

Projev náměstka Tomáše Petříčka na Sympoziu zahraniční politiky 2018

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The Czech Republic is a small country in a global context, and a medium sized country in the European context. This implies that our capacity to influence the passage of global events is rather limited. Still, it is not a reason for us to resign on a proactive foreign policy. On the contrary – the open nature of our economy and its high degree of global integration, as well as dependence on the collective defence guarantees of Allies, make such an active foreign policy an imperative.

The Czech foreign policy has profited immensely from our membership in the European Union, as well as in NATO. Membership in these two organisations remains and will remain the cornerstone of our foreign policy for years to come. Next year, we will commemorate 30 years since the fall of communism, which paved our way into these organisations that stand for the values that we aspired for in 1989: freedom, democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and market economy. Our anchor is the West.

More generally speaking, the Czech Republic also profited immensely from what we call the rules-based liberal global order, represented first and foremost by the United Nations, as well as other international organisations – such as the WTO. For this reason, we value also effective multilateralism, which creates a level-playing field in the global arena for all the actors. Albeit not perfect, still it is better than the law of the jungle. For small countries like ours, it is imperative that we strive to maintain it and improve it. For this, we have bid for and won the presidency of ECOSOC, the third most important UN body, and have also presented the candidacy for UN Human Rights Council, with the vote taking place soon.

European Union is the basic policy framework and point of reference, including its Common Foreign and Security policy. Although the EU foreign policy is still in the making and limited by necessity to reconcile many sometimes rather different stances of its 28 (soon to be 27) Member States. But if Europe, an economic giant, is to play a role on the global scene commensurate to its economic might, we have to work on its further development. The work is well underway, and the adoption of the EU Global Strategy not so long ago was a real milestone.

The EU also needs to invest much more in its security and defence. The conventional wisdom says that it is the Americans who do the cooking and the Europeans who only wash the dishes. I think this narrative is over. We in Europe do realize that we have to work on our muscles so that we can react to the numerous crises and conflicts that have been proliferating in our neighbourhood. This does not mean, however, that we can do that overnight. NATO remains the main guarantor of our collective defence and the US the most important security provider to Europe. But we have to invest in the development of our capabilities and strategic enablers that will enable us to act whenever the Alliance is not willing or capable of doing so. Furthermore, we need to take a comprehensive approach to our security: it is not only about responding and projecting force, it is – perhaps more than anything else – about acting ahead of trouble, proactively making our and Europe's environment safer and more secure. We can do this by addressing root causes of problems, using a range of tools, including notably our development cooperation.

The Czech Republic is a small, land-locked country in Europe. The relations with our neighbours have always been the key element of our foreign policy. Fortunately for us, we are historically in the best position ever. All of our neighbours are EU members and three out of the four are also our allies in NATO. We have developed extremely good relations with Germany through strategic dialogue over the past four years. Slovakia is in many respects the closest country to us. Poland plays an important role to us because of its size and weight in the EU. And with Austria we have managed to get over some tensions and are working on the improvement of bilateral relations, but also trilaterally in the so-called Slavkov format with Slovakia.

We are aware that the situation in the EU is not easy at the moment. The Union has gone through numerous crises in the last ten years, from the financial crisis to sovereign debt crisis, migration crisis and Brexit. This has drawn some dividing lines across the continent, which we thought were already overcome: between the East and the West, as well as the North and the South. Populists are on the rise. The greatest challenge is to keep unity and cohesion of the Union, not least in the context of external challenges that we have to face.

It is important for us to try to overcome the differences that divide us on difficult issues, such as migration or Russia. No easy, clear-cut solutions are on the table. But it is still better to squabble behind the negotiating table than to wage wars against each other. And this is what Europe stands for.

Brexit does not make us happy. We are losing a heavyweight, a permanent member in the UN Security Council which made the EU voice stronger, a country representing 25% of EU defence spending and one of the best intelligence in Europe. We still hope we can get a divorce deal by this autumn and avert a hard Brexit, which would be a lose-lose scenario. Even after the UK leaves, it will remain part of Europe and of NATO. I hope the Brits will be sensible enough to realize that the times of splendid isolation belong to the 19th century, while we live in the 21st. Britain needs Europe and Europe needs Britain. I hope our relationship will be more than privileged.

I have already mentioned NATO, which is the most visible manifestation of the Transatlantic alliance. Last week we hosted a conference on this very topic in this very hall. Soon I will be addressing the CEPA forum in Washington D.C., again touching upon the issue. The strength of this alliance is that it is not a mere coalition of the willing. It has been underpinned by identical values and converging interests. However, we sense that with the current US administration, our vision is rather diverging on many issues – from climate change, trade, nuclear deal with Iran, UN Human Rights Council or UNESCO. But the Transatlantic bond is far too important for us to fail. We must try hard to work with our American friends to address their concerns and not only dismiss the differences by saying that they will go away once President Trump is gone. They may not.

Traditionally, the Czech foreign policy has been active in the near abroad of the EU – in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and this remains the case even nowadays. Western Balkan countries need to be integrated in the EU, once they fulfil all the conditions for membership. Their populations support the EU membership strongly, but we cannot let them wait for too long, as this vacuum could be soon filled by other actors – Russia, China or Turkey.

When it comes to Eastern partnership, the Czech Republic considers itself to be one of the spiritual parents of the initiative. We hosted the first summit back in 2009. Next year we will be 10 years from its inception. We know that the Eastern Partnership has not delivered what we would have expected. Three countries have chosen clearly a pro-European path, but one of them – Ukraine – has become a victim of aggression. We believe it is our duty, as Europe, as the West, to stand by the principle of its freedom to choose its foreign policy course. Bilaterally, we have been continuously helping its transformation. We will continue to support the Eastern Partnership policy.

The Southern neighbourhood of the EU is also in disarray. We have traditionally paid more attention to the East, leaving the South to Southerners – the French, Italians, Spaniards. But now we do realize that the South, and especially Africa, represents a challenge for the whole of Europe. It is a time bomb, with growing population, lack of jobs, effects of climate change and conflicts forcing people out of their homes – this all creates a toxic mix that can spill over to Europe – and in fact is already doing so. What can we do about it? We need to engage continuously, through the EU, UN, but also bilaterally. Top up development and humanitarian aid, work on strengthening the state structures to be able to perform their basic functions, at the same time helping to create jobs, curb corruption, and work on education so that it can provide skilled labour force for investors. The challenges are enormous. But we understand that this is not an isolated problem that does not concern us.

To sum up, the Czech foreign policy needs to maintain, revive and build upon its best traditions, such as well-considered support to human rights where they are badly suppressed. But it also needs to take its due role in issues of global significance where it has traditionally been less active; such as addressing climate change in the framework of the EU's global leadership on this matter.

I will leave it there and will look forward to any questions or comments you might have.