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BEHIND THE CURTAINS OF THE CZECH-RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC CONFLICT

ABSTRACT

As a result of the Czech-Russian political conflict that began on April 17-18, 2021, there appeared trends in the relations between Russia and Central European countries that are capable of rolling them back to the period of "velvet revolutions". The conflict started with diplomatic withdrawals on the Czech side and then on the Russian, gradually had been enriched by the new and new accusations thus transforming it into a general political conflict, the unprecedented escalation of tension between Moscow and Central Europe since transformational revolutions here. At the same time, it revealed the intentions of the sides to seek recognition of their rightness at any cost. The history of this largest confrontation between Prague and Moscow since 1968 is based on the unsettled nature of many issues of post-Soviet coexistence, such as the parity of diplomatic representation, as a result of which the Russian embassy in Prague turned into the second largest after London. In addition, there was a lack of political reform of in the Czech-Russian relations, taking into account the Czech Republic's membership in the new Euro-Atlantic structures against the background of clearly progressing economic cooperation. Meanwhile, as the author of the article states, the issues that have appeared on the surface of these relations require an immediate solution, which will be difficult – especially for Moscow in the light of the recently progressive confrontational nature of relations between Russia and both some individual states and Euro-Atlantic structures as a whole.

KEYWORDS: Russia, Czech Republic, bilateral relations, state interests, political reform, diplomatic scandal, conflict settlement.

It only took two days for Cherninsky Palace, which houses the Czech Foreign Ministry, and Smolenskaya Square to completely paralyze Russian-Czech relations. Still, many people keep hopes that the noisy mass expulsion of diplomats will only be remembered in the relations between the two countries only as of the "April 2021 crisis" and will not grow over to the "next 1968" as already some of the Czech experts predict. We have not completely overcome the consequences of those events over the past 53 years [Pók, 2020; Tuma, 2020]. If today we shall not

be able to find a civilized and mutually acceptable settlement to the conflict, primarily diplomatic, then we can forget about positive relations with the Czech Republic for at least another half-century.

So far, in the information space of the Czech Republic, the latent grievances and anti-Russian sentiments inherited from Soviet times are being reviewed. The current sentiments associated with the new realities of Russian presence in Central Europe are also evident, and not unequivocally assessed as large-scale American or Chinese projects. [Shishelina, 2019] The new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jakub Kulhanek, who took office after the "diplomatic demarches", and several times offered Moscow a compromise solution to overcome the crisis, precedes all his official statements with the words that the Czech actions are not directed against the Russia state or against the Russian people, but only against the actions of the Russian special services. It becomes obvious, however, that the genie of Russophobia that was released from the bottle on April 17-18 will inevitably sweep away from the pre-election Czech political arena all political parties and movements that previously cautiously promoted the idea of possible pragmatic relations with Russia [Centraljnaya, 2018; Vedernikov, 2020]. The sphere of political or scientific-cultural relations may be gone for a long time. Does this fall within the interests of Russia? Definitely not.

1. DOMESTIC POLITICAL CRISIS

Analysts assumed that as a result of the approaching parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic, the aggravated struggle for the tender to expand the nuclear power plant in Dukovany, the struggle for vaccines, gas pipelines, etc., the so-called "Russian question" would resurface in Czechia - as it does in all Central European societies [Zadorozhnyuk, 2019]. However, almost no one could have imagined that this process would accelerate like an avalanche immediately after the Congress of Czech Social Democrats on April 9-10, 2021. The party played a significant role in Czech politics all the years after the Velvet Revolution, but in the second decade of the 2000s, it gradually began to lose ground [Dinus, 2019; Hopta, Hoptová, 2019; Marušiak, 2020]. Now it is only a junior coalition partner of the ANO party (Movement "Action of Dissatisfied Citizens") of the billionaire Andrei Babish; nevertheless, it occupies prominent positions in the country's government (Minister of Internal Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Labor and Social Development, Culture, Agriculture). Moreover, both parties are rapidly losing their ratings both together and separately as revealed in opinion polls.

The coalition as a whole has hardly survived the past year under the quarantine. In March, it became clear that the Czech Republic was losing ground in the fight against the pandemic. There were not enough hospital beds or vaccines. Today, it is already the fourth Czech Minister of Health within a year, who is trying to lead

the Czech battle against Covid-19, and autumn parliamentary elections are at stake. According to public opinion polls,¹ the young opponents of Prime Minister A. Babis - the coalition of the Czech Pirate Party and the Starosts and Independents (STAN) movement (30%) - have been in the lead for a long time. ANO follows with a wide margin (23.5%). The CSDP gained a little more than 3% and loses the chance to enter parliament. It was against this background that the Congress of the Czech Social Democracy took place on April 9-10, 2021. Former Foreign Minister Tomasz Petřicek fought for the leadership by proposing a renewal program. However, he did not gain the necessary support among fellow party members, after which he was forced to resign. Had he remained in office, perhaps the current diplomatic scandal would have acquired a more civilized and less destructive character, despite the former minister's completely obvious dislike for modern Russia. Thus, from April 12-21 (i.e., at the most dramatic moment in the current history of Russian-Czech relations), the leader of the party, Jan Hamacek, found himself in three positions at the same time: Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Internal Affairs and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

After the communists, who served as a conditional pillar of the shaky government coalition, announced that they would support a vote of "no confidence" on April 14, Jan Hamacek announced his intention to fly to Moscow on April 19 to negotiate the purchase of the Russian vaccine. The leader of the ruling coalition, Andrei Babish, did not like this idea. He said that the Russian vaccine wasn't going anywhere anyway and this was not a favourable time for a visit to Russia. In addition, he said this would not help to regain the confidence of the communists, which would have allowed the coalition to hold on to power for another six months.

On the evening of April 17, A. Babish and J. Hamacek, most likely realizing that they would not be able to play the Russian card, announced the expulsion of 18 Russian diplomats, "proved to be connected with the Russian special services." The suspects were given 48 hours to collect their things and leave. Thus, the Social Democrats and the "dissatisfied" tried to get ahead of the opposition in playing the anticipated - judging by recent political campaigns - anti-Russian spy card. Late in the evening on Sunday, April 18, the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the Czech Ambassador and announced that 20 Czech diplomats were *persona non grata*, and demanding they leave Moscow within 24 hours. All this took place against the background of the Czech side voicing new details about the allegedly proven involvement of the Russian special services - Petrov and Boshirov, who were already famously known to have been "on duty in Europe" in the 2014

¹ https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/volebni-pruzkum-kantar-volby-poslanecka-snemovna-preference_2104111G23_aur

explosion at an arms depot in Vrhetica. Soon several inconsistent statements were made by Prime Minister A. Babis. The incident was initially described by him as "an act of state terrorism on the part of Russia", then as "an attack on Bulgarian goods". At first, he promised to publish the results of the investigation of the Czech special services, then he says that not everything can be published. The possible party-political and pre-election background of the scandal are also evidenced by the opinion expressed by Prime Minister A. Babish in the Cherninsky Palace on April 21 when introducing the new minister Ya. Kulhánek: "We are a successful government, leading a successful vaccination campaign and who had broken the Russian spy network..."

2. RUSSIAN VERSIONS

The reaction on the Russian side also raises several questions. First, what was the hurry? Moscow announced the expulsion of Czech diplomats within 24 hours, late Sunday evening, and gave them only 24 hours to leave. Usually, on Smolenskaya Square, such steps of foreign states are carefully considered. The offense is understandable (although diplomacy should be guided first of all by reason, and not by emotions), but they sent away two more diplomats higher in status. Thus, the Deputy Ambassador of the Czech Republic to Russia was declared *persona non grata* and this was seen as Moscow's readiness to continue escalation. These actions were accompanied by official explanations, circulated by the press, by representatives who lacked a clear understanding of the situation. The statement that by expelling Russian diplomats from Prague, the Czechs tried to divert the attention of the world community from the assassination attempt on A. Lukashenko, looked curious. Traditionally, allegations were made about the pressure of the USA, Germany or Great Britain on the "fooled / weak-willed" Czech Republic. Accusations poured in that Prague "is serving the transatlantic master." At the same time, no one remembered that the Czech Republic (a NATO member since 1999) in 2011 refused to deploy elements of the American missile defence system on its territory²; and not later than in August 2020, during a visit to the Czech capital by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, also refused deployment of an American military contingent on its territory.³ [Samorukov, 2019] This is more than just a bold and independent step under the conditions of NATO membership. Moscow did not accept the proposal of the new Czech Foreign Minister to return 20 Czech diplomats to Russia, citing Prague's ultimatum. This situation could have been more flexibly defused especially since the Czech side, already in the morning

2 <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1747428>

3 https://news.rambler.ru/world/44G45743-chehiya-ne-zahotela-razmeschat-u-sebya-amerikanskih-voennyh/?utm_content=news_media&utm_medium=read_more&utm_source=copylink

of April 19, clearly signalled that it estimated the harshness of Moscow's reaction and was ready to reasonably reduce the level of confrontation. Against this background, the Cherninsky Palace decided to give G3 Russian diplomats a month and a half to leave Prague (to achieve parity in the number of diplomatic staff). However, they were not assigned the status *persona non grata*. Prague counted on Moscow's retaliatory step in terms of its diplomats, however, as it turned out, in vain. Moscow reacted symmetrically to the unprofessionalism of the acting Czech Foreign Minister. In relations with the countries of Central Europe - as recent events have shown - Russia still tries to act as "big brother", a capricious patron, often operating on some imaginary picture of what is happening in the region and its countries, created in the history of Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and Bratislava in Soviet times.

3. CENTRAL EUROPE AND RUSSIA'S INTERESTS

Moscow reacted even more unpredictably to the nervous reaction of the Czech Republic. As a result, like a house of cards, relations began to take shape with other countries of a difficult region for Russia. The expulsion of Russian diplomats from Slovakia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania followed. NATO and the European Union condemned Russia's actions. Finally, on April 26, a meeting of the Prime Ministers of the Visegrad Group took place which unanimously supported Prague.⁴ The heads of state promised assistance from their diplomatic missions in Moscow to the embassy of the Czech Republic in a difficult situation. Germany promised to provide similar support in the work of the Czech consulates in Russia. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán wrote on his Twitter: "We support Prague, we express our solidarity."⁵ Thus, as a result of the conflict that began on April 17, tendencies emerged in the region, rolling back relations with Russia to the period "before the velvet revolutions."

Does this fall within the interests of Russia? Is this what was achieved after three decades? Definitely not. The real reason for this situation, most likely, is that even despite the specific explosion in Vrbeřtica (seven years ago) and still the lack of direct evidence of the involvement of Russian special services in its implementation, the Czechs have long been irritated by the size⁶ and the activities of the Russian embassy in Prague. These sentiments were most likely not reflected in the reports of diplomats to Moscow, although here and there they appeared in

⁴ <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/statement-of-the-ministers-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-v4-countries>

⁵ <https://www.magyarhirlap.hu/kulfold/20210426-orban-viktor-csehorszag-mellet-vagyunk>

⁶ According to various sources, until April 17, 2021, about 140 employees worked at the embassy, and it was considered the second largest after the Russian embassy in London. This is twice the size of the American embassy in Prague and 4.5 times more than the Chinese official representation in the Czech capital.

the Czech and Russian press - starting with the case of the illegal leasing of the ambassadorial real estate, and ending with the detention of a Russian diplomat in Ricany while trying to buy ammunition.⁷ At the same time, a hasty shot by the outgoing parties leading the Czech government will not help them. Support from Brussels has so far turned out to be less convincing than expected. At the end of last week, Andrei Babish received an audit decision on the illegal spending of EU funds by his company Agrofert, accompanied by a demand for a refund, which he is going to appeal. So far, they are in no hurry with the mass expulsion of Russian diplomats from Europe. Contrary to initial hopes, the intervention of President Milos Zeman, known for his loyalty to the Kremlin, did not help either. Unfortunately, his speech on April 25, 2021, did not change the situation in any way.⁸ He stated that two versions still need to be worked on. According to one, the explosion occurred due to negligence; on the other hand, the mentioned Russian citizens were in the Czech Republic at the time, but it has not been proven they were exactly in this region. Against this background, said President M. Zeman, Russia should not be punished in such a way as to be unable to participate in the Dukovany tender. After this speech, Andrei Babish and Jan Hamacek made statements that there could not be a second version, and Andrei Babish urgently went to Milos Zeman to clarify positions. Meanwhile, the opposition continued its struggle to distrust the government and accused the president of high treason. Thus, on the eve of the elections in the Czech Republic, serious political upheavals can be expected, into which Russia has become involved. One could even say - to a certain extent "exposed itself" - that Russia for many years ignored the signals of growing discontent in Prague, abandoning a conceptually new approach in relations with the countries of the Central European region. In this situation, it would be more correct to sit down at the negotiating table and resolve the issue of reasonable diplomatic representation, not reducing the number of both embassies to the current number of Czech diplomats in Russia, but deciding how many employees are needed to perform the direct functions of the embassies. Experience has shown that 140 employees at the embassy are not a guarantee of the effective work of the institution. The Russian Embassy in Hungary, which is much smaller in size, nevertheless provides much better results.

Today Russia has found itself in a situation where its diplomatic relations with many states have entered a zone of increased turbulence. Therefore, the question is natural: how important is the Central European region for Moscow? And if they align, what would their relations look like?

7 <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/14/08/2020/5f3G53G59a79474efa0054f4>

8 <https://www.hrad.cz/cs/video/mimoradny-projev-prezidenta-republiky-15909#from-list>

In the last decade, after the completion of the financial agreements on compensations for the losses caused by the Soviet troops with the countries of Central Europe, the region, alas, left the conceptual sphere of Russian foreign policy. Even the very mention of it was absent in the foreign policy concept of 2016, although this region contributed to Russia's "return" to Europe after 2014. Whatever the initial reasons, several factors make it possible to doubt the correctness of this step, especially the deliberate introduction of the Czech Republic and other states of the region in the category of "unfriendly". Here it is necessary to ask those who are responsible for the region and for relations with its specific states - why the relations resulted in a crisis. The region of Central Europe is important for Russia primarily from the geopolitical point of view, it is close to it geographically. Although there are practically no common borders, Russia and the countries of Central Europe are still conditional neighbours in the region [Dostál, 2020; Mislivetz, 2019]. Moscow is inextricably linked with Prague by a common culture, mutual interest in traditions, and a well-known kinship of mentality. Finally, especially today, it is important to preserve the existing economic ties based on the great potential for complementarity [Habarta, 2019; Müller, 2020]. It is also worth noting that, unlike Russian politics, the administration of President Donald Trump has paid increased attention to the Visegrad Four countries, based precisely on their strategic importance. And the Czech Republic' outpost of the region in the West - all the more deserves a more tactful attitude. The conflict is not over yet. However, according to the steps already taken, it is clear that the debris will remain for a long time and will enter as a bold stroke in the chronicle of 21st century Czech-Russian relations.

The public - especially the Czech public - is as excited as the Russian. Proposals have already been heard to impose sanctions on several Czech goods. Russia has been struck out of the tender in Dukovany, but the exchange of diplomats for beer looks no less a curiosity than this ridiculous consequence of the pre-election congress of the Czech Social Democrats. For the fourth decade already, the Visegrad countries, like the Baltic and Balkan countries, have not been controlled by Moscow. They are pursuing independent policies choosing new allies for themselves, but for several reasons all this time they have tried to maintain good relations with Russia. This needs to be noticed and appreciated.

Most countries have special programs for relations with Russia. If Russia claims to be a power, in this scenario at least a regional one, it should return to the issue of developing a conceptual policy framework for relations with the Central European states and strictly follow it, using diplomacy for the good, and not to the detriment of relations. The way back to the state "before April 17", before the "tragic weekend", will be difficult and slow, given the mentality of the Czech Republic and other states of the region. This mentality was not born today or even in Soviet times; it existed here intrinsically, in some ways determining the

geopolitical importance of the region at the beginning of the 20th century. Global leadership will depend on who will influence the region; the well-being of the coast itself depends on which shore the Central European "ferry" will eventually find anchorage, in the words of the classics.

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