

Czech Foreign Policy towards Israel, Gaza and Palestine: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT	<p>This text introduces the special forum focusing on the Czech foreign policy towards Israel and Palestine in the wake of the Hamas' October 7 attack and the ensuing Israeli war in Gaza. It discusses the Czech political elites' statements and decision-making regarding the Middle East that have been largely defined by starkly pro-Israeli positions. The introduction goes on to note how Prague's decisions and steps on the EU and international level have become increasingly remarkable due to their uncritical support for the Israeli conduct in spite of the global criticism aimed at its breaches of international and humanitarian law. The introduction further briefly outlines individual contributions, arguing that the forum overall speaks to IR-relevant issues pertaining to the notion of a special relationship, the role of the domestic context for foreign policy, and the EU's international position vis-à-vis the recent major conflict in its neighborhood.</p>
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GAZA, THE WORLD, AND THE CZECH REPUBLIC

In November 2024, the International Criminal Court published arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israeli ex-Minister of Defence Yoav Gallant and the senior Hamas leader known as Deif. While many experts and governments across both the Global South and North heralded the judicial decision as an implementation of justice, the reaction of European states was rather mixed, and the decision was heavily criticized by the US establishment and conservative pundits (SMOLAR 2024). Still, many of these critiques were veiled in somewhat ambiguous language.

This was generally not the case for the Czech elites, who were not evasive but rather articulate in their condemnation of the ICC warrants. Already in May 2024, Prime Minister Fiala described the ICC decision to indict the Israeli representatives as *“horrible and absolutely unacceptable”*, while in November he condemned the warrants as *“unfortunate”* (SVORNÍK 2024). Although the spokesperson of the Czech MFA announced that Czech law enforcement agencies would respect the international obligations stemming from the country’s signature of the Rome Statue, many political figures voiced a strong criticism of the court in this regard (HUMPÁLOVÁ 2024). Several days after the announcement of the warrants, the Czech media reported that the government was contemplating withdrawing the Czech funding of the ICC (KŘÍŽOVÁ 2024B). Moreover, the key foreign-policy advisors of the Prime Minister and President mulled either ignoring the ICC decision or considering withdrawing the Czech Republic from the Court as such (ČT24 2024; KŘÍŽOVÁ 2024A), and the Minister of Defence Jana Černochová invited Yoav Gallant for an official visit to Prague (HORÁK 2024). No Czech politician from the parties currently present in the Parliament made a statement explicitly praising the decision, which was a marked difference from the Czech reaction to the previous ICC arrest warrant on the Russian President Vladimir Putin.

This was only the latest development in the Czech policies related to Israel, Palestine and the war in Gaza, which had been marked by the staunchly pro-Israeli stances of the Czech government, diplomacy and political elites in general. The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Jan Lipavský was the first foreign dignitary to visit Israel after the Hamas attack on October 7 in a resolute manifestation of the Czech sympathies. In the

months following the attack and during the start of the Israeli bombing and later the ground invasion of Gaza, the Czech Republic consistently voted against UN GA resolutions that were pressing for a ceasefire, positioning itself in the small camp of countries aligned with the United States and Israel (ČTK 2023). Perhaps most notably, the Czech Republic obstructed the EU resolution that was supposed to sanction several violent Israeli settlers (ČTK 2024A) and blocked a resolution that called for a ceasefire in Lebanon (ČTK 2024B) – propositions which were, in contrast to those regarding Gaza-related issues, largely uncontroversial across Europe. These concrete steps were accompanied since October 7 by expressions of unconditional support for the Israeli conduct by Czech leaders as well as members of major Czech political parties and Czech public figures. In one of the more striking statements, the Minister of Defence Černochohá called for leaving the UN in reaction to the UN General Assembly Resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza in October 2023 (URBANOVÁ 2023).

Even if somewhat more pro-Israeli than those that came before, these statements and positions of Czech politicians following the October 7 attacks are hardly surprising to any long-term observer of Czech foreign policy and, more specifically, Czech-Israeli relations. Among the members of the EU, the Czech Republic has been, despite some internal debates (DANIEL – ZÁHORA 2020), firmly situated in the pro-Israeli camp (Asseburg – Goren 2019). Czech politicians have repeatedly considered moving the Czech embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (KŘÍŽOVÁ 2022), while the Czech Republic declared that it, in practice, recognizes Jerusalem as the Israeli capital city (MFA 2017). The Czech parliament explicitly and overwhelmingly condemned the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement (ČTK 2019). In a telling example of the state of the Czech public sphere, in 2021, many commentators mused whether the Pirate Party nominee for the post of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Lipavský, was sufficiently pro-Israeli to assume the post (DANIEL – HUSSEIN 2022: 71–72). In fact, despite the nominal support for the two-state solution and official relations with the Palestinian Administration, the pro-Palestinian voices amongst Czech politicians have been scarce and, lately, virtually non-existent.

This forum engages with this exceptional level of Czech support for Israeli government policies from several different perspectives. While the Czech Republic is an outlier in the European context, the main aim of the

forum is to unpack the political and social context in which such foreign policy moves are made. In this regard, what makes the Czech case notable is how wide the support for Israeli actions is across most of the political board, and how steady it remained even as much of the global public opinion grew increasingly critical of the Israeli conduct in Gaza and later in Lebanon. On the other hand, the Czech Republic emerged, often along with Hungary, as a notable exception in terms of blocking the EU's foreign policy goals. As such, we aim to situate the post-October 7 developments in larger histories of the Czech(oslovak) relations towards the Israeli state as well as the Czech public and elite attitudes in this respect. By involving a debate on the Middle Eastern foreign policy of Poland, the Czech Republic's counterpart in CEE, we further highlight the Czech distinctiveness in a regional context and provide an example of a public sphere which was originally supportive of the Israeli actions, but became more critical of the Israeli actions as the campaign in Gaza progressed and Israeli public diplomacy increased its assertiveness. While what follows is at this point merely tentative inquiries into the determinants of the current shape of the Czech foreign policy in the Central European context, the collective aspiration of this forum is to contribute to a better understanding and contextualization of the current Czech foreign policy line.

In this introduction, we first outline the topics and dynamics which run through the individual contributions in the forum. We begin by noting that the strength of the Czech pro-Israeli positions is becoming unique not only on the European, but even on the global stage. We then engage the notion of the special relationship, a constellation which is often said to characterize the Czech-Israeli relations. This is followed by highlighting how these relations are highly salient for the domestic context as well. We then briefly reflect on the larger disciplinary implications of the forum's main insights. As a way of concluding, we consider the political stakes of the current steps of the Czech diplomacy.

THE CZECH EXCEPTIONALISM, THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP AND THE DOMESTIC CONTEXT

We already highlighted the fact that when it comes to voting patterns and decision-making in the international and European fora, as well as the shape of the elite political discourse, the Czech Republic sides

overwhelmingly and often uncritically sides with the Israeli government regardless of its orientation. Such a strong commitment to a pro-Israeli position is visible across the ideological spectrum of the main political parties, begging the question of why it is so. Admittedly, both of us, the editors of this special section, have been asked about this very issue multiple times, both in the Czech Republic and abroad. Our motivation to put this collection together is partly a result of these discussions and our struggle to find a straightforward answer to them.

Therefore, this special forum aims to explore the different contexts that have shaped the Czech position towards Israel, Palestine and the Middle East region after October 7. More specifically, we want to bring together contributions focusing on its historical determinants as well as its political and social contexts and compare them with the debate held in Poland, which has shared many historical developments with the Czech Republic (CF. DYDUCH 2024). The ambition is to offer, via these different perspectives, a multifaceted picture which is definitely not complete but should provide at least some answers regarding the reasons for the Czech position on Israel/Palestine.

In discussing these issues, the forum builds on the existing investigations of the Czech attitudes towards the Israeli state, some of which were pursued by the authors featured in the forum. Marek Čejka has previously discussed Czech-Israeli relations in the light of EU policies (ČEJKA 2017), while other works have considered the Czech positions in the larger debate on the EU member states' divergent policies towards the Middle East and Israel/Palestine in particular (ASSEBURG – GOREN 2019; DYDUCH 2018; GREENE – RYNHOLD 2018). The historical roots of the Czech policies have also been discussed by scholars, who traced how the policies developed in the context of the 1940s and the following decades (TATEROVÁ 2022A) and how these histories and their understanding inform the Central European and Czech official positions (KALHOUSOVÁ 2023). Furthermore, other studies highlighted the public-elite divide in values and perceptions of the Israel and Israel-Palestine conflict (KALHOUSOVÁ ET AL. 2025), traced the role of antisemitism in the mutual relations between the two countries (TATEROVÁ 2022B), or discussed the academic attitudes towards Israel/Palestine in the Czech context (ZÁHORA – KOLÁČEK – PLÍŠTILOVÁ 2024). While these studies thus pointed out the role of historical narratives and singled out the long-standing exceptional Czech

position, this forum aims to specifically put some of these different explanations into mutual conversation and highlight how they played out in the post-October 7 context.

With regard to the most recent political developments, the forum also speaks to how the particularly Czech policies – and their determinants – figure vis-à-vis arguably the most serious challenges that Europe has faced over the last few decades: the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the overall destabilization in the Middle East in the wake of the Hamas attack. As Zora Hesová argues in her contribution, the Czech Republic's attitudes towards conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East reveal two starkly different approaches, which are, in her analysis, embedded in geopolitical calculation as well as the country's civilizational imaginary. This resonates with some of the still rather rare comparative studies of the EU policies towards the war in Ukraine on the one hand, and the conflict in the Middle East on the other (SEE OLEART – ROCH 2025), but adds a specifically CEE and Czech angle to debates on reverberations of civilizational thinking in contemporary Europe (AUER ET AL. 2024; BAKER ET AL. 2024; EBERLE – DANIEL 2022).

Still, even if the European debate and practical steps can be criticized for their double standards in confrontation with the Russian aggression and the Israeli breaches of international law, the case of the Czech Republic deviates from the European overall foreign policy direction. The existing works reviewed above have already highlighted some peculiar features of the Czech-Israeli relations and showed how the Czech position differs from the European mainstream position, which has been supportive of the Israeli state but gradually voiced an increasingly strong criticism of the Israeli conduct of the war in Gaza (and Lebanon) or its actions on the occupied West Bank (BATEMAN 2024; FRANCE 24 2024; GEGOUT 2024). In this regard, Joanna Dyduch's contribution to this forum is important as it shows that this is the case not only with Western Europe, but with Poland as well, which has, for various reasons, grown increasingly condemnatory towards the Israeli state since October 7. No such criticism could be heard from the Czech side.

Although they focus on various aspects and sub-dynamics of Czech attitudes and policies towards Israel, Gaza, and Palestine in the wake of October 7, several threads run through most of the forum contributions.

First, the strength of the Czech pro-Israeli commitment and the consensus amongst the country's political elites on staunchly supporting Israel has by now become a unique phenomenon in Europe if not the entire globe. We already noted that the Czech Republic refused to condemn the Israeli actions in Gaza or in Lebanon in most of the UN General Assembly Resolutions concerning the war in Gaza or to condemn the situation in the West Bank, and blocked joint European positions towards the conflict in Gaza and Lebanon. Such a strong policy decision demands renewed scrutiny, especially when it clashes with the long-standing declared Czech support for universal human rights and multilateral institutions, as Zora Hesová points out in this forum. Moreover, as emphasized in the contribution by Marek Čejka, the latter policy developed from the more critical and peace-process-focused discourse of the 1990s. The contribution by Dyduch then highlights the differences between the Czech policy on the war, which stresses the value dimension of the mutual relationship with Israel, and the more distant Polish perspective, which is strongly animated by the notion of national interest.

Second, the case of the Czech ties with Israel presents an opportunity to revisit the problem of a “strategic relationship” in international politics and its shaping in a new light. Indeed, the fiercely pro-Israeli stance of the Czech Republic is usually justified by a recourse to the notion of a “special”, “historical”, or “strategic” relationship and a long-standing friendship between Czechia and Israel. This point has been repeatedly voiced on the part of the political elites, and it frequently circulates in the Czech media discourse as well. While the notion of a special relationship with Israel and narratives connected to such a relationship have been dissected often in studies of US-Israeli (MEARSHEIMER – WALT 2009; SALTZMAN 2017) or German-Israeli relations (OPPERMANN – HANSEL 2019; TKOCZ – STRITZEL 2024), the Czech-Israeli relationship is, in fact, more recent and more puzzling. At the same time, the more recent close bonds between Israel and countries such as Hungary have been interpreted through the ideological alignment between the illiberal politicians in power in both countries (DYDUCH 2021; KALHOUSOVÁ 2023). We acknowledge that the notions of historical guilt, strategic interests, foreign-policy lobbies, and ideological alignment, employed to make sense of the relationships between Israel and other states, have an explanatory power in the Czech case as well. However, we maintain that they do not fully explain the Czech foreign policy positions, or the shape of the public

discourse. As Taterová and Čejka show in their contributions to the forum, the development of the Czech-Israeli relationship has been far from straightforward throughout history, as it has gone through multiple reinterpretations. What is thus politically and analytically remarkable is the solidity of the Czech position on Israel over the last few decades, and even more so now in the context of the global and even the European critique towards Israeli policies.

Lastly, the forum shows how the issue of Israel is salient for domestic discussions and features multiple blind spots and distortions. While, to our knowledge, there is no comprehensive analysis which would empirically demonstrate this, the lack of critical debate on the Czech policy on Israel/Palestine suggests that at least the majority of the Czech political elites are rather uncritically pro-Israeli. The piece by Tereza Plíštilová suggests that this is not fully a reflection of the popular opinion, which is, in fact, more nuanced in terms of its sympathies (and, importantly, also relatively uninterested in the topic). But still, it appears that a pro-Israeli affiliation can be a source of significant political capital as many politicians in the centre and right-wing, but also the populist parties proudly state their support for Israel. In this regard, the domestic dimension of the Czech foreign policy bears some similarities with other contexts, most notably that of Germany, whose public discourse is also marked by a clearly articulated pro-Israeli orientation (GRIMM 2024; YOUNES – AL-TAHER 2024). But what needs to be noted is that the historical and domestic conditions that valorize the relationship with the Israeli state in the Czech Republic are starkly different from the situation in Germany. Here, the contribution by Joanna Dyduch is important in drawing attention to the major role of domestic conditions in the shaping of the narrative on Israel/Palestine in Poland, while providing a comparative – and somewhat contrasting – perspective from the CEE region.

THE STAKES OF THE CZECH POLICY

In what follows, the forum provides a series of reflections on the Czech policies towards Israel in their historical, social and regional context and in the specific post-October 7 moment. While the individual contributions and the forum as a whole mostly seek to offer an empirical overview of the said policies, they also relate to several larger debates.

First, the forum serves as a basis for and an invitation to debates on the challenges and domestic variants of the EU foreign policy under the current geopolitical shift marked by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the instability in the Middle East and the growing trans-Atlantic rift following the election of Donald Trump. Vis-à-vis the series of these unprecedented developments, the Czech case, probed here, shows that we need to pay attention to the bifurcated and, at least in some regards, incoherent interpretations of these crises on the domestic level. The forum can thus encourage more comprehensive debates regarding the foreign policy-making on the EU level in the context of the widely different perceptions of international crises among its member states. Such debates are definitely not new, but in the present moment they gain a new urgency.

Second, the contributions here provide fertile ground for further critical appraisals of the notion of a special relationship in international politics. The contributions in the forum show how this foreign policy orientation and bond might be a result of the ideological affinities of a relatively small political group, demonstrating how its genealogy and current state need to be situated in a particular social and historical context. It further generates the question of the extent to which the figure of a “special relationship” can be a self-fulfilling prophecy, essentially in the sense of an aspiration which works to conjure particular foreign policy steps. The regional comparison highlights the importance of local experiences and conditions in the shaping of foreign policies in this regard.

This leads to the third area probed by this forum: the discrepancy between political elites’ and the citizenry’s opinions regarding these issues of foreign policy. How come that a foreign policy issue becomes a source of such political capital while it is not widely endorsed by the voters? And how can foreign policy steps feed back into this valorization of this international orientation amongst the political elites? The Czech case appears to provide an intriguing starting point for the appraisal of these questions.

However, in addition to the disciplinary reflections, the forum is also an invitation to consider the political stakes of Czech policies. The fact that the Czech Republic has consistently voted against what amounted to the EU consensus on issues pertaining to humanitarian concerns, its refusal of political extremism and the need for a de-escalation of violence in the

Middle East has, arguably, put into question the country's self-professed dedication to human rights and multilateralism. Globally, what many see as the hypocrisy of double standards and a selective emphasis on human rights tarnishes the Czech reputation, in particular in the Global South. Crucially for the governmental support for Ukraine, the Czech uncritical embrace of Israeli policies leaves Prague open to criticism. These repercussions will be engaged with in future analytical and academic texts. This forum seeks to provide a stepping stone for them by opening debates on Czech foreign policies and the main factors which shape them.

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NOTE

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