability and Atlanticist inclination for granted. In other words, the initial reaction of Czech foreign policy elites to Obama’s attempt to “normalize” relations with Central Europe—that is, to bring those relations in line with the region’s geopolitical value for U.S. international strategy—was to criticize the new stance rather than try to adapt to it. This tends, again, to emphasize the normative (or ideological) rather than strategic texture of their Atlanticist stance. The text was not explicitly endorsed by the caretaker government in power in Prague at the time and was criticized by many Czech analysts, but its publication and the cancellation of the BMD plan affected Czech-U.S. relations for several months.

In light of the party’s previous positions, questions lingered as to how much the ČSSD-led government, which took office in January 2014, would affect Czech policies toward the United States. Overall, while seeking to distinguish itself from the legacy of political figures such as Vondra and Schwarzenberg, the new team did not fundamentally put into question the country’s transatlantic leaning. In the context of the debate on the “strategic reassurance” to be provided to NATO’s Eastern members following Russia’s actions in Ukraine, Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka made remarks that clearly contrasted with earlier goals pursued through participation in the BMD project. He declared that, contrary to Poland or the Baltic states, the Czech Republic was not calling for a reinforcement of NATO military presence on its territory or in Europe more generally.<sup>11</sup> The statement must in part be read as a posturing move in domestic politics rather than as a genuine foreign policy orientation, however: It was rather inconsequential at the strategic level because such deployment was not contemplated by the Atlantic alliance anyway and was mainly seeking to echo the public’s deep-rooted aversion to the stationing of foreign troops on national soil. In fact, many internal political actors criticized this declaration, including President Zeman, who is not positioning himself as an Atlanticist.<sup>12</sup> What is more, a few months later, while preparing for an official visit to Washington, Sobotka reaffirmed that the Czech Republic sees “the

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transatlantic bond as the foundation of [its] security policy.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the election of Donald Trump did not fundamentally alter the course of Czech policies toward the United States. Some commentators from the press and civil society have criticized the political program of the new American president while, by contrast, Zeman has declared his admiration for it. Overall, according to a study comparing EU member states reactions to Donald Trump’s election, “the image of the U.S. in the Czech Republic remains little changed.”<sup>14</sup>

### Relations with Russia

Russia is another important non-EU actor for Czech foreign policy. On this issue, divisions among internal players have been more salient than on relations with the United States. The Czech position has been more complex and more nuanced than what is accounted for in international media, where the country is depicted either as irremediably fearful of Russia because of its history or as amenable to the Kremlin’s positions because it is crippled from within by Russia’s influence.

From an economic point of view, Czech-Russian relations have been steady and consequential. On the political and rhetorical side, by contrast, they have often been rocky. While relations were good in the years immediately after the Velvet Revolution, they deteriorated over the question of the Czech accession to NATO. A period of cordial normalization followed in the early 2000s, but a new period of tension emerged around the American BMD plan and, more broadly, Russia’s new assertiveness in regional affairs. In 2007, Moscow regularly denounced the BMD scheme and went as far as threatening to point its missiles at Prague and Warsaw. Czech policymakers responded by castigating Russia’s ‘neo-imperial’ attempts to regain control of its former sphere of influence. Nevertheless, these condemnations were mainly rhetorical and very rarely obstructed diplomatic channels.

In the Czech Republic, declarations on Russia quite often serve, indeed, domestic political objectives. The Russian question is highly polarizing internally, more than in most European countries, and it is thus crucial to understand how the various domestic preferences compete and how this configuration affects Czech foreign policy. The Atlanticist stream of the foreign policy elites, the ODS party, an important share of the mainstream

press, and several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and think tanks are highly critical of the Kremlin and often present Russia as a threat to national security. They have often used Russia as a straw man in domestic political discourse: The Mirek Topolánek government (2006–09) had, for instance, used Russia as justification for the BMD project, but also, more surprisingly, as a reason to ratify the Lisbon Treaty.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, the ČSSD, the business community, and a share of the population are more inclined, traditionally, to see Russia as an economic partner. President Zeman for his part sometimes adopts, in a provocative style similar to that of his predecessor, positions that are overtly pro-Kremlin, largely endorsing, for instance, Vladimir Putin's account of the Ukraine crisis. This position allows him to appeal to the share of Czech voters who are more positively inclined toward Russia and demonstrate his independence from the government.

While in the past they were mainly shaped by the foreign policy elite, Czech policies toward Moscow have been increasingly influenced by domestic political dynamics; they sometimes seem more dictated by these dynamics than by Russia's actions themselves. The difference between Prague's reactions to the Russo-Georgian conflict of 2008 and to the Ukraine crisis of 2014 is particularly illustrative in this regard: Contrary to the other EU member states, the Czech Republic adopted a more hawkish position on the former than on the latter. In 2008, Czech government elites condemned Russia as the aggressor and joined member states such as Poland, the Baltic states, and the United Kingdom in demanding EU sanctions against Moscow.<sup>16</sup> By comparison, neighboring Slovakia, whose geographic and historical situation vis-à-vis Russia is similar to that of the Czech Republic, adopted a different stance on the conflict: Bratislava pointed to Tbilisi's responsibility in initiating hostilities and joined the group opposed to sanctions (including Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Greece).<sup>17</sup> The latter group eventually prevailed, and no sanctions were imposed in 2008.

In 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for armed groups in Eastern Ukraine, the EU progressively imposed a set of economic sanctions on Russia. In the internal EU debates on these sanctions, the Czech Republic has often counted among the member states opposed to these sanctions or calling for their lifting.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, Prague has been oscillating between reluctantly supporting sanctions as an incarnation of EU unity and implicitly calling them into questions. This

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lack of clarity stemmed from deep divisions at the highest state level, where the three principal figures at the time defended divergent positions, although they were (or had been) members of the same political party (ČSSD). Then Prime Minister Sobotka had adopted a reserved attitude toward sanctions, not officially calling for their removal but pointing to their negative effects on Czech businesses and seeking specific exemptions. Then Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaorálek and his team had been the most critical of Russia and advocated sanctions in the name of the EU mainstream. Finally, President Zeman has called for the lifting of sanctions, presenting the conflict in Ukraine as a “civil war” in which Russia was not involved.<sup>19</sup> Outside the governing circle, the ODS and most of the media have called for tougher sanctions and military cooperation with Ukraine, while the Czech citizenry sees the Ukraine crisis as a threat to European security but remains divided on the issue of sanctions.<sup>20</sup>

In reviewing these positions, it is important however to distinguish between rhetorical posturing and concrete policy decisions: President Zeman might be a vocal critic of sanctions and regularly expresses his views at home and abroad, but when the Czech Republic has to vote in the European Council on the continuation of EU sanctions on Russia, the decision rests with the government.

### **Priorities and Niches in the EU’s Common Foreign and Security Policy: The Case of the Eastern Neighborhood**

In the early 2000s, promoting further EU enlargement eastward ranked high among the foreign policy priorities of the Czech Republic and other Central European member states. The rhetorical commitment to that objective remains—the Czech 2011 foreign policy white book (*Conceptual Basis of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic*) listed, for instance, “strengthening the European integration of Eastern Europe” as one of the country’s priority inside the EU—but the actual level of engagement in realizing has largely faded. Not only is the prospect of such enlargement increasingly unlikely in the medium term, in light of both the EU’s internal dynamics and of the regional context, but Visegrad countries have themselves become much less warm to the idea.<sup>21</sup> This is especially true of the Czech Republic.

In the late 2000s, as EU membership was not readily available for states like Moldova or Ukraine, the Visegrad countries invested instead in the

eastern dimension of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). More specifically, they supported the creation and development of the Eastern Partnership (EaP), a program that aims at fostering the economic integration and political association of six post-Soviet states with the EU.<sup>22</sup> Poland, in particular, played a crucial role in providing the conceptual basis for the policy and in working toward its adoption at the EU level, supported in that endeavor by the other Visegrad countries. The Central European investment in the EaP has been serving multiple goals. Being geographically close to—and retaining historical, socioeconomic, and societal links with—the post-Soviet neighborhood, Central European countries have an acute interest in the region’s stability and economic development. In addition, the effort by Central European member states to tip the ENP geopolitical spotlight eastward has also been serving intra-EU objectives: It is a means to carve for themselves a niche of specialization within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) structures and thereby to increase their agenda-setting capacities in Brussels. The Visegrad countries can indeed claim a certain expertise both on the post-Soviet region and on the process of democratic transition.

In the case of the Czech Republic, the diplomatic attention to, and EU-level activism for, the Eastern neighborhood has been unequal however.<sup>23</sup> The region, with the exception of Belarus, was largely bereft of Prague’s foreign policy radar until the mid-2000s. Prague’s reaction to the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine was very limited, for instance. In 2007, however, the Czech Republic presented in the framework of the Visegrad Group a proposal on how to develop an eastern pillar within the ENP.<sup>24</sup> Later on, it supported the Polish initiatives that led to the creation of the EaP, which was in fact launched in Prague in May 2009 under the aegis of the Czech EU presidency. Two factors prompted this new foreign policy activism toward the Eastern neighborhood. First, this new diplomatic priority was successfully pushed internally by policy entrepreneurs from the Atlanticist foreign policy elite and the NGO sector: The former saw it as a mean to roll back Russia’s influence in the Eastern neighborhood and the latter as a way to promote democracy in the region.<sup>25</sup> Second, the Czech Republic was keen to find a flagship project for its EU Council Presidency role in 2009 and in increasing its specialization and influence within EU structures more generally. The influence of these two factors is confirmed by the fact that with the Czech EU presidency being over and the internal influence of the Atlanticist foreign policy elite receding, Prague’s diplomatic

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attention and level of activism toward the region has diminished. In that sense, Czech foreign policy seems more closely aligned than before with the attitude of the population: 62 percent of Czechs oppose, indeed, further EU enlargement.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusion

During the 2000s, the Czech foreign policy process was largely deserted by the political class once NATO and EU accession were achieved. In that decade, as noted by a long-term observer of Czech politics, foreign policy has never been among the top-five priorities of any of the successive governing coalitions.<sup>27</sup> Instead, diplomatic and strategic elites played a key role in shaping the policy choices of the country.

As this chapter has shown with reference to Czech policies toward the United States, Russia, and the Eastern neighborhood, this state of affairs has recently been somehow reversed, however. The foreign policy elite is no longer able to steer Czech foreign policy as it used to, and the influence of its Atlanticist branch in particular has decreased. Conversely, domestic political considerations and partisan infighting have increasingly affected foreign policy decisions. This is salient not just in the three issue areas analyzed, but also with regard to Czech EU policies. For instance, outgoing Foreign Minister Zaorálek, who since 2014 had been regarded as one of moderate and pro-European voices on the Czech political scene, engaged in March 2017 in an unexpected rant against the EU and its institutions—in all likelihood because of upcoming elections and to be in a better position to compete with the populist-leaning President Zeman and Andrej Babis, the current prime minister.<sup>28</sup> Czech commentators abundantly criticized his declarations, pointing out that they risked weakening the country's position in the EU by conveying an image of unpredictability and short-termism.

Foreign policy cannot, obviously, be summed up—or simply grasped—based on rhetorical statements. Several Czech initiatives at the EU could be mentioned, and more generally, Prague's balancing act—at once using the Visegrad Group as a punctual coalition platform on certain topics and avoiding association with the governments in power in Warsaw and Budapest—shows that it increasingly conceptualizes its national interests in European terms. What is more, the *politicization* of Czech foreign policy

amounts, in fact, to a *normalization* to a certain extent. The conditions in which Havel laid the groundwork for Czech foreign policy, as well as his aura and vision, were exceptional. The momentum following the Czech Republic's accession to the EU and NATO, in which Atlanticist policy entrepreneurs were able to tilt the country's foreign policy in a certain direction, took place in a markedly different European and international contexts. For the Czech Republic, as for all the other member states, the choices to be made at the EU level are much more pressing now than a decade ago. Following the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump, Atlanticism has lost much of its shine and operability in this context, at least in the way it was previously defined.

The structural influence of domestic politics on foreign policy is common to any country; emphasizing it simply invites one to pay closer attention to political parties and to how they relate to foreign policy matters. The lack of schooling and vision of the political class in international affairs is hardly a pattern confined to the Czech Republic. What appears more detrimental in the case of the Czech Republic and several other European countries, though, is the absence of a political party setting forward a positive agenda and, most important, a sense of ownership about the EU.

#### NOTES

1. See "EU Takes Action against Eastern States for Refusing to Take Refugees," *The Guardian*, June 13, 2017.

2. This is the main conclusion of the 2016 edition of an annual assessment of Czech foreign policy conducted by a local think tank. Vít Dostál and Tereza Jermanová, eds., *Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy 2017* (Prague: Asociace pro Mezinárodní Otázky/AMO, 2017).

3. "Interview: Confusing Czech Foreign Policy Worries Allies," *European Security Journal*, May 25, 2017 ([www.esjnews.com/interview-karel-kovanda](http://www.esjnews.com/interview-karel-kovanda)).

4. On Havel's ideas and on its imprint on Czech foreign policy, see Jacques Rupnik, "In Praise of Václav Havel," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 3 (2010), pp. 135–42; Ondřej Ditrych, Vladimír Handl, Nik Hynek, and Vít Střítecký, "Understanding Havel?," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 3 (2013), pp. 407–17; Rick Fawn, "Symbolism in the Diplomacy of Czech President Vaclav Havel," *East European Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (1999), pp. 1–19.

5. David Cadier and Kristina Mikulova, "European Endowment for Democracy: Institutionalizing Central and Eastern European democracy promotion model at the EU level?," in *Democratization of EU Foreign Policy? The*

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*Role of New Member States*, edited by B. Berti, K. Mikulova and N. Popescu (Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2015), pp. 83–101.

6. Dostál and Jermanová, *Agenda for Czech Foreign Policy 2017*, p. 14.

7. Jacques Rupnik, “America’s Best Friends in Europe: East-Central European Perceptions and Policies towards the U.S.,” in *With US or Against US: Studies in Global Anti-Americanism*, edited by Tony Judt and Denis Lacorne (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 99.

8. See Nikola Hynek and Vít Strítecký, “The Rise and Fall of the Third Site of Ballistic Missile Defense,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 43, no. 2 (2010), pp. 179–87.

9. David Cadier, “Après le retour à l’Europe: convergences et contrastes dans les politiques étrangères des pays d’Europe centrale [After the Return to Europe: Convergences and Contrasts in the Foreign Policies of Central European Countries],” *Politique Etrangère* 3 (September 2012), pp. 573–84.

10. “An Open Letter to the Obama Administration from Central and Eastern Europe,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 16, 2009. Neither Vondra nor Schwarzenberg were in power at the time of the letter’s publication, but both resumed key governmental positions just a few months after (as minister of defense and minister of foreign affairs, respectively).

11. “Slovak PM Follows Czechs in Ruling Out Foreign NATO Troops,” Reuters, June 4, 2014.

12. “PM Draws Fire for Saying Czech Republic Will Not Call for NATO Troop Increase,” *Radio Prague*, June 4, 2014.

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