De-Europeanisation of Czech policy towards Eastern Partnership countries under populist leaders

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ABSTRACT

Europeanisation alters the conduct, content and norms of EU member states’ foreign policies. This has also been true for Czech policy towards Eastern Europe, where the country actively supported EU frameworks and promoted European norms. With the rise of populists, however, the adherence to EU norms and structures has decreased to the extent that makes de-Europeanisation possible. This article analyses Czech policy towards Eastern Partnership countries after 2013 when populists entered the government. Based on three elements of potential de-Europeanisation, the adherence to European framework, professional norms and role of EU expertise, and deviation from foundational norms, the article concludes that Czech foreign policy towards the region remains highly Europeanised. Czech populists have concentrated on domestic matters and showed little interest in and understanding of foreign policy. Any changes to foreign policy will occur as a by-product of domestic politics, not a result of deliberate change in course in the future.

KEYWORDS

Europeanisation; populism; Eastern partnership; Czechia; de-Europeanisation; foreign policy

Introduction

It has been long accepted that member states’ foreign policy is subject to Europeanisation processes similar to other policy areas (Irongelle 2003; Wong and Hill 2011; Tonra 2015). The channels through which the change occurs may differ, depending more on unwritten norms and peer pressure than on the hard law. However, the mutual influence in the three directions between the national and the European levels – downloading, uploading and cross-loading – can be traced, as shown by the ever-growing number of publications (cf. Torreblanca 2001; Larsen 2005; Raimundo 2013; Weiss 2017).

In foreign policy, Europeanisation has always relied on norms, informal rules and socialisation of key actors and institutions (cf. Nuttall 1992; Juncos and Reynolds 2007). Foreign policymaking at the EU level undergoes increasing institutionalisation, particularly with the establishment of the European External Action Service (Bátora 2013). Nevertheless, the basic structure of the common foreign and security policy has not changed and relies on consensus and shared understanding that the EU as a whole is more robust than its parts internationally. The unanimity condition alters the whole negotiating framework in the CFSP issues because each country can block the rest and
use the threat of a veto to extort concessions (Tallberg 2008; Thomas 2012). As a result, EU foreign policy may be particularly sensitive to individual countries’ idiosyncrasies and particular interests, such as in case of Cyprus and the EU’s Turkey policy (Ker-lindsay 2007; Pastore 2013).

The design of the CFSP and its reliance on informal modes of cooperation makes it vulnerable to actors who do not adhere to unwritten norms and who are keen to exploit the power of veto. The recent surge in the vote for populist parties throughout Europe and their participation in national governments (Kessel 2015; Katsambekis 2016) bids for the question to what extent their presence changes the member states’ behaviour in CFSP. More specifically, to what extent populists have strived for and managed to reverse the adjustments to collective European foreign policymaking, the Europeanisation of foreign policy.

De-Europeanisation is a hotly debated but not particularly clear concept (Yilmaz 2016; Murphy 2019). This article understands de-Europeanisation, particularly in foreign policy, in line with the introduction to this special issue as a mirror-image of Europeanisation. The phenomenon is composed of three elements that refer to disengagement from EU-level policymaking (a structural disintegration), a decreasing need to understand and be able to navigate in the EU institutional environment (a reconstruction of professional norms in predominantly national terms) and a regression from foundational EU norms and values either through deliberate action or neglect (repudiation of fundamental norms) (see the introduction to this special issue for a more thorough debate on the concept). In this sense, de-Europeanisation is a process, not an end state, in the same way as there is no end state to Europeanisation (cf. Radaelli 2006). This process can happen faster or more slowly and may start in one area and creep into other areas, depending on the context. It is necessary to look into the practice of de-Europeanisation to see under which conditions and how it occurs, and what are its limits.

This article aims to help fill the gap in our understanding of the de-Europeanisation of foreign policy in EU member states due to the populist surge. There has been much interest in the impact of the populist parties on foreign policy lately (Destradi and Plagemann 2019; Varga and Aron 2020; Stengel, MacDonald, and Nabers 2019). This article looks at the case of the Czech Republic’s policy towards the countries of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and asks to what extent and how it has changed after populist parties entered the government (see also contributions by Dyduch and Müller as well as Raik in this issue for a similar focus).

The Czech policy towards the EaP countries is an apt case to study potential de-Europeanisation for several reasons. Firstly, Czech populists (ANO, the party of the current prime minister Andrej Babiš) have been in government for the past seven years.¹ ANO first joined the government as a junior, albeit powerful, partner to social democrats in 2014 (8 members for ČSSD, 7 for ANO and 3 for the centrist Christian Democracy). They won the next elections by a landslide to form a minority government in 2017. After it failed to gain confidence, ANO formed a minority coalition government with social democrats as junior partners (10 members for ANO and 5 for ČSSD) and the support of the Communists. There is, as a result, a track record long enough to study. Secondly, the relationship to the EaP countries has traditionally belonged to the Czech foreign policy priorities, both bilaterally and multilaterally. It also became one of the areas where the Czech foreign policy bought into the European framework the most (Tulmets 2008). It thus meets the criteria that any
de-Europeanisation requires a certain level of Europeanisation to occur (Copeland 2016, 1126). The Eastern Partnership itself was launched in Prague during a dedicated summit under the Czech presidency of the Council in 2009, and Czechs managed to secure the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolio for their nominee in the second Barroso Commission in 2010–2014. The Czechs were eager to assist the Eastern neighbours in their transition to democracy and strengthening ties with the EU (Weiss 2011, 2018; Únal Eris 2013). At the EU level, the policy towards Eastern European countries has been firmly anchored in European values, particularly democracy, respect to human rights and fundamental freedoms, the rule of law and a common approach, making it an even more interesting case to study from the perspective of potential de-Europeanisation. The European Neighbourhood Policy in general and the EaP in particular span across several modes of decision-making on the EU level – from CFSP to development assistance to trade. Its objective, however, is embedded in foreign policy as the political conditionality manifested in the ‘more-for-more’ principle suggests (cf. Bicchi 2014; Korosteleva 2016).

Czech populism differs from the similarly labelled movements in other countries in the region. Although there are parties that employ the rhetoric of cultural or political exceptionalism in the Czech system, they have never reached dominance despite being present in the parliament. Individual politicians not generally connected to the extreme right have occasionally resorted to this type of argumentation, notably President Zeman on counter-terrorism and migration. In Czechia, the leading populist branch has been described as centrist populism (Havlík and Voda 2018). Its representatives, most notably Mr Babiš, use the vocabulary of managerial and economic technocracy instead (Čišťák 2017). This technocratic clout attracted several prominent personalities to join ranks with Mr Babiš, such as a former rector of a major Czech university, several diplomats and former ministers. Over time, however, most of them have left or loosened the ties to the party, such as minister Stropnický or Věra Jourová, the Czech member of the European Commission.

The article analyses the three elements of potential de-Europeanisation on the following empirical material. First, it looks at strategic documents to trace changes in how the Czech policy towards the region understands the European framework and its role for Czech interests. The written expression of the Czech policy is further enriched by a review of leading Czech politicians’ statements on the topic to see to what extent the political elite challenges the strategic frameworks. Second, the article turns to the professional norms and analyses how EU expertise helps Czech diplomats working on EaP countries advance their career and to what extent Czech foreign policy has supported Czech diplomats applying for jobs at the EU level. Thirdly, the article studies the norms and asks to what extent Czech policy has deviated from the established norms of EU cooperation in the relations to the EaP countries and abandoned the foundational norms, particularly the support to democracy and human rights, in its dealings with the region.

The article concludes that there is no deliberate populists’ plan to de-Europeanise Czech foreign policy. Instead, foreign policy becomes marginalised and domesticated so that short-term domestic political concerns increasingly shape it. Where de-Europeanisation occurs, it is caused by ignorance of the longer-term impact of short-term motivated decisions (both due to the lack of understanding and the disregard of what happens in the future) and a lack of long-term planning, not by the government’s preference for a competing ideological or structural approach.
First, the paper reviews Czech policy towards the EaP countries until 2013 and sets the Czech approach to the region in the European context. It introduces the main actors responsible for the formulation of Czech foreign policy and their affiliation. Next, the three elements of de-Europeanisation are traced in the Czech foreign policy after 2013. The final part discusses the findings and argues that Czech foreign policy toward the EaP countries has remained largely unscathed in practice, although various actors keep sending mixed signals rhetorically.

**Czech policy towards the EaP region until 2013**

Czechia mostly lost interest in Eastern Europe after the end of the Cold War. After the split of Czechoslovakia, the newly established Czech Republic did not directly border the post-Soviet space and re-focused its attention fully towards the West. The country subordinated its foreign policy to the objective of joining NATO and the EU, which meant settling relations with the neighbours, Austria and Germany (cf. Handl 2009; Šepták 2009), and proving to be a reliable partner in various international settings, such as in the Balkans (cf. Karásek 2010).

Czech policy towards Eastern Europe became the subject of intensive Europeanisation. Initially, the accession negotiations altered the content of policies, such as when Czechia had to introduce visa obligation for Ukrainian citizens (Kaźmierkiewicz 2005). Later, Czech politicians re-discovered Eastern Europe, which gained importance economically (through revitalised trade relations), strategically (as a transit region for Russian oil and gas), normatively (as the destination of transition assistance) and politically (as a region where Czechia could contribute to EU foreign policy) (cf. Kratochvíl and Tulmets 2007). Czech policy towards the region fell in line with the European framework and made use of it. The launch of the Eastern Partnership initiative constitutes the most prominent example. Although the EaP was primarily a Swedish-Polish initiative (Copsey and Pomorska 2014), Czechia backed it entirely. It used one of the last full-fledged rotating EU Council presidencies to convene a grand launch in Prague in 2009.

Czech foreign policy embraced the institution of Eastern Partnership. So much so that the Czech foreign policy concept of 2011 even identified the post-Soviet region in Eastern Europe as ‘Eastern Partnership countries’ (Government of the Czech Republic 2011). Czech policy towards the region was anchored in European values and practices. To quote the 2011 foreign policy concept again: the Czech support to partners in the area was conditioned by ‘[s]haring common values’ and focused on ‘political, social and economic stability … with an emphasis on respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, development of the rule of law, political pluralism, civil society and media freedom’ (Government of the Czech Republic 2011, 16). Czechia supported EaP countries at the EU level and invested in bilateral relations too. The Czech foreign ministry had opened embassies in all EaP countries by 2012, despite significant budget cuts and closures elsewhere. Four out of six EaP countries became priority recipients of Czech development and transition cooperation assistance, surpassing, as a region, Western Balkans as the main target of Czech funding (cf. Weiss 2018). The ministry also created the position of a Special Envoy for EaP.

The appointment of Czech diplomat and politician Štefan Füle as the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy in the second Barroso Commission in 2010–2014 can be understood as a recognition of the Czech
investment into the Eastern Partnership region. It contributed, without any doubt, to the
general Czech willingness to support the European position in this area as it is very
uncommon for member states to undermine policies proposed by ‘their’ Commissioners (cf. Wonka 2007).

According to the research framework proposed in this special issue, Czech policy towards
EaP countries became highly Europeanised by 2013. The EU level was structurally integrated
into the Czech system in terms of policy conduct, policy objectives and constitutional
norms. It was also incorporated into the set of professional standards, as the establishment
of the Special Envoy within the foreign ministry and the appointment of a senior Czech
diplomat as the Commissioner for enlargement and neighbourhood policy suggest.

Responsibility for Czech foreign policy after 2013

At the most general level, the Czech government has got the sole responsibility for the
formulation of Czech foreign policy, according to the Czech constitution (Art. 67). Within the
government, the foreign minister is tasked with foreign policy’s coordination and conduct. However, security-related aspects of foreign policy are influenced by the minister of defence and the minister of interior; trade aspects by the minister of industry and trade. In case of disputes, at the level of general guidance, and particularly in European policy, the prime minister’s role is crucial. The state secretary for European affairs is directly subordinated to the prime minister within the Office of the Government’s structure.

In practice, however, there are many actors beyond government that contribute to
Czech foreign policy’s formulation and conduct. Firstly, there is the president who
represents the state abroad. In the Czech context, presidents have traditionally been
very influential figures despite a lack of formal powers. All presidents since 1989 have
shaped the Czech foreign policy discourse and the environment in which the policies are formulated (cf. Weiss 2020; Novotný 2020). More often than not, presidents have also blurred the communication of foreign policy by publicly diverging from the government’s positions. Besides, the two chambers of the Czech parliament actively participate in
representing the country abroad with their members and presidents travelling around
the world within the parliamentary foreign policy framework (cf. Raunio and Wagner 2017). In Czechia, the presidents of both chambers often represent different parties due to the
electoral system difference. The table below shows the party affiliation of the relevant
politicians in the period 2014–2020.

As Table 1 shows, foreign policy in Czechia was led by social democracy most of the
time under scrutiny, except for the defence ministry. In the first half of 2018, the ANO
minority government briefly took over all departments but failed to win confidence in the
parliament and had not had time to change foreign policy. The role of the populists has
been significant since 2014, however, mainly through the informal alliance between Babiš,
the leader of ANO, and president Zeman. Zeman, the former chairman of and prime
minister for social democracy, parted ways with the mainstream of his old party and has
actively undermined social democratic leadership over the whole period (Šídlo 2020).
Since mid-2018, social democracy returned to the foreign ministry, but this time as the
junior partner in the coalition led by ANO with a clear preference for other policy areas.
The chairman of the party, Jan Hamáček, opted for the ministry of interior.
Table 1. Party affiliation of selected Czech politicians, 2014–2020.

| Year | President | Prime Minister | Foreign Minister | Defence Minister | Minister of Interior | Minister of Industry and Trade | State Secretary for European Affairs | President of the Lower Chamber | President of the Senate |
|------|-----------|----------------|------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| 2014 | Zeman     | Sobota (ČSSD) | Zaorálek (ČSSD) | Stropnický (ANO) | Chovanec (ČSSD)      | Mládek (ČSSD)                | Prouza (ČSSD)                    | Hamáček (ČSSD)                | Štěch (ČSSD)            |
| 2015 |           |                |                  |                  |                      |                                |                                  |                               |                    |
| 2016 |           |                |                  |                  |                      |                                |                                  |                               |                    |
| 2017 |           |                |                  |                  |                      |                                |                                  |                               |                    |
| 2018 |           |                |                  |                  |                      |                                |                                  |                               |                    |
| 2019 | Babiš     | Stropnický (ANO) | Šlechtová (ANO) | Metnar (ANO)      | Hamáček (ČSSD)       | NovákůvÁ (ANO)              | Hrdinková (no party affiliation) |                               |                    |
| 2020 |           | Petlíček (ČSSD) |                  | Metnar (ANO)      |                      | K. Havlíček (ANO)          |                                 |                               | Kubera (ODS)          |

Source: Author. Time of the tenure is approximate. ČSSD stands for Czech Social Democratic Party; ODS stands for Civic Democratic Party, which was in opposition during the whole period.

Strategic documents and the European framework

In 2014–2020, the Czech government updated all the major strategic documents shaping Czech foreign and European policy. In 2015, three strategies were adopted: the Foreign Policy Concept (Government of the Czech Republic 2015a), the Security Strategy (Government of the Czech Republic 2015b), and the Czech Strategy in the EU (Government of the Czech Republic 2015c). Whereas the foreign ministry was responsible for drafting the first two and the government’s office for the third, all three were rubberstamped by the government as a whole. No strategic document with relevance to the general framework of the Czech approach to the EU or the particular policy towards the EaP has been adopted since 2015.

The ČSSD-led government embraced the European Union and the Czech membership within the organisation. The three documents emphasised the importance of the EU for Czechia as a whole, and its foreign policy in particular, which was a reaction to the rather lukewarm approach of the previous centre-right governments (cf. Beneš 2017). The foreign policy concept bluntly stated that the ‘European Union provided an underlying framework for Czech foreign policy to be put into effect’ (Government of the Czech Republic 2015a, 2). It further argued that it was in the Czech interest to have ‘a uniform, strategically run EU Common Foreign and Security Policy’. The EU strategy shared the emphasis on a capable CFSP and CSDP. It singled out the need to stabilise the EU neighbourhood, not least through the differentiation of the EaP (Government of the Czech Republic 2015c, 4). The government recognised the importance of other international organisations, particularly NATO and the UN, partially OSCE. Still, none of them was considered to provide the framework for Czech foreign policy. The security strategy prioritised NATO as the tool to deliver security but stated that the Czech security was ‘crucially linked to the political and economic stability of the EU’ (Government of the Czech Republic 2015b, 6).

ANO-led governments have dissociated the strategic framework from concrete steps. ANO was part of the government that adopted all these documents that emphasised the importance of EU cooperation and its contribution to Czech interests, even though its
ministers were not primarily responsible for the drafting. As no subsequent documents were adopted, we can assume that the government still subscribes to all the premises outlined in the papers. They also guide the civil service in designing specific statements and policies. However, politicians undermine the framework by individual decisions. A prominent example is a preparation for the Czech Council presidency in 2022. Prime Minister Babiš was reported to be thinking about giving up the presidency due to its high costs and later claimed that he had only wanted to raise the issue of money (Prchal, Mazancová, and Tvrdoň 2019). A few months later, the government adopted the budget for the Czech presidency’s preparation and conduct, with all social democratic ministers voting against the proposal. The adopted budget of € 50 million is about half of what was initially planned and about 30% of the 2009 presidency’s budget (Czech Television 2019).

The situation is even more blurred when politicians’ statements are taken into consideration. The most visible controversies surround the situation in Eastern Ukraine and the issue of Crimea. Officially, the Czech government has held the common European position on the inviolability of the Ukrainian territorial integrity. Both President Zeman and Mr Babiš, while acknowledging the illegality of the Russian annexation, argued that it was not possible to return Crimea to Ukraine and called for the recognition of the status quo in 2016 (cf. Svoboda 2017, 198) in a clear breach of the governmental and EU’s position. President Zeman repeated the same message at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in 2017 where he labelled the annexation a fait accompli (Council of Europe 2017).

Similarly, Czechia has been sending confusing messages on the issue of sanctions against Russia. President Zeman criticised the sanctions right from the beginning, and Prime Minister Babiš argued that the sanctions ‘had not brought much and damage[d] everything’ (Czech Radio 2018a). Mr Vondráček, the speaker of the lower chamber for ANO, visited Russia in 2018 and met with various Russian politicians, including those on the EU sanctions list (Czech Radio 2018b). Simultaneously, the Czech Republic has always supported the extension of the sanction regime at the EU level so far.

To sum up, leading politicians’ conventional rhetoric and activities suggest that Czech policy towards EaP countries diverts from the European framework. The strategic documents setting up the context of the Czech foreign and European policy remain highly Europeanised, however, and so does the actual Czech policy in the EU.

**De-construction of professional roles and the impact of EU expertise**

Due to the relatively short period of Czech EU membership, it is difficult to assess the value of EU expertise in Czech foreign policy. Firstly, there are not that many civil servants with EU expertise. Secondly, senior officials’ appointment is often subject to political deals, particularly in the case of ambassadors, where the government and the president must strike a deal.

Since 2015, Czechia has had a strategy for the support of Czechs in EU institutions. The timing of the adoption reflects the fact that Czech governments had long ignored the issue. That resulted in relatively low numbers of Czechs entering the EU civil service, particularly at more senior levels and very few officials with Brussels expertise returning to the Czech public service. The government of the day even allocated some (limited) budget and jobs to improve Czech presence in Brussels. The government’s office coordinates the policy, and there is a dedicated official at the permanent representation in
Brussels. The foreign ministry took responsibility for the promotion of Czech officials in the EEAS, for which it created a post of special envoy. The policy lacks clear guidelines on what happens with the EU expertise acquired, however. It focused on training potential candidates and on how to maintain contact with those who succeeded. But it did not offer any better career perspective within their home institutions for those who return from Brussels back to the Czech civil service. This significant deficiency limits the appeal for civil servants to compete for Brussels jobs and has decreased the socialisation potential that could further Europeanise Czech institutions.

Generally, the rise of populists did not change how foreign policy appointments are made in Czechia. The pool of experts is relatively small, and most of the positions are not particularly interesting from the perspective of public relations. The continuous presence of social democratic ministers at the foreign ministry (with a very short tenure of Mr Stropnický) has ensured the appointment processes’ relative stability. Part of the explanation may also rest with the lack of personal capacities in AMO, which has struggled to find suitable ministerial candidates. Appointments at lower levels, such as ambassadors, have been made from among the regular civil service as a result.

The ANO-led governments made three important appointments that shape the Czech EU policy. PM Babiš appointed a new state secretary for EU affairs directly subordinated to the prime minister and coordinating the government’s EU agenda. Ms Hrdinková, who became the state secretary in 2019 after two representatives closely connected to ČSSD, had been a civil servant specialised in European affairs throughout her career. In her case, expertise was crucial (and she also got the job based on an open competition). Simultaneously, Mr Babiš had known her from their close cooperation at the finance ministry (cf. Houska 2019). Similarly, two changes at the Czech permanent representative’s position to the EU followed the logic of expertise. Mr Dürr, the permanent representative in 2018–2020, had been an experienced diplomat with long tenure in Brussels. Again, the fact that he was known to PM Babiš due to his previous deputy foreign minister’s position responsible for European affairs surely did not harm. Mr Dürr’s tenure has ended prematurely, however, reportedly due to his conflict with PM Babiš over budget cuts for the Czech presidency in 2022 (Šídlová 2020). The appointment of a new permanent representative from October 2020 does not defy the logic of expertise. Ms Hrdá is an experienced Czech diplomat who, among other positions, served as the ambassador to the United Nations. In 2015–2020, she served as the managing director for the Americas in the EEAS, the highest Czech official in the EU foreign service.

The significant deviation from the standards in the system of appointments is, again, connected to president Zeman’s activity. Ambassadors must be approved by the government but are appointed by the president in the Czech system. The constitution does not specify any appointment conditions, and presidents have blocked unwanted candidates and promoted their candidates in the past. Mr Zeman was particularly active in this respect in the first years of his tenure, blocking various appointments and aggressively pursuing his own choices. The core motivation was personal antipathy to the candidate or the minister in charge, not the issue of principles or tampering with the system. Lately, the foreign ministry and the presidential office seem to iron out differences in advance and without major public fallouts, prioritising professional diplomats. PM Babiš has not been very active in the process. Although he reportedly offered
diplomatic posts to several of his former ministers, he never followed through with the bid (Hošek 2019).

There has been no change in the personal profile of the Czech representatives in the EaP countries. Czechia has got embassies in all six countries – the latest addition was the embassy in Armenia established within the Polish embassy’s building in 2012 and expanded into a full-fledged office in 2015. All current ambassadors joined the foreign ministry in the 1990s (or earlier) and connected their career with Eastern Europe. For many of them, this is not the first posting in the region, and two even transferred into their current assignment from another EaP country. All ambassadors are professional diplomats with extensive and relevant expertise in the region. At the same time, none of the ambassadors has got any experience with European integration, either from a posting in Brussels or a relevant ministry department. They can all be considered bilateralists and country/region specialists. Reliance on regional specialists is, however, not a change introduced by the current government but a longer-term feature of the Czech personal policy towards the region.

To sum up, there is no glaring change of the course in terms of professional norms and the approach to EU expertise. Instead, personal feuds and grudges have influenced the choices and office conduct at the level of ambassadors. At lower levels, EU expertise had never been recognised as a critical skill for civil servants, despite recent attempts to support the Czech presence in Brussels. In the case of EaP countries, the choice of ambassadors reflects their expertise in the region, not in EU affairs.

**Foundational norms and the Czech policy towards the EaP region**

Czech foreign policy incorporated the EU foundational norms without significant difficulties after 2004. Due to the strong influence of former dissidents during the transformation period, Czechoslovak and later Czech diplomacy identified human rights and democracy as foreign policy principles. Practically, Czechia spends significant resources on civil societies’ support, the rule of law and good governance, access to information and election processes in transitioning countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2010; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2015). The Transition Promotion programme’s focus changed only slightly with the adoption of a new (historically second) concept in 2015. It included broader issues and priorities, such as human rights in employment and the environmental context, and became subject to a heated public debate. The alleged departure from the traditional focus on narrow political rights occurred mainly due to the political preferences of the then minister Zaorálek and his first deputy minister Drulák (Šafaříková 2014; cf. Dostál and Eberle 2015). In reality, the programme did not change significantly and has continued funding human rights defenders and activities supporting the rule of law without interruption.

Around the same time, however, Czech foreign policy actors started putting more emphasis on economic diplomacy and the direct economic benefits of foreign policy. Economic diplomacy is a constant feature of all states’ external activities. For Czechia, it gained prominence only through the actions of president Zeman who argued for an ‘economisation of diplomacy’, i.e. reframing economic relations as the core task of all Czech diplomats abroad (Zemanová 2014, 293). Economic diplomacy became a topic of domestic political clashes, particularly concerning China, which became the priority of president Zeman’s external activities. The president visited China regularly and praised China and Chinese policies
publicly, sometimes somewhat controversially. In 2014, for instance, Mr Zeman declared in an interview for the Chinese TV station CCTV that he had not travelled to China to lecture about human rights, but to learn ‘how to increase economic growth and stabilise the society’ (quoted in Novinky.cz 2014). The China policy developed into a highly polarising topic evaluated through the domestic political lenses without broader context (Fürst 2016). Interestingly, ANO remained neutral with Mr Babiš supporting economic diplomacy but refraining from taking a clear stance on China and Chinese investments in Czechia (cf. Čaban 2019).

EaP countries have belonged among the major recipients of transition promotion funds since the programme’s establishment in 2005. As shown in Graph 1, the programme has been relatively stable over the years. Having reached the level of CZK 40–50 million soon after the launch, it stagnated in the aftermath of the financial and economic crisis. It started growing steadily after 2013 to reach almost CZK 80 million in 2019. The amount of money spent on transition assistance and EaP may be even higher because there are additional resources for EaP projects and NGO activities beyond the core programme. EaP countries’ share has remained more or less stable over time at about 50–60% of the total budget. Changes in the programme reflect the situation in the region. Whereas Belarus was the primary recipient of Czech assistance among the EaP countries in the first years of the programme, it was overpassed by Ukraine in 2014. In terms of focus, the programme remains coherent in supporting issues like civic education, transparency, the rule of law, and free media. In recent years, media independence and environmental issues have gained prominence, with the focus on civic mobilisation and participation, to which the ecological issues contribute easily.  

Graph 1. Czech transition assistance. Source: Author based on Ministry of Foreign Affairs reports. Money earmarked for assistance to Ukraine based on a specific governmental decision is included.

In short, there has been no significant change in the way how the foundational values are reflected in Czech foreign policy in general and in Czech policy towards the EaP countries in particular. Despite the confusion caused by the mismatch between the Czech official position and positions publicly declared by the president, especially on China, but also on
Russian sanctions and the annexation of Crimea, Czech policy has remained stable. The increased budget and the attention paid to media independence may even seem paradoxical because this is a highly contested topic domestically. Recent studies considered the state of media plurality and independence under significant risk in Czechia with the situation worsening over time (Štětka, Hájek, and Rosenfeldová 2016; Štětka and Hájek 2020).

Conclusions

Czech foreign policy toward the Eastern Partnership countries does not suffer from de-Europeanisation. In all three aspects, the surge of populist actors has not altered the conduct of the policy, their framework or content significantly. Czech foreign policy became, in fact, increasingly Europeanised from 2013 through 2017 under the leadership of the social democratic prime minister with a strong presence of populists in the government and with a populist president in office. The strategic documents adopted during this period emphasise the European framework for Czech foreign policy and sketch guidelines for higher Czech activity in the EU. After 2017, the situation did not reverse as the ANO-led government did not revise the strategies and mostly left the primary direction of foreign policy untouched under the guidance of social-democratic foreign minister. The same is true for the adherence to the foundational norms in Czech foreign policy, particularly towards the EaP region, where Czechia even increased its support to political and civic rights.

Expertise seems to remain the critical aspect of career prospects in the foreign policy area. Despite occasional hiccups, which are of personal rather than structural character, experts have been appointed to key positions in the multilateral and bilateral frameworks of Czech policy towards the EaP countries. Simultaneously, EU expertise is not embedded in the system as one of the crucial factors that guide career prospects outside of the EU policymaking proper. However, this is not due to the populist influence but the unfinished Europeanisation processes from the past.

There has been an evident shift in rhetoric as the president often contests EU positions and frameworks. Other politicians express similar opinions at times, including Mr Babiš and senior members of his party. When it comes to practice, however, Czechia has not moved significantly over the past few years, as evidenced by the voting on Russian sanctions or ongoing funding of civil society initiatives and human rights in Eastern Europe. Two main factors explain the limited de-Europeanisation: institutional constraints and internal constraints due to the lack of expertise and interest.

First, Czech populists in government have not been interested in foreign policy and have not taken over the key institutions responsible for foreign policymaking. When ANO rose in prominence in Czech politics, it was on domestic issues, particularly corruption, transparency and efficiency. Consequently, ANO ministers preferred offices that focused on domestic matters and oversaw major spending programmes, such as the finance ministry, regional development, transport, and defence. The foreign ministry sat on a tiny budget and escaped ANO’s notice. The transition assistance funds may be vital for their recipients and a symbol of Czech activity, but they are minuscule in relation to the public budget. Accordingly, foreign (and European) policy catches the eye of Mr Babiš only when significant money is at stake. A prominent example of which may be the Czech
2022 Council presidency and the government’s decision to cut its budget in a way that may hamper its conduct significantly. While president Zeman has been interested in the topic, he lacks formal power to steer Czech foreign policy. His statements may confuse Czech partners abroad and alter the domestic debate. Still, they cannot change the policy without cooperation from the foreign minister and the prime minister, who remain cautious or outright critical.

Secondly, there is very little foreign policy expertise among the populists. The few foreign policy experts who joined ANO early on have mostly left the party (Mr Telička, who served as an MEP for ANO in 2014–2019) or stepped back from the foreground (Mr Stropnický, defence and foreign minister for ANO, who became Czech ambassador to Israel). As a result, ANO does not have a foreign policy programme that could be pursued and imprinted on Czech foreign policy. Unlike populists in Poland and Hungary who represent a comprehensive worldview, ANO’s policies are highly opportunistic. Being a business party that serves its leader’s business interests, foreign policy remains a field where very little can be gained. Only highly salient issues or issues directly impacting the leader’s business interests deserve consideration in foreign and European policy, notably migration (blank refusal without alternative ideas) and budget (securing EU subsidies on which Mr Babiš’s business empire has been dependent). ANO is, however, not much different from the rest of the Czech political scene in this respect, where the interest in foreign policy has declined since 2004 (cf. Weiss 2020).

In the longer run, the de-Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy cannot be ruled out, nevertheless. It would happen not as a result of a deliberate plan but rather as a by-product that could be labelled as de-Europeanisation by ignorance. Lacking a coherent programme, ANO emphasises media appearance and Mr Babiš and his ministers’ image as effective and efficient managers. The permanent representative to the EU was sacked not due to his poor performance but because of his criticism of the controversial decision not to allocate sufficient budget to the Czech Council presidency. Domestic image trumps policy content, which makes foreign policy highly unstable. This domestication of foreign policy does not mean the import of international considerations and ideas into domestic politics. It leads to a foreign policy designed to help score domestic political points without considering national interests, norms and values. Sometimes it may lead to de-Europeanisation, sometimes to higher Europeanisation. Still, it will avoid neat categories of foreign policy research because the foreign policy will remain present in the name only.

Building on the impact of de-Europeanisation on the theoretical explanation of EU foreign policy provided by Thomas in this special issue, this paper concludes that the Czech branch of populism does not contribute to a lower explanatory potential of the sociological theories that rely on normative convergence, learning and coordination reflex. On most issues, these models will sufficiently explain Czech foreign policy engagement at the EU level because the Europeanisation processes continue at the expert level, which formulates Czech foreign policy. Only when a foreign policy issue becomes part of the domestic political fight, the intergovernmentalist theories will gain explanatory value. The problem for the future of joint European policymaking is not the mere fact that such situations will occur. It is the extreme difficulty to predict when and on which topics the populists become interested.
Notes

1. In this article, the focus is on the most successful Czech populist party so far, ANO 2011 (further as ANO). ANO is generally recognised as a populist party (Havlík 2019; Hanley and Vachudova 2018), sometimes categorised as a business-firm party (Kopeček 2016). There are other minor populist parties represented in the Czech parliament and there was another short-lived populist (business-firm) party, Public Affairs, participating in the government in 2010–2012. It is only with ANO, however, that a populist party managed to have major influence on public policy in Czechia. Officially, ANO is not a party but a movement in an open bid to distinguish itself from the traditional political parties. For the purpose of this article, however, this bears no significance and I refer to it as a party in the text as most academic literature does. ANO did not enter Czech politics with a clear foreign policy programme. Mr Babiš was described as ‘absolutely not interested’ in foreign or European policy (Dostál and Eberle 2015, 16). As such, it could be expected to bend foreign policy norms to the domestic political needs.

2. The source of information for this paragraph is the website of the Czech foreign ministry, which includes CVs of current and former ambassadors representing the country, available at www.mzv.cz.

3. Interview with Czech MFA official, telephone, 28 July 2020.

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