

GERMANY AND CENTRAL EUROPE: DRIFTING APART?

Editor
András Hettyey

The work was created in commission of the National University of Public Service under the priority project PACSDOP-2.1.2-CCHOP-15-2016-00001 entitled “Public Service Development Establishing Good Governance”.

Authors

András Hettyey (Chapter 1; 9; 10)
Christopher Walsch (Chapter 2)
Jana Urbanovská (Chapter 7)
Jelena Volić-Hellbusch (Chapter 5)
Marko Lovec (Chapter 3)
Marko Savković (Chapter 5)
Rafał Ulatowski (Chapter 6)
Sandro Knezović (Chapter 4)
Vladimír Müller (Chapter 8)
Zdeněk Kříž (Chapter 7)

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Chapter 7

Germany and the Czech Republic: An Asymmetric Relationship in Search of a Strategy

Jana Urbanovská – Zdeněk Kříž

1. Introduction: Czech–German Relations between Conflict and Cooperation

Given that the two are immediate neighbours, the relations between the Czech Republic and Germany have always necessarily been close. Beyond the shared border, there are a number of factors influencing the proverbial “contact and contention”¹ between the Czechs and the Germans: cultural and social proximity, membership of a single economic area and the connected closeness of their economic cultures as well as an industrial-technological compatibility, and, of course, a shared past with all its bright and dark chapters. The fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 created a unique constellation for the development of Czech–German relations, one based on the compatibility of fundamental values and strategic interests: a belonging to the West; and an interest in the development of multilateral institutions and in strengthening international law. Thanks to the Czech Republic’s integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the European Union (EU), which Germany greatly facilitated, the two countries also share a normative and institutional framework that aids their mutual cooperation and gives a multilateral dimension to their bilateral relations (HANDL 2009, 19).

However, mutual relations are also characterised by factors that encumber their development to a greater or lesser extent. First, among these is a political-power asymmetry, a striking feature of the relations between the Czech Republic and Germany. Although this asymmetry has been somewhat relativised by the Czech accession to the EU, the Czech Republic remains a small country with limited potential for power politics, while Germany is Europe’s No. 1 power. This means that for the Czech Republic Germany is much more important than the Czech Republic is for Germany. In 2011, the Czech foreign policy concept described Germany for the first time not just as an important neighbour, but also as a “strategic partner” (MFA CR 2011, 15), which was fully in keeping with the importance of Germany for the Czech Republic. The Czech–German strategic dialogue, agreed upon four years later, finds it difficult to hide the fact that the Czechs are not a strategic partner for the Germans. In Germany’s foreign policy concept, the Czech Republic figures as

¹ ‘Contact and contention’ (*stýkáni a potýkáni*) was how the celebrated nineteenth-century historian František Palacký famously described Czech–German relations.

a regional and second-tier partner; what is more, with its difficult-to-read, polyphonic and clumsy policy towards Germany and towards European issues, the country often contrives to make its position worse.

The asymmetry in the positions of Germany and the Czech Republic is also apparent from the public opinion in the two countries. A recent comparative survey has shown that in evaluating their mutual relations, the Germans are much more reticent than the Czechs, and they give less attention to these relations than their eastern neighbours. Czech–German relations were described as mostly or very good by 43% of Germans; as mostly or very bad by 15%; and 42% of the respondents said “don’t know”, testifying to an indifference and lack of strong emotions towards the Czechs (STEM 2017).

Another factor that has long influenced Czech–German relations concerns the baggage of the past. The “Munich complex” and the memory of the loyalty of most Sudeten Germans to Hitler’s Nazi regime, have settled into the “genetic code” of Czech politics (HANDL 2002, 22). Although the 1997 Czech–German Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development managed to deal with the overwhelming bulk of this historical baggage, questions of the past have maintained a greater or lesser emotional charge, manifest primarily in domestic political struggles on both sides of the border. Despite this, there has been an unquestionable trend of historical normalisation, which gradually took this most difficult issue of Czech–German affairs away from the politicians’ agenda, thus substantially unburdening Czech–German relations.

Last but not least, throughout the period observed, Czech–German relations were characterised by pragmatic, depoliticised and decentralised cooperation across a number of sectors. Whereas on the strategic issues of European policy and the role of Germany in this policy there was no consensus among Czech political leaders, on issues of practical cooperation with Germany there was agreement across the political spectrum. In the border regions and elsewhere, a very dense network of contacts was established, erasing the importance of the border between the two countries.

2. Bilateral Political Relations since 1989

2.1. From 1989 to 1992: Hope for a new quality of mutual relations

The end of the Cold War provided an opportunity for a fundamental transformation in the geopolitical positions of the two countries. Reunited, Germany became Europe’s greatest power and an important player worldwide. Thanks to the fall of the Iron Curtain, Germany ceased to play the role of a buffer zone between the West and the Eastern Bloc and moved from a disadvantageous position on the periphery into a comfortable position at the centre of Europe. Czechoslovakia, too, freed itself from its role of buffer state and – with its Velvet Revolution – started its ‘return to Europe’. For the first time in modern history, the two countries were given a unique opportunity to put their mutual relations on a qualitatively new and stable basis (HANDL et al. 1997, 167).

In the early 1990s, Czechoslovakia’s policy towards Germany was marked by activism. This was apparent from, for instance, President Václav Havel’s first presidential visit leading to Germany or his full and unqualified support for German reunification – Czechoslovakia

did not even attempt to make use of the international negotiations between the two German states and the four victorious powers to resolve any of the disputed issues in Czechoslovak–German relations before the achievement of unification. These accommodating steps – “blank cheques” granted by Czechoslovak policy to Germany (KUNŠTÁT 1998) – soon strengthened the understanding of Czechoslovakia as a partner who did not think in national but rather in European terms (HANDL 2004, 72–73).

As part of this atmosphere of optimism in mutual relations, the Czechoslovak Government attempted to achieve a new quality in the treaties between the two countries and to insure itself against possible reversals in German policy – this despite its trust in Bonn’s policies. However, the resulting 1992 treaty on good neighbourly relations and friendly cooperation failed to bring a breakthrough, due to the differing views of the two parties. On the question of the Munich Agreement, which the Czechoslovak side sought to have annulled from the outset (*ex tunc*), the new treaty merely confirmed the 1973 Treaty of Prague. Nor did the 1992 treaty move forward on the matter of the border between the two countries – a question that aroused significant emotion and apprehension among the Czechs – and it also avoided addressing claims to property rights. It confirmed, at least, the continuity of Czechoslovak statehood, thus recognising the legitimacy of Edvard Beneš’s exile government in London, which had been questioned by the Sudeten German Homeland Association (*Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*) (HANDL 1995, 41). In consequence of the negotiations of the 1992 treaty, a defensive approach gradually came to dominate the Czech policy; it was reactive by definition, and, rather unfortunately, oriented almost exclusively to the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*. Thus, paradoxically, this pressure group (one that was of secondary importance from German and European viewpoints) exerted greater influence over Czech–German relations than the German Federal Government or the governments of Germany’s states. Despite the inability of the two sides to close the issues of the past, the 1992 treaty was broad in scope, and helped to develop practical, depoliticised and decentralised cooperation across various sectors, nationally, regionally and locally (HANDL 2004, 73–74).

2.2. From 1992 to 1997: In the name of the legacy of the past

During this period, the development of Czech–German relations was not entirely satisfactory. The disintegration of Czechoslovakia significantly weakened the Czechs’ position *vis-à-vis* Germany and increased the power asymmetry between the two neighbours. A rational approach prevailed in the Czech policy, understanding Germany as the main foreign partner, whose political and economic support the Czech Republic needed not only for its internal process of post-communist transformation, but also for its integration into Western multilateral organisations. At the same time, there was a noticeable tendency for the Czech Government to apply a conception of balancing German influence with other influences, and sometimes even a tendency to bypass Germany, rather than use cooperation with that country to build a “bridge into Europe” (HANDL 2004, 74).

Questions of the past continued to dominate the political agenda of Czech–German relations. Due to the incompatibility between the Czech and German views, these questions continued to represent the thorniest issue in mutual affairs. During this period, the matter

went so far that the Czech–German relationship was essentially reduced to the issue of the Sudeten Germans, strengthening feelings of mistrust and alienation among both partners. It seemed that the Sudeten German question and its dissatisfactory resolution could even negatively impact the process of the Czech integration into NATO and the EU. The Czech public opinion increasingly feared Germany, and opinions were voiced that the country was following a strategic plan, continuing upon the expansionist policy of the Greater German Reich. Although such a scenario was unlikely, the fact that the possibility was voiced pointed to the continued misgivings about Germany’s position in Europe and uncertainty about the future course of German policy (HANDL et al. 1998, 170).

With the signing of the Czech–German Declaration in 1997, the main purpose of which was to re-evaluate the perspectives for the understanding of Czech–German relations in connection with questions of the past, the Sudeten German question finally ceased to be an issue of foremost importance. The German side acknowledged its responsibility for its role in the historical development that led to the 1938 Munich Agreement, and expressed regret that, with the Nazi crimes, the Germans caused much suffering and many grievances to the Czech population. They also acknowledged that Nazi policy had created conditions for the post-war flight, expulsion and forced displacement. The Czech side, likewise, expressed regret over the post-war expulsion and forced displacement of Sudeten Germans from Czechoslovakia, in which the principle of collective guilt had been applied, and accepted that the process had been accompanied by a number of excesses which were never punished. Both sides agreed in the declaration that the wrongs that had been committed belonged to the past, and for that reason the two parties would not further encumber their relations with the political and legal issues of the past. It was nevertheless emphasised that each party remained bound by its own legal system and respected the differing legal views of its partner (MFA CR 2004, Articles II–IV). Last but not least, the declaration gave rise to the Czech–German Future Fund and the Czech–German Discussion Forum, which became the main pillars upon which Czech–German relations were developed.

2.3. From 1997 to 2004: Heading towards NATO and the EU

Due to the signing of the Czech–German Declaration, the historical agenda was finally shifted from the political to a moral level. In March 1999, to signify its accommodating attitude, the Czech side expressed some distance from the Beneš Decrees by describing the effect “of some Czechoslovak post-war laws” as “extinct” (HANDL 2004, 77). To reciprocate, the German Government factually and formally refused to support the property claims made by Sudeten Germans against the Czech Republic. Compensation for victims of Nazi persecution and forced labour, and the involvement of the Sudeten Germans in projects funded by the Czech–German Future Fund, were of fundamental importance (HANDL 2009, 30).

With the controversial questions of the past settled, both countries turned their attention to other issues. Foremost on the agenda was the integration of the Czech Republic into the key multilateral structures. Although joining NATO and the EU had been set as the main goals of Czech foreign policy back in the early 1990s, it was only in the period from 1997 onwards that Czech accession to the two organisations could become the main subject in

Czech–German affairs. The development of mutual relations was strongly supported by the ideological closeness of the social-democratic governments on both sides of the border. For the rest of the decade and into the early 2000s, Czech–German relations therefore developed much more positively than previously (KRATOCHVÍL–SYCHRA 2012, 31).

The limitations of the Czech–German dealing with the past and the potential ability of the Sudeten German question to encumber mutual relations once again were nonetheless on display in a crisis that took place in spring 2002. The utterances of the then Prime Minister, Miloš Zeman, about the Sudeten Germans (he called them Hitler’s “fifth column”), voiced in response to provocative pre-election rhetoric in Bavaria, Austria and Hungary, led to the unprecedented cancellation of a visit to Prague by the German Chancellor, Gerhard Schröder. As the situation escalated, some of the deeper characteristics of the Czech position towards Germany – but also vice-versa – came to the surface. First of all, it was revealed that the Czechs had an insufficient understanding of the complexity of German politics – there was a tendency to confuse Bavarian, Sudeten German and official federal levels of policy-making. The passivity of the Czech side (e.g. its reluctance to make at least a symbolic gesture of reconciliation towards the Sudeten Germans) and the absence of a Czech voice in the German media and public discourse went hand in hand with ignorance of post-war developments in Germany. The response by the German side, meanwhile, recalled the lack of public interest in and empathy towards the Czech Republic – the importance of the “Munich complex” for Czech politics and the general public was appreciated only to a limited extent and the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft was given sufficient opportunity to dominate German public opinion with its critical views. The crisis of 2002 was, then, a result of a combination of a political miscalculation, misperceptions and asymmetric responses, unfolding against a background of domestic election campaigns (HANDL 2002, 24–26; PICK 2002).

A temporary distancing between the Czech and German sides was also caused by the 2003 Iraqi crisis, when the two sides found themselves in opposite camps due to their differing views as to whether military intervention ought to be undertaken in Iraq. The famous ‘letter of the eight’ caused controversy in Germany: it was welcomed by the right-conservative segment of the political spectrum and criticised by the liberal left, who warned against further “provocations”. The Czech Republic was nonetheless understood as a country whose transatlantic orientation was not particularly profound, and as such could be won over for a joint European defence policy (HUDALLA 2004, 237).

2.4. From 2004 until the present: In need of a strategy

With the accession of the Czech Republic to the EU, the trend of Europeanisation in Czech–German affairs reached its peak: European issues became the main topic in the relationship between the Czech Republic and Germany. After 2004, Germany as a separate topic practically disappeared from the Czech political agenda, appearing rather in the broader context of multilateral security and integration policy. This was also reflected in the policy statements of governments that successively held power since the Czech accession to the EU: they either did not address bilateral relations including those with Germany or

mentioned Germany only in connection with practically-oriented, non-political cooperation (HANDL 2009, 21).

Paradoxically, under a constellation that favoured more balanced, partnership relations, the existing clear orientation of the Czech foreign policy towards Europe and hence also towards Germany weakened somewhat. On the one hand, the continuing depoliticising of the links between the two countries was apparent; and the practical aspects of cooperation had run smoothly since the early 1990s, irrespective of what government held power at any given time. On the other hand, political relations were much more unstable and subject to frequent change, depending on the political climate on both sides of the border (KRATOCHVÍL–SYCHRA 2012, 31).

In an attempt to overcome an evident strategic deficit in Czech–German relations, in 2015 Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka initiated a so-called Czech–German strategic dialogue. A form of intergovernmental cooperation, its central axis consisted of nine working groups, largely made up of representatives from Czech and German ministries. Other actors were also involved in planning and implementing specific joint activities, including federal states such as Bavaria and Saxony, non-profit organisations, and the Czech–German Future Fund and the Czech–German Discussion Forum as representatives of the civil society.

The very fact that the strategic dialogue was established can be viewed as a success of the Czech policy towards Germany and as a manifestation of a very pro-active stance, not least because the German side had originally viewed the idea of creating the strategic dialogue with restraint. Indeed, in the end it is the Czech Republic, as Germany's junior partner, which profits more from the strategic dialogue. It also needs noting that Germany does not ordinarily enter into strategic dialogues with countries whose position of power is comparable to that of the Czech Republic. Czech diplomacy managed to build the strategic dialogue on certain specific points (neighbourly ties, economic interdependence, and a shared overarching motive of overcoming divided European mentalities), in response to which the German side accepted the idea of the dialogue (Interview with a diplomat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 7 April 2017). It is a good advertisement for the Czech–German strategic dialogue that it is being considered as inspiration for other countries that find themselves in a position similar to that of the Czech Republic (even though it would mean that the Czechs would lose their special model of bilateral relations with Germany if other such dialogues were created with them). Despite its name, the Czech–German strategic dialogue has been criticised as insufficiently strategic. According to Benjamin Tallis, it has substantial potential, but largely covers issues of practical, tactical cooperation; arguably, truly strategic content is lacking. The main responsibility for this, of course, lies with the Czech side; it is up to them to demonstrate to their German partners that the Czech–German strategic dialogue matters and can provide results that are strategic in the true sense of the word (TALLIS 2016).

Last but not least, we need to note the continuing historical normalisation of mutual relations, an important element in bilateral Czech–German affairs. After the path-breaking visit of Bavaria's Prime Minister Horst Seehofer to Prague in 2010, the hitherto frozen political relations between Munich and Prague gradually improved. Three years later, the historical first visit to Bavaria of a Czech Prime Minister (Petr Nečas) confirmed the ongoing "thaw" as far as the Sudeten German question was concerned. On the issue of reconciliation

with the Sudeten Germans, then, an active attempt by the Czech Government to improve mutual relations won through, finding response from the Bavarian side. One of the most recent events signalling the successful normalisation of relations as far as dealing with the past is concerned was the official participation of the Minister for Culture Daniel Herman as the first member of the Czech Government to attend a congress of the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft in Nuremberg in May 2016, where he expressed regret over the excesses that had accompanied the post-war displacement of Germans from Czechoslovakia (KDU–ČSL 2016).

3. Economic Relations since 1989

In the mutual relations between the Czech Republic and Germany, economic links have been a constant presence and are absolutely crucial, in particular for the Czech side. Until a communist regime ruled Czechoslovakia, the development of mutual economic relations was hindered by political issues, but since 1989 there has been a dramatic increase in the intensity of economic cooperation and Germany has clearly become the Czech Republic's most important economic partner. The solidity of mutual economic links is due to the Czech Republic's integration into German and Western European economic structures. A traditional analysis of economic relations describes the Czech and German economies as very similar: both are part of the European economic area; both have a strongly developed industrial sector where they create a substantial part of their domestic product; both specialise in the same branches of industry; and currently both achieve significant trade surpluses. Although European economies are highly integrated overall, the interconnection of the Czech and German economies is such that the Czech Republic is sometimes hyperbolically described as Germany's 17th federal state (KRPEC–HODULÁK 2018).

From the early 1990s, German economic circles appreciated the Czech Republic's liberal economic and legal environment, skilled and cheap labour, good level of technological development, dense infrastructure, geographical proximity, macro-economic and political stability, relatively balanced regional development and kindred culture and consumption patterns (HANDL et al. 1997, 168). As a result, Germany contributes a large share of foreign investment into the Czech Republic; in particular in industry, machinery and electrical engineering, services and banking. Although the German share of foreign capital investment in the Czech Republic decreased from a staggering 82.0% in 1992 to 36.2% in 1994 (CVEV 1995, 54, 131) the position of German investors remained unshakeable throughout the period observed.

At present, the share of German capital in the Czech Republic is estimated at 21.9% (Euro 2016; ČNB 2018). However, a substantial imbalance remains between the number of companies operating in each partner country. Whereas the number of German companies active in the Czech Republic increased from ca. 1,200 to 3,500–4,000 after the Czech accession to the EU, in Germany there are at present only about 150 companies in which Czechs have more than a 50% equity interest (BusinessInfo 2018; Euro 2016; PICK 2002). These numbers suggest a problematic trend in profit outflow, which in the EU context places the Czech Republic among the countries with the greatest outflows of money abroad (PERGLER 2016). It has been shown that virtually all growth in the Czech economy

since 1995 has been due to the expansion of foreign-owned companies, whereas the size of the economy in domestic ownership has remained the same (expressed in real values) (Government of the CR 2016, 3).

Beyond the area of foreign investment, Germany has also been the Czech Republic's most important economic partner as far as the volume of foreign trade is concerned: it increased continuously from 1989 to 2004. Since the Czech accession to the EU, the position of Germany expressed in relative terms has started to decrease: whereas in 2000 Germany's share of Czech exports was 40.0% and of imports it was 32.0%, in 2011 these figures decreased to 32.1 and 25.6% respectively (BusinessInfo 2012). Nonetheless, currently the volume of trade between the Czech Republic and Germany has broken records for the eighth year in a row, reaching 87.9 billion Euros in 2017. The Czech Republic has maintained its place as Germany's 10th biggest trading partner and was the 12th export and 7th import destination. Czech exports to Germany reached 46.3 billion Euros and grew faster than imports from Germany. In 2017, the Czech Republic's positive trade balance with Germany broke the previous record of 2016, growing by 12.2% to 4.6 billion Euros (EHLER 2018).

The commodity structure of Czech–German trade has remained relatively stable. Three items remain crucial: motor vehicles, machinery and electrical goods, together accounting for 58.4% of Czech exports to Germany and 48.9% of German imports into the Czech Republic (EHLER 2018). Undoubtedly, the automotive industry has remained the driving force of Czech–German economic cooperation. But, on the other hand, this strengthens concerns over the increasingly one-sided dependency of the Czech economy on this one branch of industry, and ultimately, on the German economy (ŠITNER–KUČERA 2017). Given that mutual trade relations and the economic conditions in Germany are fundamental factors influencing the Czech Republic's macroeconomic situation, the country would be subject to substantial vulnerability and risk should these indicators evolve negatively. Indeed, this was previously confirmed by changes in the Czech economy after 2008, in connection with the global economic crisis and the subsequent crisis of the Eurozone (KRATOCHVÍL–SYCHRA 2012, 40, 44; ČTK 2017).

4. Institutional Relations since 1989

4.1. Czech–German relations and the EU: Key factors shaping the framework

Ever since the end of World War II, European integration has been a key aspect of German policy and the country's foremost national interest. Similarly, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, accession to the EU as a full member became a Czech national priority. Czech and German politics are both involved in the successful continuation of the European integration process, to which neither country has any real alternative. In European policy, the Czech Republic and Germany share a number of interests, of which the most essential – supporting democracy, developing multilateral institutions, maintaining security and sustaining political, economic and social stability and prosperity in Central Europe – were behind the strong German support granted to the Czech Republic during its integration into the EU. Although the priority given to the eastern enlargement of the EU on the list of German policy objectives varied, Germany remained the main advocate throughout of the Central

and Eastern European post-communist countries' accession to the EU (KRATOCHVÍL–SYCHRA 2012, 36). The extraordinary importance of Germany for the Czech European policy was also manifest in connection with the Czech presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2009, when Germany provided strong support to its eastern partner.

With the EU accession, Czech–German relations multi-lateralised and there was an 'upgrading' of the Czech Republic's position, thus partially mitigating the asymmetry between the respective power potentials of the two countries. The institutional and normative homogenisation of Central Europe, to which the German strategy of 'milieu shaping' had contributed, completed the transformation process that had been occurring in the Czech Republic and other post-communist countries of the region since 1989 (HANDL 2009, 31). However, this also meant that the disciplining effect of the efforts to integrate into the EU, which had informed the Czech European policy during the accession process, disappeared, leaving the Czech foreign policy without a unified strategy and vision that would be of similar importance to that of the process of integration into the EU.

The evolution of Czech–German relations in the EU context has confirmed that the existence of fundamental interests shared by both does not guarantee in itself a corresponding degree of political proximity (HANDL 2009, 31). Perhaps the main reason for this paradox has been an internal-political differentiation among the Czechs in their approach to the EU. Whereas Germany's European policy has long been characterised by the broad "permissive consensus", the Czech Republic has manifested precisely the opposite throughout nearly the entire period observed – i.e. an absence of political consensus in strategic matters of European policy. In consequence, almost any change of government has been accompanied by fluctuations in the approach to European issues, making European policy alternatively a source of alienation or of a bond between the Czech Republic and Germany.

The broader cleavages in the Czech society, as concerned with European policy and the role of Germany, stem from the positions Czech political leaders take towards their nation state and the issue of sharing sovereignty. A "nation-state movement" in politics defines the nation state as the fundamental building block, and considers any limitations on its power and autonomy via supranational sharing of sovereignty undesirable. The advocates of this approach insist that the intergovernmental model of European integration must be maintained and are sceptical of deeper European integration, or reject it outright. This has long been characteristic of the Czech political right, which somewhat paradoxically finds itself in one camp alongside the Communist Party that criticises the EU as a capitalist structure dominated by Germany. The second, "nation-federation movement" also places primary emphasis on the nation state but does not reject the strengthening of the supranational model of European integration, accepting also a prospective political union – in contrast to the "nation-state movement", this is compatible with the German approach towards European integration. This movement mainly recruits its supporters from the ranks of the Social Democrats, the Christian Democrats and the Greens (HANDL 2012).

Beyond the internal-political differentiation, the institutional incoherence of the Czech foreign policy has long played an important role, with negative effects for Czech–German relations. The coordination among Czech foreign policy actors is wobbly and their powers are not interpreted unambiguously. The former president Václav Klaus provides a notorious example: he often – and especially in European matters – acted out of keeping with the

government's position. With his anti-EU and anti-German rhetoric, he also left considerable marks on the Czech public debate about the EU, becoming a key figure in the growing Euroscepticism.

As the Czech political landscape is divided and its key constitutional actors are not united on foreign policy issues, no cohesive political line on Europe can be defined in the Czech Republic. The country's split relations with Germany and its role in the EU are closely connected with this. Whereas the "big issues" of European policy such as the reform of primary law and the future direction of the EU have been dominated by the ideological differences noted above, the Czech–German cooperation across various sectors of European policy has been largely characterised by a pragmatic, ad hoc approach to resolving particular issues. The proximity of Czech and German positions largely depended on the matter being negotiated, and the extent to which it was in agreement with Czech and German national interests (BELLING 2016, 80).

4.2. Czech–German relations and NATO: Gradual convergence of Czech and German strategic thinking

The Czech Republic and Germany agree on the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation as the central guarantor of security and defence, and their active involvement in this alliance as the foundation of their security and defence policies. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, Germany was among the strongest advocates of Czech integration into NATO. Germany had not just economic but also security reasons for promoting the shift of EU and NATO borders further to the east. In doing so it grasped the historical opportunity to secure for itself a central and not a frontier position, in which it had to live for decades (HANDL 1995, 44). The Czech–German border is the longest each country has with any of its neighbours within the EU, and this is an important premise for creating a joint security policy. One can also note a certain moral or symbolic dimension to this support: as the former state secretary of the Federal Ministry of Defence, Walther Stützle, argued, "[to] leave Václav Havel's country standing outside the doors of the Atlantic Alliance [...] would be to contradict history" (STÜTZLE 2001, 17).

Germany's intense support during the Czech preparations for NATO accession helped to overcome potential fears of Germany's military power and its use for political ends. The main topics of cooperation included democratisation, modernisation and civil control of the armed forces. Through this cooperation, a systematic policy transfer was undertaken – this was largely a unidirectional transfer of political and institutional models and military-technical standards that apply in the armies of NATO member countries. Germany was also interested in offering its eastern neighbour a specific German model – "Modell Bundeswehr". The overwhelming majority of operations and measures were funded by the German side, even at a time when the Czech Republic already was a NATO member. A shift towards the normal NATO model including national financing in the early 2000s helped to make the official contacts between the Czechs and Germans more matter-of-fact and emphasised the principle of mutual benefit (HANDL 2010, 127–128).

An important chapter of Czech–German cooperation under the heading of NATO was linked with the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Feyzabad, Afghanistan,

in 2005–2007, part of the International Security Assistance Force. This was the first example of direct military cooperation between the Czech Republic and Germany abroad, as well as the first deployment of Czech soldiers under German command, a matter of substantial symbolic significance. The cooperation of Czech and German soldiers in Afghanistan marked the peak of Czech–German military collaboration to date. The greatest benefit of the co-action of Czech and German service personnel in the PRT in Feyzabad was the increased interoperability of the Czech and German sides, facilitating further the Czech–German military cooperation. Despite the positive evaluations of this chapter of the Czech–German military collaboration it needs noting that it was an exception rather than the rule; both sides still had to wait for several more years before the arrival of large-scale projects implying true partnership (Interview with Ondřej Vlk, Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, Prague, 14 April 2016).

In 2012–2013, the idea of a “backbone power” started to take shape as one of Germany’s most important initiatives in the field of European security. It referred to “Anlehnungsmacht Deutschland”, a characterisation of Germany’s role within NATO (DAUSEND–BITTNER 2012). On Germany’s initiative, this later evolved into the Framework Nations Concept, officially adopted at a NATO summit in Wales in September 2014. Briefly put, what this means in practice is that militarily powerful and large NATO member countries serve as centres for groups of smaller countries which they lead. At the Wales Summit, the Czech Republic joined a group of ten allies who were interested in cooperating with Germany as the framework nation on specific projects of military cooperation. The Czech Republic was particularly motivated by the fact that in doing so it would achieve the greater military involvement of Germany in Central Europe, where Germany’s military engagement was previously only hesitant. Thus, the Framework Nations Concept can be viewed as an interesting and important opportunity for the Czech Republic, permitting the country to remain a relevant actor in European security architecture and an ally to Germany within the framework of NATO (KUFČÁK 2014, 2).

4.3. Czech–German relations and the Visegrád Four: In the role of the most bearable of all trouble-makers

Since the early 1990s, the multilateral aspect of the relations between the Czech Republic and Germany has also developed in the context of the so called Visegrád Four (V4), associating the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary. Germany’s foreign policy vis-à-vis this group was based on two broad paradigms. The first was a constructivist approach, based on a sense of historical responsibility and having as its aim to preserve peace on the European continent; the second was a rationalist promotion of political and economic stability in Central and Eastern Europe (GAWRICH–STEPANOV 2014, 3). It needs noting, however, that the relations between Germany and the V4 as a whole remained secondary; in many sectors, Germany approached cooperation with the V4 countries primarily on a bilateral basis. This was due not just to their differing power potentials, internal political developments and the divided positions of the V4 countries in the EU, but, more broadly, to Germany’s unwillingness to create in the EU permanent blocs that would limit the options for the flexible building of issue-related coalitions (HANDL 2014).

Germany's differentiated approach to the V4 countries was influenced by a range of factors: geographic and geostrategic, economic, security and historical. The last-mentioned in particular dominated the mutual agenda for a significant portion of the 1990s and occasionally also resonated in the early 2000s. Historical questions tended to unite, rather than divide, Germany and Hungary, and they did not pose a fundamental issue for German–Slovak relations; but the opposite was true for relations between Germany on the one side and the Czech Republic and Poland on the other. The ways of dealing with the past were very different in these two countries. The difference was primarily due to a strong feeling of guilt in Germany over the sorely tried Poland, and, by contrast, a weak feeling of guilt or even indifference towards the Czechs. The post-war displacement of Germans was also an important factor: whereas Germans displaced from Poland were scattered throughout Germany, Germans displaced from Czechoslovakia concentrated themselves in Bavaria, where their representatives became a powerful political force, influencing national politics to the detriment of the eastern neighbour. On the other hand, in Czech–German relations the question of the border did not play as important a role as it did in Polish–German relations: in the post-war period, the Czech–German border was not questioned internationally or by German governments (HANDL 2003, 17).

In the context of European policy, the quality of relations between Germany and the V4 countries was subject to change, depending on the internal developments of this policy and external processes. When the V4 countries joined the EU, they did so as “hawkish Atlanticists, mistrustful of German power and drawn to the UK's views on EU economic governance” (SIMECKA 2013, 1) – this despite the enormous support given to them by Germany during the accession process. However, the Eurozone crisis caused a shift in the V4 countries in terms of their perception of German power, and they sided with Germany. Like other V4 countries, the Czech Republic followed German austerity policy and the quality of mutual relations with Germany improved sharply. This was supported in Czech politics by the formation of the most pro-European government for the last many years (SIMECKA 2013, 1–2). Similarly, the Ukrainian crisis and the threat of Russian aggression helped to cement defensive cooperation between Germany and the V4 countries. The Czech Republic did not fall behind its V4 partners and offered its limited – but in terms of political legitimacy not insignificant – military capacities for a number of multilateral projects led by Germany (for more detail, see KŘÍŽ et al. 2018).

While the Eurozone and the Ukrainian crises raised expectations that a stable central European coalition led by Germany could be created, the next crisis, which affected the European Union in 2015 in connection with a wave of migration, thwarted or at least restrained such hopes. The V4 countries were among the leading critics of the solution to the crisis promoted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel. This open dispute transformed recent allies of Germany into loud opponents and caused the largest East–West split of the decade (BLUSZ–ZERKA 2016). In the V4 context, Germany saw the Czech Republic as a better, more reasonable country, and the Czechs sought to play a bridging role between Germany and other V4 countries. However, the sustainability of this role was undermined by illiberal tendencies in Hungary and Poland, which called the very purpose of continued cooperation between V4 countries into question. For the Czech Republic, this opened alternative scenarios, in which the country would turn away from V4 politics and instead align itself strategically with Germany (KRATOCHVÍL 2016). A lesson learned by Germany

from the migration crisis was that it is better to structure relations with the V4 countries bilaterally. Despite the differences of opinion, the V4 countries have remained relevant to Germany's European policy (LANG 2017).

5. Czech–German Defence Cooperation as a Case of Policy Field-specific Relations: Towards a Strategic and Natural Partnership

Defence cooperation between two countries, which is directly connected with such sensitive aspects of power as state sovereignty and the use of force, can be seen as an important indicator of the quality of mutual relations. For a long time, Czech–German defence cooperation did not occupy a prominent position in their mutual relations. Pragmatic rather than strategic cooperation was traditionally preferred. This was due chiefly to the structural differences and the lack of compatibility in the security and strategic cultures of the two countries. The pervasive historical sensitivity of the Czech–German defence cooperation – especially as seen by the Czech general public – also played a non-negligible role. However, following on from the processes unfolding in the European security architecture, the fundamental starting points of Czech and German security policy were gradually brought into accord and a mutual security and defence cooperation developed.

Despite agreement in the fundamental set-up of Czech and German interests in the field of security and defence, persistent differences in the understanding of mutual cooperation can be noted. From Germany's perspective, the ultimate goal of military cooperation is to strengthen European security and defence capacities and to push European integration in this area forward. Germany views future developments in Europe through the prism of European integration, and its efforts to increase its international political influence goes hand in hand with this, because a stronger Europe equals a stronger Germany. Naturally, then, Germany advocates such steps as are compatible with an overall security architecture as understood by the country. The Czech Republic, by contrast, emphasises self-sufficiency, clearly feeling a need to maintain a degree of autonomy. Unlike Germany, the country does not consider the European framework the primary one; it tends to think in terms of a transatlantic framework, and more recently also in regional terms. This difference can create frustration on the Czech side, stemming from the awareness that adaptation cannot be expected from Germany. Germany plays the role of the backbone of European security forces, and the Czech Republic has neither the power nor the security forces structure to play such a role. From the Czech perspective, it is nevertheless important that Germany ranks the Czech Republic among the solid partners with which it wants to develop further cooperation (Interview with a defence attaché at the Czech Embassy in Berlin, 14 April 2016).

With the inclusion of security and defence policy into the framework of the Czech–German strategic dialogue, defence cooperation was raised to a new level both qualitatively and quantitatively. The Czech Republic and Germany mutually confirmed that this domain was among the key subjects of their relations and had a promising future. An important benefit of the strategic dialogue was that it induced the German side to show a greater interest in the Czech Republic's potential in the area of defence. Unlike in police cooperation, where multiple consequential projects have been developed between the early 1990s and

the present, continuity was lacking in defence cooperation (Interview with Ondřej Vlk, Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, Prague, 14 April 2016).

Given the developments in the international security environment and the growing role of Germany in solving the challenges created by these developments, the strategic potential of the Czech–German defence cooperation is becoming increasingly prominent. We believe that the intensification of this cooperation is one of the most important trends in Czech–German affairs, both bilaterally and multilaterally, throughout the period observed. The updated Defence Strategy of the Czech Republic, adopted in March 2017, emphasises defence cooperation with Germany as one of the two pillars of regional defence cooperation (alongside the V4), and, with reference to the mutual economic ties and the importance of Germany in NATO and the EU, describes the country as a natural partner to the Czech Republic (MoD CR 2017, 11). This is the first time Germany has been named in this way in a Czech government strategy document concerned with security and defence policy. Given the historical background, the choice of such a description testifies to an important shift in the understanding of mutual relations, as well as to an active approach taken by the Czech side (Interview with a representative of the Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, Prague, 12 April 2018). The peak of the Czech–German defence cooperation to date came with the Letter of Intent concerning the affiliation of the 4th Rapid Deployment Brigade of the Czech Army to the 10th Armoured Division of the Bundeswehr signed in February 2017 – a bilateral agreement that aims to build up coordinated units intended for shared defence operations. Although in practice the affiliation consists largely of joint training and the exchange of experiences, it has elicited much emotion among the Czech political opposition, as well as in some media and sections of the general public, which point to persisting limits to the understanding of a defence partnership between Czechs and Germans as “natural”.

6. Conclusions and Outlook: Are Germany and the Czech Republic Drifting Apart?

The Czech Republic and Germany are natural partners in Central Europe. The compatibility of their strategic interests and fundamental values after 1989 created a firm foundation for the development of mutual relations. Germany’s multi-faceted interest in having the Czech Republic successfully integrated into the European and transatlantic frameworks led to intense cooperation between the two countries and Germany’s support for the Czech Republic in political, economic and social spheres. Throughout the period observed, Czech–German cooperation was characterised by close, practically oriented, depoliticised and decentralised cooperation, which developed successfully in various areas and at all levels of governance. Very intense economic links were a constant feature of Czech–German relations, thanks to the integration of the Czech Republic in the German economic area and the two countries’ interlocked economies. Gradually, there was also a rapprochement over the historical agenda, which had previously been very controversial and politically explosive. Bilaterally and multilaterally in NATO and the EU, the Czech Republic and Germany have in recent years come remarkably close in the area of defence cooperation, which is of not just practical but also symbolic importance: Germany, an erstwhile enemy,

is now understood not just as a strategic but also a natural partner for cooperation in security and defence issues.

The opening of the Czech–German strategic dialogue in 2015 can be understood as another milestone in the rapprochement of the two countries. Although it might seem that the description ‘strategic’ is overly ambitious, we can highlight areas where a strategic importance can be ascertained, as for example the cooperation in the area of security and defence or the deepening of cooperation in applied research and development following the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution, crucial for the future development of the relations between the Czech and German economy. From a long-term perspective, the socialisation effect that accompanies the strategic dialogue also seems important, and can provide a strong pillar of Czech–German relations for the future.

On the one hand, Czech membership of the EU has made the country’s mutual relations with Germany stronger; but on the other, the ‘dual multi-lateralisation’ of Czech–German relations (HANDL 2009), initiated by the Czech accession to NATO and the EU, has not in itself secured political proximity between the two sides. This has been most noticeable in the area of European policy, even if this is an area where Germany evidently suggests itself as a key and strategic partner to the Czech Republic. Although it is in the Czech Republic’s broad interests to cooperate with Germany and ‘upload’ its interests and preferences to this partner (EBERLE–HANDL 2016), a drifting apart has been noticeable in the field of European policy. Since the Czech Republic’s accession to the EU, its relationship with the EU as such and especially its position on EU institutional issues and Eurozone developments has become a cleavage splitting the Czech political spectrum, affecting also Czech–German affairs. The Czech Republic looked like a ‘European state without Europeans’ (HANDL 2013, 102), which clearly had a limiting influence on its relations with Germany. An insufficient sense of EU solidarity was most conspicuous during the migration crisis, when the Czech side loudly opposed the crisis management model promoted by Germany.

Given that the bilateral Czech–German agenda is closely linked with European policy, one of the main reasons for the drifting apart of the two countries can be sought in the lack of unity of the Czech political leadership and in the absence of a long-term strategy towards the EU that is able to command support across the Czech political spectrum. With the Czech policy characterised by a largely reactive approach, the country cannot expect to be a truly strategic partner to Germany. In formulating its strategy towards Germany, the Czech Republic ought to bear in mind the asymmetry that is an inevitable characteristic of its relationship with its western neighbour, even if this asymmetry has been relativised somewhat by ‘dual multi-lateralisation’. Whereas, for the Czechs, the maintaining of close ties with Germany as the regional power is a must, the position Germany has enables it to consider multiple vectors of interests and choose among various partners. This means that the Czech side must be proactive and come up with impulses that push mutual cooperation forward. General conditions are favourable for an active approach to be taken by the Czech Republic: although Germany is the strongest European power, it needs partners to promote its interests in the multilateral structures that are the key locus of its foreign policy. It would be to its disadvantage if the Czech Republic were unable to exploit this fact sufficiently and failed to prevent any further drifting apart.

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