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Coping with U.S. and EU's challenges? Strategic confusion in the Czech foreign and security policy



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ABSTRACT

This article traces developments in the Czech political elite's thinking about structural changes that the region and the country have experienced during the last several years. It is argued that two parallel, external structural constraints have significantly shaped decisions of the Czech political elite as the country has, once again, proven to be an ostensibly "reactive state". These structural constraints have been the ongoing U.S. recalibration of its grand strategy as well as the financial crisis with a systemic challenge to the European political project in which fiscal and monetary issues have largely replaced previous criticism of the Constitutional Treaty and then the Reform Treaty. It is argued that these developments have posed a notable problem for two predominant ideological convictions present in the Czech political thinking – Atlantism and Europeanism, as neither of them has offered readily answers to deal with such a challenge. As will be shown, this mutually reinforcing dual challenge has further exacerbated previously existing Czech government's lack of political vision, and resorted to a political mentality which has contained elements of denial, rationalization, and political resignation.

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1. Introduction

The core of this article considers tumultuous political developments in the Czech foreign and security policy between the years 2009 and 2012. Particularly, it examines the demise of two traditional mindsets in the Czech security policy, that is, Atlanticism and Europeanism respectively. It deals with subsequent impact of this demise on decision-making process and external political action. While this demise has generally not taken place overnight, it may be considered rather rapid unfolding of events which caught the Czech political elite utterly unprepared for such a challenge to its almost Euclidean constants. The presented article offers an explanation and conceptualization of the strategic confusion on the side of the Czech political – and especially governmental – elite that has failed to productively react to the structural challenges in question. As will be shown there has been nothing inevitable about such a failure. As another piece in this special issue demonstrates, for instance, the Polish reaction to those events has been completely different and contributed to a significant diplomatic, economic, and politico-security rise of that country. The failure investigated here has therefore been a product of several specific factors within the Czech foreign and security policy, rather than a general inability to navigate in this state of flux.

These specifics need to be understood within a relatively recent historical context. That is, to highlight the ongoing governmental salience of strongly Atlanticist and simultaneously Eurosceptical right-wing political parties, especially the Civic Democrats. They have been governing the country since 2006: first, as a unicolor minority government of Civic Democrats (2006–2007), then as a centre-right cabinet of Civic Democrats in a governmental coalition with the Green Party and the Christian and Democratic Union-Czechoslovak People's Party (2007–2009), than indirectly through backing up a supposedly 'apolitical' (and in reality centre-right) caretaker government of Prime Minister Jan Fischer, and, most recently, as the strongest political party in a governmental coalition formed with the TOP09 (itself created, among others, out of renegades

from the Christian and Democratic Union–Czechoslovak People's Party and earlier sympathisers/members of the Green Party and Civic Democrats) and a right-wing and populist party Public Affairs. Compared to the disorientation of the Czech Social Democrats, the main opposition party of the past seven years, the governmental confusion has been much stronger and persistent. Its empirical characteristics and conceptual elucidation will be the primary objective of this article. Contextually, it is crucial to discuss the previous period (2003–2009), in particular the 'old halcyon' years (2006–2009), often understood by the Czech Atlanticists as the golden period of bilateral cooperation between the Czech Republic and the United States. This diplomatic and security peak of political and security collaboration between the two countries was marked mainly by the George W. Bush presidential administration's interest in stationing an X-band radar in the Czech Republic, as a part of a wider build-up of the Third Pillar of the US Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) system.

The key argument presented in this article proceeds as follows: First, the Czech Republic will be analysed as the so-called 'reactive state', as far as its foreign and security policies are concerned. One notable implication has been high dependence on external structural environment for the country's decision-making process. As soon as those external structures went into flux, such as during the recent, dual crisis caused by recalibrations of the U.S. foreign and security policy and the financial, turned into political, crisis within the European Union, taken for granted certainties have disappeared. It will be maintained that the dual crisis has been a greater challenge for the Atlanticists in the government than the Europeanists in the opposition. While the former traditionally cast Atlanticist and Europeanist projects in mutually exclusive categories and held opposite views on the relevance of the two projects (hence, the US phase-out of the support for Czech Atlanticism has had no readily available substitute), the latter have oscillated between mild support and mild criticism of Atlanticism and, concurrently, backed the European project. Unlike the Atlanticists, the Europeanists have eventually managed to redefine the relevance of the European political project, thus recognising and coping with the crisis, rather than denying it and resigning.

Second, the Atlanticist ideology will be examined by using the concept of bureaucratic coalition which is explained in the following part and can be heuristically considered more precise than the notion of a governmental coalition, or the government. The important difference will be discussed in the former's more dispersed, inter-institutional, and cross-party character. Finally, the stages of confusion, denial and eventual resignation of the Czech Atlanticists before their ability to innovate the substance of the country's foreign and security policy will be analysed through the apparatus borrowed from social and political psychology. Specifically, the concepts taken from the cognitive consistency theory will be introduced and applied. This is seen as a suitable tool, given the fact that the Czech Atlanticist reaction to and denial of the two parallel crises has clearly shown cognitive dissonance, here manifested as group's inability to reconcile two conflicting cognitions: that is, the cherished, idealised image of the U.S. as the dominant ideological leader and the source of security, prosperity and stability for the Czech Republic, and its perceived abrupt withdrawal from the CEE region and, especially, the Czech Republic through the cancellation of the US BMD system in 2009 and the ensuing phase-out of the U.S. interest in bilateral ties with the Czech Republic. This cognitive dissonance, further reinforced by Atlanticists' ideological (Euro-scepticism) and empirical (EU in the crisis) concerns about the European project, led to several coping strategies and defensive mechanisms. Three of them will be discussed in relation to the Atlanticists: denial, rationalisation, and resignation. As for the opposition, Social Democrats, the mechanism of restructuring will be discussed.

2. Initial insights: reactive state, Atlantism, and bureaucratic coalition

This section defines and discusses key concepts which are applied later in the article in order to comprehend the responses of the Czech political elite. Specifically, three concepts explaining the character of and influences on the Czech decision-making process are highlighted: reactive state; Atlantism; and bureaucratic coalition.

First, there is a notion of a 'reactive state'. Initially, the phrase was coined by Kent Calder in the late 1980s who used it to explain both discursive and practical dependence of the Japanese decision-making process on the United States. Calder's (1988) depiction has been of a state that formulates policies and launches initiatives as a reaction to external developments and pressures. Particularly, such is a state that "responds to outside pressures for change, albeit erratically, unsystematically, and often incompletely" (Calder, 1988: 519).¹ What followed were the 'reactive-proactive' debates within the sub-discipline of Foreign Policy Analysis (Lincoln, 1993; Yasutomo, 1995; Hirata, 1998; Berger et al., 2007; Kaarbo, 2012). While the structural position of Japan and the Czech Republic in their reaction to U.S. policy preferences is not directly comparable, chiefly due to Japan's greater resources and potential scope for independent foreign policy, the key facets discussed by Yasutomo (1995) within the Japanese context can be clearly recognised in case of the Czech Republic: (i) the external origin of reactivity; (ii) the United States as the source of this reactivity (linked to the leader-follower relationship); (iii) at least partially paralysed and /or dysfunctional policy-making process; (iv) significant scope of reactivity which engulfs foreign policy, security policy, economic policy, as well as broader strategic and diplomatic orientation of a country in question. According to Blaker (1993: 3), such behaviour is based on the essential strategy of "coping" (with events and demands of a leader country, here the United States) and can be characterised by minimal policy innovation, passive diplomacy and risk-aversion in decision-making.

In politico-economic literature, the notion of a reactive state has often been linked to the processes of late development and consolidation of political authority. This has traditionally meant economic development and modernisation efforts in the

¹ For a more general area of strategic thinking and decision-making see Allison (1971).

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