



Going beyond the anti-refugee rhetoric: a new formula for Czech-Polish relations

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Summary and Recommendations

→ **Czech-Polish political relations** are cordial, Poland is the Czech Republic's second most important trading partner and mutual infrastructure is gradually improving. **Though, as is also the case with the Visegrad Group, a negative attitude towards refugees dominates the countries' joint political narrative in the EU.**

→ The resistance to any relocation scheme for asylum-seekers **spills-over into the thematization of an alleged broader cultural rift between Central and Western Europe.** Western European nations are depicted by key Czech and Polish politicians as doomed by their "multicultural" policies. On the contrary, Central Europe is portrayed as a region with superior ethics, security and values and which has to resist social-engineering coming from "Brussels".

→ This attitude will not only become more salient in the run-up to the European Parliament elections, but also remain part of everyday European politics in the institutions next cycle. **As Poland and the Czech Republic – or the whole Visegrad Group – can hardly find any inspiring policy ideas attractive in the EU-wide context, the current attitude may lead only into isolation, or the eventual break-up of the Visegrad alliance.**

→ Still, this Central European "solidarity" created through the rejection of refugees could be capitalized on for some bona fide bilateral initiatives. **Czech-Polish relations are not problem-free. Some burdens might be removed and cooperation in some areas must be moved forward.**

→ Already well-developing **security and defense cooperation must be enhanced by a regular dialogue of (deputy) ministers of defense and foreign affairs.** The **territorial debt might be settled** as there are now probably the best political conditions on the Czech side for such a step. Cross-border environmental issues must be addressed, and Poland should formally promise that it will (financially) participate in the necessary measures to mitigate the negative aspects of the Turów coal mine extension. Last but not least, the Czech Republic and Poland should jointly and with dignity **commemorate the Seven-day War from 1919** – the last military conflict between Czechs and Poles.



Introduction

“To date our cooperation in many areas is strengthening; we are ever stronger when we speak with a common voice” said Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki while summarizing November Polish–Czech intergovernmental consultations in Prague.¹ **Czech–Polish relations are on a very good level and their cordiality has increased over the past three years.** After the Law and Justice party victory in parliamentary elections in October 2015, Warsaw commenced a pivot to Central and Eastern Europe. Poland perceived these countries – together with the United Kingdom – as key allies in the EU. Apart from a focus on the Visegrad Group, which had already received more attention since the Polish Visegrad Group Presidency in 2012–13, Poland commenced several new initiatives. Firstly, the Bucharest Nine, which brought together Eastern Flank NATO members ranging from Estonia in the North to Bulgaria in the South, that lobbied for Alliance transformation to new threats coming from the East. Secondly, Poland and Croatia launched in 2016 the Three Seas Initiative – a grouping of 12 Central and Eastern European EU Member States. The relative importance of these regional formats in Polish foreign policy even increased after the British EU membership referendum which made a planned alliance with London on the EU’s reformist agenda meaningless. Moreover, a deterioration of relations with Germany after 2015 also pushed Polish foreign policy thinking more towards Central Europe.² **The Czech Republic participates in the Visegrad Group, Bucharest Nine as well as the Three Seas Initiative which makes it a relevant partner for Poland.**

At the same time, Poland is considered as Prague’s strategic partner according to the currently valid Concept of the Czech Republic’s Foreign Policy.³ Moreover, **Prime Minister Andrej Babiš has so far moved the Czech position on the (strategic) EU agenda closer to the Polish views,** than was the case with the previous cabinet of Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka. Today’s policy proximity is based mainly on anti-refugee rhetoric, distance to Brussels’ EU establishment and rhetoric of the cultural distinctiveness of Central Europe from Western Europe.⁴ **The Czech–Polish alliance – as with the Visegrad Group – lacks tangible novel future oriented projects which would attract other EU member states and would draw the positive attention of EU institutions.**

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, I argue that the above mentioned anti-refugee symbolism that unites the Czech Republic and Poland in the EU does not lead to a strengthening of the two countries’ positions and negotiating options in the EU. On the contrary, it could lead either to isolation or a break-up of the Visegrad Group. Secondly, as any U-turn of Czech or Polish European policy cannot be foreseen, I try to identify a positive bilateral agenda. Thus, I sketch out a couple of issues that could be solved and areas in which cooperation might be strengthened. Despite the cordial words of Prime Minister Morawiecki, **Czech–Polish relations are not problem-free, and some topics could**

¹ “Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in Prague: Cooperation between Poland and the Czech Republic brings ever better effects | Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów,” <https://www.premier.gov.pl/en/news/news/prime-minister-mateusz-morawiecki-in-prague-cooperation-between-poland-and-the-czech.html>.

² Adam Balcer et al. In Clinch: The European Policy of the PiS Government. Warsaw: Batory Foundation, 2017, 3–15. http://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/pdf/rap_otw_eu/In%20a%20clinch-report.pdf.

³ “Concept of the Czech Republic’s Foreign Policy,” https://www.mzv.cz/file/1574645/Concept_of_the_Czech_Republic_s_Foreign_Policy.pdf.

⁴ Vít Dostál, “Hungarianization” of Czech Central European policy – a fait accompli?” *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 27, no. 1–2 (2018).



be problematized in the future. Therefore, more solid fundamentals of the Prague-Warsaw link must be established. The current atmosphere of togetherness and a solid capital of mutual trust should be invested in for that purpose.

More than just a clash about the EU's migration policy?

The key element of the Czech and Polish attitudes towards the reform of the EU's Common Asylum and Migration Policy has been the resistance to any obligatory relocation of asylum-seekers. Although Poland supported the EU Council Decision in September 2015 on the temporary relocation of asylum-seekers, the new Law and Justice government changed its mind and did not participate in the scheme. Poland's Interior Minister Mariusz Błaszczak said in May 2017 that "to accept migrants would be worse than the European Union imposing penalties."⁵ The Czech Republic stopped taking part in the program in August 2016. The Czech attitude has also been accompanied by expressive statements. E.g. Prime Minister Babiš recently underlined that he "does not want to accept a single migrant as such a move would symbolize that Europe does not have any other solution."⁶ Non-participation in the relocation scheme resulted in an infringement procedure and later, a case against the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in front the Court of Justice of the EU.⁷

The policy lines of the Czech Republic and Poland on migration are very close to each other. Both countries refuse any relocation mechanisms in new reformed asylum and migration legislation. Moreover, they stress that aid should be provided primarily in the countries of origin and to refugees in countries hosting them, that the EU should focus on control of external borders and that the EU must initiate a robust development program for Africa. Czech and Polish officers also took part in various border control missions and Prague and Warsaw support the concept of flexible solidarity; i.e. that they contribute to the joint European effort to manage migration through other means than accepting asylum-seekers.⁸

Migration policy draws significant attention among the European policies of both countries. It was given central position in the Czech government's policy statement from June 2018 and the speeches of the Prime Minister, acting Minister of Foreign Affairs and the President at the ambassadors' convention in August 2018.

As Poland also faces the rule of law procedure according to Article 7 of the Treaty on the EU for the changes in Constitutional Court, migration policy is not that substantial in domestic debate on the EU. Yet, resistance to relocation schemes plays a significant role in the Law and Justice European policy and this attitude

⁵ "Forced relocation of refugees worse than EU penalties: minister," Polish Radio, May 17, 2017, <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/307297,Forced-relocation-of-refugees-worse-than-EU-penalties-minister>.

⁶ "Andrej Babiš na poradě velvyslanců: Chtěl bych vám poděkovat za vaši práci, kterou odvádíte pro naši zemi | Vláda ČR," <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/clenove-vlady/premier/projevy/andrej-babis-na-porade-velvyslancu-chtel-bych-vam-podekovat-za-vasi-praci--kterou-odvadite-pro-nasi-zemi-168137/>.

⁷ "CJEU: Actions brought against Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic for failing to fulfill relocation obligations | European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)," <https://www.ecre.org/cjeu-actions-brought-against-poland-hungary-and-the-czech-republic-for-failing-to-fulfil-relocation-obligations/>.

⁸ "Policy Statement of the Government of the Czech Republic," <https://www.vlada.cz/assets/jednani-vlady/Policy-statement.pdf>. and Adam Balcer et al. In Clinch: The European Policy of the PiS Government. Warsaw: Batory Foundation, 2017, 2-25. http://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/pdf/rap_otw_eu/In%20a%20clinch-report.pdf.



mirrors the party's ideological basis. Law and Justice understands sovereignty as the ability to act fully independently, i.e. without external pressure. Therefore, it argues that sensitive issues (like migration) should be decided by unanimity. Furthermore, the nation is for the Law and Justice party more than a political entity – it is an organic and historical community. As put in a paper on the change in Polish European policy prepared by the Batory Foundation, “the emphasis on the specific nature of Polish historical experience, the significance of the Catholic religion to the national identity, as well as the value of cultural and ethnic homogeneity, is an expression of the belief that this model of ‘Polishness’ ought to be defended above all else.”⁹ The EU's migration policy and especially binding relocations of asylum-seekers undermines, in the Law and Justice view, the ability of the Polish government to preserve the nature of the Polish nation. **Apart from that, in the Law and Justice discourse is a deeply rooted conviction, that Western European societies, politics and intellectual elites are obsessed with multiculturalism, glorification of minorities and secularism and that they use various forms of so-called social engineering to impose it on countries like Poland.**¹⁰ The EU's common migration policy is perceived as one of its expressions and Poland must – in the view of the government – resist it.

Andrej Babiš presents himself as a pragmatic leader, a self-made man coming into politics from business and a manager who is used to resolving problems without ideological burdens. Following public attitudes combined with a well-mastered PR is a key element of his day-to-day politics. Therefore, **Babiš' rejection of binding relocation of refugees is not based on deeply rooted party ideology, but on the fears of the Czech public.** Since 2015, around 60% of Czechs are against accepting any refugees and as of October 2018 72% perceived the situation around refugees as a security threat for the Czech Republic.¹¹

Despite the lack of a well-designed ideological basis, Babiš also bashes Western Europe for multiculturalism. In an article from August 2016, Babiš stated: “I stopped to believe in successful integration, in multiculturalism. Look on the situation of countries, which have rich experience with immigration from other continents.”¹² Recently, in an interview about the Czech decision to drop participation in the United Nations Global Migration Pact Babiš stated: “We are the sixth safest country [all around the world]. That is a great value. In Prague, women and girls may come home at night without problems. This is not possible in most of the European metropolises with the exception of the V4.”¹³

Therefore, leadership of both countries use the image of cultural division between Central and Western Europe. They perceive the Western European societal model as a failed experiment which – moreover – aspires for expansion to Central Europe. Contrary to that, they depict the Czech Republic and Poland as peaceful ethically and religiously homogenic societies. **In such an**

⁹ Adam Balcer et al. Change in Poland, but what change? Assumptions of Law and Justice party Foreign policy. (Warsaw: Batory Foundation, 2016), 3.
<http://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Otwarta%20Europa/Change%20in%20Poland.pdf>.

¹⁰ Adam Balcer et al. Change in Poland, but what change? Assumptions of Law and Justice party Foreign policy (Warsaw: Batory Foundation, 2016).
<http://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Otwarta%20Europa/Change%20in%20Poland.pdf>.

¹¹ “Tisková zpráva: Postoj české veřejnosti k přijímání uprchlíků – říjen 2018,”
https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/cz/a4745/f9/pm181109.pdf.

¹² Andrej Babiš, “Nevěřím v integraci a multikulturalismus,” Express.cz, August 3, 2016,
https://www.expres.cz/andrej-babis-komentar-oto-/zpravy.aspx?c=A160802_223401_dx-zpravy_bk.

¹³ Andrej Babiš, “Migrace není lidské právo,” interview by Jan Rovenský, novinky.cz, November 3, 2018, <https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/488072-babis-migrace-neni-lidske-pravo.html>.



interpretation, Central Europe represents a region with superior ethics, security and values over doomed Western Europe.

In sum, it is important to see that the **East-West divide is not only about reform of the EU's migration policies, or about the attitude to a specific EU Council regulation on temporary relocation of asylum-seekers. The conflict between the West European and Central European governments and majorities of their societies has a cultural nature and is largely based on people's identities, or political interpretations thereof.** This argument is relevant for Czech and Polish foreign policy for two reasons. Firstly, such rhetoric will even sharpen in the run-up to the European Parliament elections in May 2019. Andrej Babiš's ANO will try to utilize public views on the issue. Law and Justice may feel threatened by a newly established ultra-conservative political party around the media entrepreneur father Tadeusz Rydzyk and might be maneuvered into similar positions. Though, as Law and Justice needs to regain support in bigger cities, its campaign would be more balanced and involve a variety of messages with a stress on Polish sovereignty. Secondly, this cultural clash will also be present in the next cycle of the European institutions – the European Parliament and the European Commission – and will make European-wide compromises on various agendas even more difficult.

As a result, Poland and the Czech Republic could find themselves in a very difficult situation. They are not members of the Eurozone, benefit from EU money transfers through cohesion and agricultural policies and are dependent on the European Commission guardian role vis-à-vis the EU's single market – one of the key benefits of both countries' EU membership. The emphasizing of cultural differences between the EU's East and West as well as uploading them onto the European decision-making processes will make trade-offs in all EU negotiations more difficult. The interests of the Czech Republic and Poland in the three above mentioned areas (the Eurozone, the EU budget and the inviolability of the single market) would be at stake in the next months and years. The importance of the Eurozone will grow with Brexit. There will be a lower appetite for keeping significant money transfers from West to East in the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027, because of the Central European reaction to the so-called refugee crisis in 2015-16. Last but not least, the revision of the posted workers directive has shown that the issue of alleged “social-dumping” in Central and Eastern Europe might reach the top of the political agenda in some Western European member states and lead to threatening the single market principles.

There are two future scenarios plausible for the Czech and Polish position in the EU. **Either the policy of the cultural clash prevails in a way that would make compromises impossible. That would lead to a deterioration of the Czech and Polish position in the EU, if not isolation. Or someone breaks up this symbolic coalition and accepts at least some trade-offs.** This scenario is more probable in the case of the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, the Law and Justice could also pull back from sharpening the East-West cultural conflict and smoothen its rhetoric in order to attract centrist voters before the general election in autumn 2019.



What is then the Czech-Polish Agenda for Today

As has been demonstrated, we can hardly expect that further Czech-Polish or Visegrad cooperation on EU issues would improve these countries' positions and negotiation options in the EU. Creation of Visegrad solidarity based on the cultural distinction from Western Europe is either real and would eventually lead to the isolation of Central Europe, or is just illusory, full of false promises and will eventually produce a rift in relations between Prague and Warsaw. **Still, this feeling of Central European togetherness and mutual trust among top politicians could be used for some good deeds.** The following part discusses four areas of Czech-Polish relations, in which a step forward could be made - **defense cooperation, environmental issues, historical agenda and territorial debt.**

Poland is an important partner for the Czech Republic within the framework of security policy. The Defense Strategy of the Czech Republic states, that Czech regional defense cooperation is primarily based on cooperation with Germany and the Visegrad Group. The Czech Army is involved in the enhanced Forward Presence, a key element of NATO's post-2015 adaptation to the new security environment, and an initiative staunchly supported by Poland. As the Czech Defense Strategy also underlines, "one way of deepening regional cooperation with Germany and Poland is the Czech Republic's contribution to the strengthening of capabilities of the Multinational Corps Northeast headquartered in Szczecin."¹⁴ At the same time, the Czech Republic takes part in the so-called Bucharest Nine – an informal grouping of NATO's Eastern Flank countries. The group activities were first aimed at a more robust NATO presence in Central and Eastern Europe, which was promised at the Warsaw Summit in 2016. The cooperation has since evolved. Apart from meeting on the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and Presidential level, a first "B9" Parliamentary summit was held in April 2018. **Thus, there is not only a declared will for structural cooperation in the area of defense, but there are also new instruments available.**

Nevertheless, as the indispensable element for a well-functioning NATO is unity, the Bucharest Nine should avoid being labelled as "Eastern NATO".¹⁵ The Polish effort to attract a permanent U.S. military base poured even more oil on to the fire in this debate, as it was not welcomed by Western European countries – especially France.¹⁶ The Czech Republic has kept an eye on avoiding that the Bucharest Nine initiative polarizes regional coalition within NATO. Czechs have also been developing enhanced security and military cooperation with Germany since 2015. The Czech Republic could thus contribute to avoiding divisions on the issues related to European security. **Therefore, a deepening of the security dialogue between the Czech Republic and Poland, e.g. in the format of joint meetings of (Deputy) Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs is desirable.** Such

¹⁴ "Defense Strategy of the Czech Republic," <http://www.army.cz/assets/en/ministry-of-defence/strategy-and-doctrine/defencestrategy2017.pdf>.

¹⁵ Michal Kořan, "Bukurešťský minisummit NATO aneb jak se „východní křídlo“ tvářilo, že vlastně není východní křídlo," NATOaktual, November 17, 2015, http://www.natoaktual.cz/bukurestsky-minisummit-nato-aneb-jak-se-vychodni-kridlo-tvarilo-ze-vlastne-neni-vychodni-kridlo-izs-na_analyzy.aspx?c=A151117_175300_na_analyzy_mo2.

¹⁶ Emmanuel Macron, "Pokud chceme Evropu zabit, pak pokračujme takto dál, říká o Česku a spol. Emmanuel Macron v rozhovoru pro HN," interview by Ondřej Houska, Martin Ehl, iHNed.cz, October 25, 2018, <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-6631120-pokud-chceme-evropu-zabit-pak-pokracujme-takto-dal-rika-o-cesku-a-spol-emmanuel-macron-v-rozhovoru-pro-hn>.



meetings took place before, and a revival of the format was already suggested during Foreign Minister Petříček's first visit to Poland.¹⁷

Secondly, environmental issues have grown in importance in Czech-Polish relations. Apart from air pollution which hits the Czech Republic and Poland in Silesia, new problems have arisen. The expansion of the Polish lignite mine in Turów on the western edge of the Czech-Polish border allegedly worsens underground water reserves in parts of the Liberec Region. The issue is being investigated through geological research and the Czech Republic may claim against Poland for compensation. Bearing in mind the current wave of droughts, the issue is very sensitive and could easily be politicized. Therefore, formal Polish assurances that it will (financially) participate in necessary measures, if they are needed, would definitely calm down the issue.

Thirdly, there is unsettled territorial debt. The Czech Republic owes Poland some 368 hectares of territory after the straightening of the border which took place in 1950's. All efforts to identify suitable land and hand it over to Poland have failed, due to the resistance of local municipalities. Again, it is not a burning issue in mutual relations. The territorial debt is a residual item on the agenda, which, nevertheless, meaninglessly consumes some energy invested into Czech-Polish relations. Though, as in the case of environmental issues, it too could easily be politicized. **It is just after the municipal elections in the Czech Republic and the next regional elections take place in two years. Therefore, now is the most convenient time to move on the issue.** Of course, that the municipalities which would lose some land need to be appropriately financially compensated and a constitutional majority will be needed to push a law on this issue through the Czech Parliament. Last but not least, **the solution of the territorial debt might un-block the issue of Czech diplomatic properties in Warsaw.** The buildings were confiscated in 1945 and the Czech Republic has repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempted to get them back.

Fourthly, in January 2019, we will mark the 100th anniversary of the last military conflict between Czechs and Poles. The so-called Seven-day War in 1919 resulted into the division of Cieszyn Silesia and was one of the sources of Czechoslovak-Polish animosity in the interwar period. **Czechoslovak and Czech officials have never expressed regret for these events.** Contrary to that, Polish President Lech Kaczyński called the Polish seizure of Zaolzie in 1938 a "sin" and a "wrong" in his speech at Westerplatte at the commemoration of the break out of the Second World War in 2009.¹⁸ **Czech officials should come up with a belated response and underline today's non-problematic co-existence of the Polish minority in the Czech Republic.** Otherwise, the anniversary could be hijacked by groups glorifying the Czechoslovak military action in 1919.

¹⁷ Tomáš Petříček, "SzeF MSZ Czech Tomáš Petříček: Nie ograniczajmy się do imigracji," interview by Jerzy Haszczyński, Rzeczpospolita, November 12, 2018, <https://www.rp.pl/Swiat/311129969-SzeF-MSZ-Czech-Tomas-Petricek-Nie-ograniczajmy-sie-do-imigracji.html>.

¹⁸ Lech Kaczyński, "Nie ustępujemy imperializmowi" Polskie Radio, September 1, 2018, <https://www.polskieradio.pl/5/3/Artykul/2184254,Nie-ustepujmy-imperializmowi-Zobacz-archiwalne-wystapienie-Lecha-Kaczynskiego-na-Westerplatte>.



Conclusion

Czech-Polish relations are without any doubt on an extraordinarily good level-bilateral trade grows, infrastructural connections improve, and politicians always stress friendship and cooperation. Though, **as a proof of mutual cohesiveness the shared view on EU migration policy is extensively used.** A peculiar position maintains the issue of the possible obligatory relocation mechanism for asylum-seekers, which is always thematized and condemned. Moreover, key politicians in the Czech Republic and Poland emphasize alleged societal, cultural and values division between Western and Central Europe. This rhetoric will probably even sharpen in the run-up to the European Parliament elections and would negatively influence promotion of Czech and Polish interests in the EU.

Still, this strange Central European “solidarity” created through the rejection of refugees could be capitalized on for some bona fide Czech-Polish initiatives: cooperation in security and defense policies should be enhanced, cross-border environmental issues must be addressed, the territorial debt might be settled, and the historical agenda ought to be cultivated. There is a window of opportunity for progress in all four areas in the next couple of months, which would remove some burdens and result in improvement of the fundamentals of Czech Polish cooperation. Since there is one-party government in Poland and Andrej Babiš, who brands himself as a practical doer able to untangle complex issues, dominates Czech politics, these steps might be taken quite easily if there is enough political determination on both sides.



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