

**CONFERENCE PAPER**

**POLITICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA  
AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC:  
OR THERE AND BACK AGAIN?**

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**Paper presented at ICEG EC Conference  
Budapest, 5-6 February 2004  
Economic and Political Relations After the EU Enlargement:  
The Visegrad Countries and Russia, Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova**

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All you need is ignorance and confidence and the success is sure.

Mark Twain

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is threefold: First of all, the main bulk of the paper presents an analysis of the latest development in the political relations between Russia and the Czech Republic (CR). I divide the mutual relation in the last ten years in three stages with different features. Secondly, I would also like to shortly address a more abstract question of why the improvement in the Czech-Russian relations has been much slower than in the case of Polish-Russian or Hungarian-Russian relations. Finally, I will sum up the results of the interaction between the two countries achieved during the last ten years and make some preliminary remarks about the future nature of the relation after the EU enlargement.

At the very beginning I should correct a false assumption which may stem from a mistaken interpretation of the title of my paper: I do not intend to simply reiterate the conventional wisdom among Czech analysts and policy-makers who, when asked the classical Chernyshevski's question "kto vinovat?", often insist that only and exclusively Russia is to blame for the failure to establish normal relations between the two countries. I will, quite to the contrary, try to show that neither side pursued a cooperative approach in the past years.

To begin let us remind that, historically speaking, the relations between the Russian Empire and the Czechs were harmonious, albeit sometimes overly idealised: The Russian Empire was often portrayed as the ultimate defender of the freedom of Slavic nations oppressed by the German, Austrian or Turkish rulers. At the time of the Czech National Revival, Russia was regarded the natural ally of the Czechs aiming at self-determination.<sup>1</sup>

Only after the communist coup d'état, this attitude began to change. But the deadly blow to the already worsening relations was dealt with the 1968 invasion of Warsaw Treaty armies headed by Soviet forces which occupied the country for three decades afterwards.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the tragic nature of the Soviet invasion, we might assume that there had not been much negative experience with Russians prior to 1948 and that, therefore, the return to normal relations after the end of the Cold War could be more swift in the case of the ČR than in that of Hungary or even Poland with its long history of deep-rooted aversion.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Štindl, Karel. Rusko a střední Evropa. *Mezinárodní politika*. 5/2000

<sup>2</sup> For a similar account of the transformation of the Russian-Czech relations see Sokolov, Maksim. Jazycheskoye pokayanie. *Izvestia.ru*. <http://www.izvestia.ru/sokolov/article37422>

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Surprisingly enough, this was not the case. The return to normalcy took no less than ten years and one might be doubtful about whether this process has been already brought to its end. The Czech foreign policy towards Russia after 1993 can be roughly divided into three stages with different levels of interaction and different attitudes towards the Eastern giant.<sup>3</sup> This is illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Czech foreign policy towards Russia*

	Russia as a threat	Russia as a partner
frequent references	Stage I (1993-1996)	
rare references	Stage II (1997-1999)	Stage III (2000-...)

The table shows the last decade divided in three successive stages; each of these stages is characterised by a different pattern of Czech behaviour towards Russia. In the first stage, the country's main target was the "return to Europe", meaning both joining the European Union and NATO. The fear of unstable Russia was often seen as one of the main driving forces. The second stage started approximately at the time when it was already sure enough for the CR that it would join both organisations in nearest future. Russia, though still considered rather as a threat than as a partner or an opportunity, virtually vanished from the Czech foreign political agenda. Only in the third stage, Russia has emerged as a country the Czech government should seriously deal with but still the attention given to Russia lags far behind both Western and Central Europe.

We could easily draw a similar table that would reflect Russian foreign policy towards the Czech Republic and that this table would use the same three stages. In such case, the table would look as follows:

**Table 2**

*Russian foreign policy towards the CR*

Stage	Predominant behaviour
Stage I (1993-1996)	political pressure
Stage II (1997-1999)	lack of interest
Stage III (2000-...)	construction of a normal relation

## Before Stage I

Shortly after the fall of communism, both the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia had similar ideas: A well-known example is President Havel's famous proposal to dissolve not only the Warsaw Treaty but also NATO.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, both countries believed that OSCE would be the best guarantee of security in Europe. Whereas Havel and other representatives of the Czech foreign policy elite dropped these ideas well before the split of Czechoslovakia, the very same ideas (e.g. the OSCE as the corner stone of the European security architecture) remained key pillars of the nascent Russian foreign policy towards the West. Even the pro-Western Foreign Minister Kozyrev believed that NATO expansion would have serious repercussions for Russia and should be replaced with strengthening the OSCE or with "cross security" guarantees for Central Europeans from NATO and from Russia.

<sup>3</sup> I start my analysis in 1993 when Czechoslovakia split.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Prezident Václav Havel a NATO. Radio Prague, [http://www.radio.cz/cz/html/nato\\_havel.html](http://www.radio.cz/cz/html/nato_havel.html)

## Stage I

Thus, at the beginning of the stage I, the main political and security issue between the two countries was the question of NATO enlargement. The growing disillusionment of Moscow with the US plans for NATO enlargement which became visible already in 1993 and even more so after the release of the NATO enlargement study in 1995, was coupled with ever more vehement Czech demands for NATO membership.

Although the West tried to soothe Russia through the 1994 Partnership for Peace, the very first glance at Czech media reports would present a different picture: NATO membership was clearly understood as a safeguard against the destabilisation coming from the East.<sup>5</sup> Three events were typically mentioned in this context: the unsuccessful coup of 1991, Yeltsin's handling the Parliament during the hot autumn 1993 and, later, also the war in Chechnya was added to the list of the dangers lurking in the East.

On the other side, Russian diplomacy was forced to make a fundamentally important choice that would pre-determine the future development in the mutual relation between the Czech Republic and Russia for several years: either to acquiesce to the NATO enlargement plans and thus improve its relations to the candidates for NATO membership, or to run into heavy opposition which would inevitably lead to tense relations to the Candidate Countries. Although the Russian reaction varied from time to time, it is evident that the overall Russian stance was closer to the latter alternative.

## Stage II

Since 1997 there were signs indicating a gradual change in the troubled relationship: The first and foremost reason for this shift was the final decision about the NATO enlargement. The Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security Between NATO and the Russian Federation<sup>6</sup> also helped to alleviate Russian fears of an enemy *ante portas*. To assume that the improved overall conditions would also move both sides to set aside their old differences would be, however, totally wrong. Russia gradually weakened its political pressure on the CR but a warming up in the bilateral relations did not follow the move. Instead, Russian foreign policy effectively overlooked the CR on the political map of Europe. This led some Czech analysts to believe that "after the definitive decision about our joining the Alliance Russia adopted a posture of insulted frostiness towards the CR and systematically blocked the development of mutual relations for several years."<sup>7</sup> More to that, in 1998, Russia was struck with economic crisis which swept through half of the "countries in transition" and Russia's main preoccupation was, therefore, domestic social and economic situation and rather than improving ties with a partner who himself was not willing to contribute much to the success of such a step.

Indeed, the CR, now firmly anchored in the Western Alliance, did not make a single friendly move to overcome the stalemate although it did not serve the interests of either of both parties. To the contrary, it played its old game of describing Russia as the archenemy of the free, democratic world. This aspect of Czech foreign policy was so evident that some

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Běloševský, Dmitrij: Česká republika v ruské zahraničněpolitické reflexi 90. let. [http://veda.fsv.cuni.cz/konf\\_sem/globalni\\_svet/GS\\_prispevky/gs\\_ter\\_belosevsky.htm](http://veda.fsv.cuni.cz/konf_sem/globalni_svet/GS_prispevky/gs_ter_belosevsky.htm)

<sup>6</sup> NATO On-line Library, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basic/txt/fndact-a.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, Duleba, Póti, Votápek (eds.): Eastern Policy of the Enlarged European Union: Developing Relations with Russia, Ukraine and Belarus. A Visegrad Perspective. Slovak Foreign Policy Association, Bratislava, 2003

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politicians from neighbouring countries with similar history in the past decades warned against unduly anti-Russian sentiments that effectively prevented the new NATO Member States from creating normal relations to Russia.<sup>8</sup>

### Stage III

While the aforementioned stages were not defined by particular dates and may thus overlap, the beginning of Stage III is clearly defined by the beginning of the year 2000. The most spectacular change was represented by Putin's quick rise to power after Yeltsin's demise and his newly acquired position was finally confirmed during the presidential elections in March.

Putin's pragmatism laid particular emphasis on multidirectional diplomacy with good relations to every part of the world, especially when speaking about economy. The new Foreign Policy Conception also mentions Central and Eastern Europe but limits itself to several general phrases about the need for preservation and development of the mutual relations.<sup>9</sup>

The warming in the Russian-Czech relation has been, nevertheless, rather protracted; it did not slip the attention of Czech media and analysts that the political dialogue was still quite limited during all of 2000. After the Alliance enlargement in spring 1999, seemingly less controversial topics were allowed to gain more prominence. One of them was the abolishment of visa-free regime and the other payment of the 3.5 billion USD debt.

Although the end of visa-free travel by the end of May 2000 caused some problems to the Russian side mainly due to the tight timing because the Czech side informed the Russian Foreign Ministry only three months before the introduction of the new system, the move had some positive side-effects. First of all, both sides were forced to communicate with each other and interests of both compelled them to looking for a solution which would a) be in accordance with the requirements of the European Union and b) make as little damage to the bilateral relations as possible. Similarly, the discussion about restructuring and payment of Russia's debt to the CR showed the willingness of both sides to move ahead with the solution of this old issue but, at the same time, it has not remained void of controversies.

The intensification of political dialogue started even before the question of the mounting Russian debt was settled. In February 2001, Russian ForMin Igor Ivanov paid an official visit to Prague and although he spent there only several hours, his visit gave rise to bold predictions of "a return of Russia to the Czech Republic".<sup>10</sup>

A whole series of visits followed during the next two years: In January 2002, Czech Foreign Minister Kavan visited Moscow and in April Russia hosted Czech Prime Minister Zeman. As representatives of Czech Social Democratic Party, both ministers were well disposed towards Russia. They repeatedly expressed their support for closer cooperation of NATO and Russia<sup>11</sup> and Russian diplomats appreciated this gesture as Czech President Havel constantly rejected closer relations of Russia with NATO or even further institutionalisation of the relationship.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Kotyk, Václav: Jak přistupovat k politickému dialogu se současným Ruskem, *Mezinárodní politika*, 4/2001.

<sup>9</sup> Kontseptsya vneshney politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsiyi. <http://www.ln.mid.ru/ns-osndoc.nsf/4e5fa867101effb4432569fa003a705a/fd86620b371b0cf7432569fb004872a7?OpenDocument>

<sup>10</sup> Rossiya vernulas' v Chekhiyu: bol'shoy brat vspomnil o svoich sosedyach. <http://www.lenta.cz/0102/05ivanov.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Jan Kavan: „My ne opasayemsa sbližheniya NATO s Rossiiyey.“ *Izvestiya.Ru*, <http://izvestia.ru/article13171> or O peregovorakh Predsedatelya Pravitel'stva Rossiiy M.M. Kas'yanova s prem'yer-ministrom Chekhiyi M. Zemanom. Soobshchenye press-sluzhby Pravitel'stva Rossiyskoy Federatsiyi, <http://www.ln.mid.ru/ns-reuro.nsf/strana?OpenView&Start=30&Count=30&Expand=35#35>

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Last year, the new Foreign Minister Svoboda visited Russia, and in autumn, Czech President Václav Klaus, elected in March 2003, also paid a visit to Moscow. The success of his journey was granted because of two simple reasons: First, former President Havel hesitated to visit Russia and so an official visit in the very year when the new President came to power was greatly appreciated. Secondly, Havel often criticised Russian military actions in Chechnya and shortly before the end of his presidential term, he stated that Russia was not a European country.<sup>12</sup> Klaus's visit to Russia may be the final step to normalisation of the mutual relation and it is not by chance that Foreign Minister Svoboda declared the current stage of "the Russian-Czech ties the best in the last ten years."<sup>13</sup>

## Why so late?

The final question to be answered is why the relation between Russia and the CR has needed so much time for normalisation given the relative lack of historical animosities and considering that other Visegrad countries managed to do so much earlier? The solution to this puzzle is probably not to be explained in one sentence. We can identify at least two kinds of factors which we could provisionally label as material and sociological (or constructivist). Let us first tackle the material factors:

The most striking difference in geographical position compared to other Visegrad countries is that the CR does not share a common border with neither the Russian Federation itself as in the case of Poland nor with any other country occupying the post-Soviet space (e.g. Ukraine). Therefore, if we speak about an Eastern policy of CR, we might as well mean the Czech policy to other Visegrad countries. An Eastern policy towards Russia has been, strictly speaking, non-existent with the sole exception of the early 1990s. The geographical position might probably be very important but in no way the only reason for this deficiency.

The group of sociological factors is undoubtedly more comprehensive. First of all, the Czech Republic and its political elite in the 1990s took greater pains than any other post-Communist country to return to Europe and even to erase the mere memory of the Communist past. Thus, it often accentuated its exceptionality and rejected deeper engagement of the country anywhere else than in the West and its integration organisations.

In addition, the internal political situation also exerted considerable influence on the foreign policy orientation. The Communist Party has not, unlike other Communist parties in the region, reformed itself and all other relevant political parties in CR rejected to share power with Communists who were thus forced to constant anti-systemic opposition. However, their popularity has risen steadily, Communists now ranking only second in election polls. On the other hand, post-Communists in other Visegrad countries were strong enough to come to power and thus soften their country's stance towards Russia.

## Conclusion

Let us summarise the most important conclusions of this paper: Although rather belatedly, the CR has finally succeeded in normalising its relations with Russia. It would be ominous to blame just one of the two partners for the failure to construct a normal partnership earlier in the 1990s. While Russia was fiercely opposed to the Czech NATO accession and

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<sup>12</sup> Václav Klaus peresporil Václava Gavelu: Prezident Chekhiyi dokazal, tshto s Rossiyei nuzhno imet' delo. Vremya novostey, 3.11. 2003, <http://www.vremya.ru/2003/206/5/84009.html>

<sup>13</sup> Cyril Svoboda: „Nashi otnosheniya – naylutschiye za posledniye 10 let“. Izvestiya.Ru, 25.4. 2003, <http://izvestia.ru/politic/article33160>

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some of its representatives even threatened the country, the CR ignored Russia or criticised its actions in Chechnya without giving it a chance to develop a constructive relation.

Only after the final decision about Czech membership in the Alliance and de-ideologisation of Russian foreign policy with Putin's rise to power, the situation began to change slowly. This trend was accelerated when new and old issues alike had to be solved such as the introduction of visa regime or the issue of Russia's debt to the CR.

The future membership in the EU, is not, unlike the membership in the Alliance, seen as a threatening move in Russia. A moderate hope is being expressed on both sides that the inclusion of several post-communist countries to the EU might give new impulses to the EU Eastern policy. The future of Russian-Czech relations might not be seen as bright but it is certainly more promising than the time of the "cold peace" in the second half of the 1990s.