

International Principles or Crude Geopolitics? The Incoherence of Czech Foreign Policy Towards Ukraine and Gaza

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ABSTRACT	Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Czech Republic's foreign policy has gained an unprecedented salience in domestic politics. While strongly supporting Ukraine based on international law, the Czech government stands unreservedly behind Israel in the conflict with Gaza and Lebanon, ignoring international humanitarian law. The article argues that this inconsistency undermines the credibility of Czech foreign policy, and its commitment to human rights and international law, and threatens its partners and interests. The framing of the two wars by foreign policy representatives suggests that this discrepancy is driven by civilizational geopolitics. The neglect of universal principles leads to inconsistency with the position of the majority of the European Union and contributes to the weakening of the international order.
KEYWORDS	Czech foreign policy, Ukraine war, Gaza war, international law, human rights, civilisational geopolitics
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INTRODUCTION

“The international system based on international law and the UN Charter is under unprecedented pressure. One of the permanent members of the Security Council has openly torn apart the very UN Charter it is supposed to protect. This is another reason why the world needs an effective and well-functioning Human Rights Council” (ČRO 2023B). These words of Jan Lipavský, the head of Czech diplomacy, were uttered at the UN Human Rights Council meeting that the Czech Republic chaired in November 2023. In the UNGA in 2022, Lipavský defined the *“Czech Republic’s priorities”* as *“defending Ukraine, ensuring energy and food security, and promoting democracy and human rights”*; he further condemned *“the illegal annexation of Crimea”* and listed *“atrocities such as the ‘filtration’ camps, the horrors in Mariupol, Bucha, Irpin”* etc. (LIPAVSKÝ 2022). Only a year later, however, considerations for international law and human rights were conspicuously absent in the Czech Republic’s reaction to the unprecedented escalation of violence and human suffering in Israel, Gaza and Lebanon.

This article engages with this discrepancy between the Czech Republic’s positions on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on the one hand, and the wars in Gaza and Lebanon on the other, as well as the consequences for the Czech priorities in the international arena. The article points to the unprecedented salience of foreign policy in Czech politics since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It then outlines the Czech policies on behalf of Ukraine since 2022 and then those towards Israel, Palestine, and Gaza since October 8. Comparing the Czech Republic’s voting in international fora brings out the contrast between the two and the Czech foreign policy’s fundamental incoherence. By situating them vis-à-vis the “traditional” Czech emphasis on human rights issues, the article suggests that Prague’s unflinching support for Israel, which effectively disregards international law and the main tenets of the humanitarian concerns, is motivated by a civilizational geopolitics that revolves around purported civilizational differences between the civilized, democratic West and the barbarous, authoritarian East.

FOREIGN POLICY'S UNPRECEDENTED SALIENCE

The Czech Republic has systematically promoted its foreign policy as dedicated to human rights and focused on democratization. Unsurprisingly, it has been systematically criticized for, softly speaking, “*underusing its potential*” (BÍLKOVÁ 2018). Diplomatic inconsistencies are common in the Czech Republic and elsewhere (CUHOVA – NESIBA 2023), especially when domestic issues trump foreign policy. Yet foreign policy matters greatly when it suddenly assumes a prominent role in a government’s overall agenda, as happened in Czechia in the past two years. After the most important foreign policy aims were achieved two decades ago, namely NATO membership (1999) and the EU accession (2004), the Czech role on the international scene has been a secondary issue for Czech politics and public debates. This changed drastically after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, with the Czech EU presidency in 2022 and also when the Czech government assumed the role of the defender of Western values in the face of Russia’s aggression. Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala has made the defense of Ukraine the government’s priority. Countering Russia domestically and internationally, as well as dealing with the presence of hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees, has dominated Czech politics for almost three years now. The government has devoted a lot of symbolic, personal and financial resources to this – e.g., raising Ukrainian flags on government buildings, investing in diplomatic efforts, and the so-called Czech munition initiative: the national security advisor Tomáš Pojar and his team search the globe for available munitions to purchase and deliver to the weakened Ukrainian army.

The sudden importance of this policy initiative has highlighted the discrepancy between the principled Ukraine policy and the principle-free support of the Israeli government’s military course in Gaza and Lebanon. When it comes to Israel, the Czech government has been unusually active as well, especially in symbolic and diplomatic terms: its activities in this regard included raising Israeli flags, sending military material to Israel, vocally supporting Israel’s government in the EU and the UN and entertaining very active and visible diplomatic and political relations with the country. While Czech foreign policy officials continue to pay lip service to international law and human rights, the Czech unconditional support of Israel’s military course in international fora arguably isolates the Czech Republic from the Western mainstream. It stands in contrast to the principled and

Europe-centered Ukraine policy. As this article will argue, this undermines the role of international law in the Czech foreign policy and goes against the Czech Republic's very foreign policy partners and interests.

CZECHIA'S SUPPORT OF UKRAINE'S DEFENSE BY LEGAL AND MATERIAL MEANS

Under the leadership of Petr Fiala, the Czech Republic has become active on the international scene. Unlike the painful experience of the first Czech EU presidency in 2009, the 2022 presidency was successful. In the latter case, at the helm of the European Council, the Czech Republic has faced the most significant foreign policy challenge to this date. It weighed in with other Central and Eastern European countries for a decisive and unified EU response to the Russian aggression. The Czech team contributed to pushing through concerted energy policies in the meetings of the European Council that helped to wean European states off Russian gas and contributed to the coordinated European stance on the financial and defense support to Ukraine.

After decades of passivity, Ukraine finally allowed the Czechs to assume a more visible international role. Moral and geopolitical considerations were part of that role from the beginning for good reasons. The Russian invasion highlighted Central and Eastern Europe's positive contribution to EU politics. The Czech Republic and other EU post-Communist countries were also vindicated in their scepticism towards Russia because of it. The Czech Republic drew on the moral appeal of a smaller country defending itself against the overwhelming force of a neo-imperialist power. It also argued in favour of defending a country that had chosen the European path and whose freedoms and inner accountability stand in stark contrast to Russia's aggression and violence against civilians and civilian infrastructure.

In his support of Ukraine's rightful defense against the Russian aggression, the Czech PM found himself a special foreign policy issue that was unequivocally moral, legally sound and geopolitically clear-cut. Conversely, the European unity (barring Hungary) around a principled, economically costly and politically vigorous stance on Russia has been highly appreciated in the Czech Republic, as well as by Petr Fiala's conservative party (the Civic Democrats), which has otherwise been known for its Euroscepticism.

As the Russian aggression became a priority in Czech foreign policy, the EU and European unity rose in value.

The coordinated support for Ukraine's defense rests on the qualification of the Russian invasion as an unequivocal case of interstate aggression that violates the UN Charter. That it is a violation of international law has been established in the UNGA resolution condemning Russia's aggression and confirming the validity of the ban on the use of force, which was passed with an overwhelming vote on February 28, 2022. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) further ruled that Russia must immediately suspend its military operations on March 16, 2022, and the International Criminal Court (ICC) has opened a full investigation into past and present allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide in Ukraine.

This legal qualification and its large acceptance within the UN organs are the grounds on which a coalition of states supported the Ukrainian war effort with financial and military means, confiscated of Russian state and private property and imposed unprecedented sanctions on Russian businesses and citizens. International law is based not on enforceable sanctions but on interstate agreements and individual state commitments. Hence, the effectiveness of international law rests upon the legitimacy of the claims, the breadth of support, and the decisions made by UN organs. That is why UN resolutions are vetoed and actively contested by Russia and its allies in the UN SC (Security Council) and the UNGA, respectively – to diminish the perceived validity of international law.

The Czech government has duly supported all major UN decisions in this matter, including the ICC arrest warrants against Vladimir Putin in March 2023. The UN vote on Ukraine was defined as crucial for the Czech foreign policy: the Czech Foreign Minister has appealed to undecided UNGA members to condemn the Russian invasion and call on Russia to withdraw. In Jan Lipavský's words: *"We fight for every vote"* in the UNGA in an effort to isolate Russia and to mobilize for a special criminal tribunal for Ukraine (ČRO 2023A). The former was successful: UNGA votes have twice condemned Russia's aggression with a clear majority (in March and September 2023). Minister Lipavský commented: *"The future of the international order is being decided right now. Ukraine defends not only itself and its people but also the basic principles of the UN Charter"* (NOVINKY 2023).

THE CZECH GOVERNMENT'S SILENCE ON GAZA AND INTERNATIONAL LAW

Echoing the resoluteness of the stance towards Russia and Ukraine, in 2023, the Czech government adopted a strongly supportive position on Israel's course of action in Gaza and later in Lebanon. Foreign Minister Lipavský was one of the first European politicians to visit Israel and was soon followed by the Czech President in this respect. The Czech support for its ally Israel was understandably strong in the immediate wake of the October 7th Hamas attack, in line with the positions of all other EU countries. While most European states continued to support Israel, however, they balanced their support with humanitarian considerations, legal caveats, political reservations, or even criticism, calling for abiding by humanitarian law and for a ceasefire and expressing support for the UNRWA ([EC 2024](#)). Unlike the stance of the majority of the EU, the Czech stance has not changed when it was gradually confronted with the unprecedented numbers of civilian casualties in Gaza, the accusation of genocide in the ICJ and the mounting evidence of war crimes committed by the Israeli army as provided by human rights and UN agencies ([UNHRC 2024](#)).

Instead, the Czech foreign policy has stood out with its unreserved defense of Israel's policies. The Czech government has indeed become, in PM Fiala's words, the "*voice of Israel in Europe*" ([ČRO 2023C](#)). It has done so at the cost of sidelining international humanitarian law. The Czech Republic, as will be argued below, has, in fact, consistently opposed resolutions that sought to establish an international response to the war in Gaza and Lebanon in the UNGA. It has cast doubt on UN agencies such as the International Court of Justice and blocked common European decisions on Gaza and Lebanon.

The Czech stance has not changed after the International Court of Justice issued an order for Israel to take steps to prevent acts of genocide in Gaza in January 2024, when it requested Israel to halt its military offensive in Rafah and secure the unhindered provision of humanitarian aid in May 2024 or after it put out an advisory opinion qualifying Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory as unlawful. The contracting parties, such as Czechia, had the obligation to prevent acts of genocide and to differentiate between Israel in its 1967 borders and the occupied territories. The Czech government did not openly acknowledge that these facts have legal consequences.

Instead, it has consistently rejected public criticism of its unconditional support for Israeli war policies (HÜBSCHEROVÁ 2024) and continued to exhibit its active relations with the Israeli government, overlooking the immense humanitarian cost of the Israeli military operations (ZÁHORA ET AL. 2024).

In the UN General Assembly, the Czech Republic has voted against resolutions calling for a “humanitarian truce” in October 2023 and December 2023, and also against a resolution calling for the end of the Israeli occupation in September 2024 (UN 2023; UN 2024). In the September UNGA vote, the Czech Republic’s representative claimed to support the “*political horizon towards a two-state solution*” but referred only to Israel’s “*security challenges*” and not the overall legal situation the UNGA addressed (MFA 2024). More specifically, the September UNGA vote followed the July 2024 ICJ advisory opinion that declared Israel’s legal obligation to end its “unlawful” presence on the occupied territory and asked the UNGA to “*consider the modalities and further action*” (MISHRA 2024). The UNGA did this by calling on Israel to end the occupation within a year.

The Czech Republic assumed a marginal position in this regard alongside Israel, the USA and several small states – along with Austria in December 2023 and Hungary and Croatia in October 2023. In the words of Petr Fiala: “*There are only a handful of countries that are prepared to stand up for Israel in international fora, and I am proud that the Czech Republic is one of them*” (FIALA 2023). In the vote on ending the occupation, the Czech Republic and Hungary were the only EU states to vote against a request based on an authoritative legal opinion. The Czech Republic ignored the option to abstain. Other European states, such as Germany, may have had reservations about the practicality of the resolution but recognized the legal consequences of the ICJ’s advisory opinion and did not vote against the resolution. By putting a political partnership above the law, the Czech Republic has done precisely that against which Mr Lipavský campaigned in the vote on Russia’s aggression. The Czech Republic was arguing then against the weakening of the authority of international law.

The Czech government officials have further openly defied the UN system. The Czech PM rejected the International Criminal Court’s (ICC’s) Prosecutor’s request for an arrest warrant for Israeli politicians alongside the Hamas leaders. The PM Fiala called the request “*appalling and utterly*

unacceptable” (FIALA 2024). The National Security Adviser Tomáš Pojar, a former ambassador to Israel, said that the Czech Republic would not hand over a democratically elected leader to the Hague (ŠAFARÍKOVÁ – HORÁK 2024). Earlier, the defense minister reacted to the UN resolution by calling for the Czech Republic to leave the UN (ECHO 2024). There is a discrepancy, however, between the rhetoric of the two leading Czech foreign policy makers – PM Fiala and his national security adviser Pojar – and the positions of the MFA representatives: In June 2024, the Czech MFA joined a statement of 90 countries in support of the ICC, and Minister Lipavský acknowledged *“the independence of the court’s decision-making”* and called it an *“essential international institution”* (ČRO 2024). While the government representatives symbolically defied the binding character of international norms, the MFA officials and even the FM continue to honor them.

The Czech government has framed the war in Gaza solely in terms of Israel’s right to defend itself against terrorism (ČRO 2023D) and has ignored the international humanitarian law, the Palestinian claim to rights and humanitarian needs, and the positions of UN organs. This omission has contrasted with the Czech stance on Ukraine. In its efforts to justify the military support of Ukraine’s defense against Russia, the Czech government has appealed to international law, used venues such as the UNGA to strengthen these appeals, and supported organs of international justice. But in the case of Gaza, it chose to ignore or oppose them. The incoherence is not just a matter of logical inconsistency. The ignorance of international law betrays short-sightedness and directly undermines the Czech Republic’s (other) foreign policy priority of the defense of Ukraine.

The Czech Republic and the West, in general, rejected the imperial and geopolitical justification for the Russian-Ukrainian war and appealed to international law, international courts and the UN to condemn the aggression. Initially, there was a broad sympathy for Ukraine, and most third-world countries have indeed voted to condemn Russia and uphold the law. However, after the US, along with the Czech Republic, denied the recognition of humanitarian considerations and rights for the Palestinians and supported the war even after the intervention of international courts, many were sobered by the proof of Western double standards (EISENTRAUT 2024). Politically and militarily, the US and the Czech Republic explicitly supported Israel’s efforts to achieve total military control of the surrounding

area without regard for the legitimate interests, rights and even lives of the local population and international law. At the same time, most Western countries remained silent, save for a handful of “moderate” EU members (KONEČNÝ 2024). The consequence is, among other things, a profound delegitimization of international legal standards and procedures, and the marginalization of the UN and its agencies in the region, including the silence over the killing of 200 UN employees in Gaza. The weakening of the UN has already had consequences beyond Gaza: its weakening as a platform for conflict resolution has allowed the escalation of the immensely destructive and destabilizing wars in Sudan: *“Europe and North America seem only able to focus on Gaza and Ukraine [while] underestimating the geopolitical risks that these supposedly ‘second tier’ conflicts are generating”* (SHEA 2024).

A CLOG IN THE EU’S UNITY

Besides voting against resolutions calling for a ceasefire in the UNGA, the Czech representatives have taken positions in European institutions that also put the alliance with Israel before humanitarian and legal considerations. In October 2023, along with the rest of the EU, the Czech Republic endorsed a common declaration condemning the October 7th Hamas attack in Israel and supporting *“Israel’s right to defend itself in line with humanitarian and international law”*, and called for the return of hostages, the protection of all civilians and the provision of humanitarian aid (EC 2023). However, as the Israeli operation unfolded and its violence and humanitarian cost intensified, the concern about the gross violations of humanitarian law and the Palestinian plight also grew. A division started to appear already in the fall of 2023, namely that between pro-Israeli EU countries which would endorse Israeli policies by flying Israeli flags on official buildings, such as the Czech Republic, and the “moderates” that condemn both Hamas and the violations of humanitarian law by Israel, and try to balance Israel’s need for security with Palestinian rights. Some have since recognized Palestine (Spain, Ireland and the EU’s partner Norway). In contrast, others (such as the Czech Republic, Hungary and Austria) have only intensified their unconditional support of Israel’s government’s course of war (KONEČNÝ 2024). In the middle, most EU countries do voice their support for Israel. However, some quietly stopped providing weapons to it or slowed down their exports to it and recognized the risk of complicity in humanitarian law violations (JONES 2024A).

Due to these divisions, the EU was noticeably slower in expressing a common stance than the UN. The European Council called for a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza in March when there were already 32,000 dead in Gaza. Among the reasons for the delay was a blockage by the Czech Republic and Hungary (JONES 2024B). The Czech Republic and Hungary have repeatedly opposed and vetoed almost unanimous declarations by the EU on Israel and Palestine. In February 2024, the Czech Republic blocked a plan to sanction extremist Israeli settlers (SOUSA 2024), and then Hungary kept blocking the declaration on ceasefire (JONES 2024C). Both have lifted their veto in the European Council after the US announced it would support a resolution in favor of a ceasefire in the UNSC. In October 2024, the Czech Republic again blocked a common EU declaration calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah (ČTK 2024) and, several days later, blocked another EU declaration condemning the Israeli law that intended to outlaw the UNRWA's presence in Gaza. Here, alongside Hungary, the Czech Republic chose to fragment the EU foreign policy due to its support of Israel's government (SCHARF 2024).

The Czech Republic is a small state that usually has little influence on most international issues. However, in policies that require international coordination and consensus building, even a small state can have substantial leverage, especially when it is derived from a strong ally like the USA or Israel in the UN (LONG 2017). In its resistance to attempts to restrain the Israeli conduct of war by international humanitarian law, the Czech Republic had a disproportionate impact on EU policies, which was decisively negative in terms of the rules and values of the international order. International law and human rights were at the core of Europe's soft power. As so many have noted, the EU failed to express a principled stance on Israel (DEMSEY 2024; ISLAM 2024) while it acted unanimously on Ukraine. The discrepancy between the reference to law and morality in one case and not referring to them in the other has undermined long-standing efforts to use the EU's soft power to cultivate its neighborhood, such as through cooperation with civil society representatives, human rights organizations and parliaments (LYNCH 2024). With their stubborn refusal to value lives and acknowledge the political rights of Palestinians and the Lebanese, the Czechs framed the war in Gaza solely as a fight against terrorism. In doing so, the Czech Republic has risked alienating partners in the EU's southern neighborhood in regard to what

many see as a hypocritical approach to Gaza and undermined efforts towards its declared goal of funding a negotiated settlement in the Middle East (CAFIERO 2024).

CIVILIZATIONAL GEOPOLITICS RATHER THAN A HUMAN RIGHTS-INSPIRED FOREIGN POLICY?

The Czech Republic has traditionally defined its foreign policy as driven by universal human rights in its documents (MFA 2019). The Czech government has also actively engaged with Václav Havel's human rights legacy, e.g. by supporting annual human rights awards for human rights defenders. It has generally invoked human rights as a special feature of the country's foreign policy. The Czech Republic's Transition program was proudly presented as part of a larger EU soft power strategy intended to strengthen civil society's human rights groups and democratization efforts, mainly in the South-European and Eastern neighborhoods (MFA 2015). In 2023, the Czech Republic successfully applied to lead the UN Human Rights Council.

The emphasis of human rights was nevertheless contradicted by the staunchly pro-Israeli policies of and statements by leading Czech representatives that ignored the international law and humanitarian considerations. They have increased under President Zeman (2013–2021). To give one example, in 2020, President Zeman raised the idea of moving the Czech embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This and his generally uncritical stance towards Israel's violations of international law were then criticized by some former foreign ministers in 2020 (LIDOVKY 2020). In the immediate aftermath of Hamas' attack in October 2023, the idea was revived by PM Fiala (IDNES 2023). This time, it went unopposed in the political classes.

The contradiction between the Czech appeal to international law and human rights in the matter of Ukraine's defense and the country's disregard in the matter of Israel's course of action in Gaza and Lebanon appears to have a common ground: a civilizationist and geopolitical perspective of international relations. Petr Fiala has consistently framed the war in Israel as *"not just an attack on Israelis, on the Israeli state and society, [but] an attack on humanity, [and] an attack on our civilization"*, concluding that *"that is why we must be unequivocal in our condemnation of this attack; we must be unequivocal in our support for Israel"* (FIALA 2023). By separating the Palestinians and

the Lebanese from “our civilization”, he made it possible to take into account only the Israeli “security challenges” (MFA 2024). Doing so, he conflated the terrorist part of Hamas with all Palestinians and the military wing of Hezbollah with all Lebanese.

The concept of “civilization” clearly does not express the pursuit and defense of universal rights and principles by “civilized” nations. Rather, it refers to a geopolitical division of the world along civilizational lines where the “democratic” West opposes an “authoritarian” East. Minister Lipavský used the same words in his account of Russia: *“We live in a time when Russia is disrupting the world order, attacking the very essence of European civilization, and we too feel a responsibility to defend the UN Charter. We therefore want to contribute to maintaining international order and security”* (MENŠÍK 2023). Hence, the defense of rights and security is validly evoked only on account of Ukraine, which is seen as part of the democratic West, and not on account of the Palestinians, who do not belong in it.

The Czech government abandoned its former attachment to the universality of human rights by adopting a Huntingtonian civilizationist framing (BRUBAKER 2017; BETTIZA ET AL. 2023). In its refusal to consider Arabs as bearers of legitimate claims to rights and security, the Czech Republic went even further than Israel’s main partners. The sense of political attachment and historical responsibility that the USA and Germany pledged to Israel was somewhat rhetorically limited by the recognition of principles of international law and a sense of responsibility as to regional stability: Joe Biden has openly criticized Israel’s violence against civilians in Gaza and Germany temporarily reduced its sales of weapons to Israel.

The Czech government, on the other hand, defined itself as being among the “greatest supporters of Israel” (CZECH GOV. 2023). Well before the terrorist attacks of October 7th, 2021, Petr Fiala wrote that Israel is *“the only democratic state in the region”* and that *“facing terrorist attacks by Hamas... it also defends European freedom and security”* (FIALA 2021). Under Petr Fiala, the Czech government has adopted a civilizationism of a similar kind: more precisely, a civilizationism *“closely tied to geopolitical thinking”* (BETTIZA ET AL. 2023: 22), where the “West” is squarely defined by Western culture and democracy and the “East” by authoritarianism. Its position was consistent with its voting in alliance with Hungary, an ideological civilizationist regime

under Viktor Orbán (ENYEDI 2024). The turn to civilizational geopolitics reflects the importance the newly salient foreign policy plays in domestic policy, where identitarian and civilizational politics have been on the rise since the last decade.

CONCLUSION

As Czech foreign policy has become a defining governmental policy in the past few years, it has grown inconsistent and self-defeating. The Czech government's incoherence has undermined the very pillars of Czech and EU positions on Ukraine: by weakening the legitimacy of international law and by hindering European unity, it has promoted the type of politics the Czech Republic has claimed to oppose. Petr Fiala and Jan Lipavský's announcements on behalf of Israel and Ukraine and the Czech Republic's voting patterns in international fora force us to conclude that Czech foreign policy is motivated by adherence to a geopolitically defined civilizational perspective rather than by multilateralism and universal principles of international law. However, it suggests a rather crude rendering of Western geopolitical interest that relies on the Manichean division of the world into the civilized West and the barbarous East, and that focuses solely on the competition with Russia and China. The Czech government's idea of the Western agenda thus omits broader issues such as multilateral security and climate change. It is arguably in the interest of the West and the Czech Republic that the international order be based on law, cooperation and common interests, and not on confrontation. The Czech government's attitude towards the Israeli disregard for international order and human rights makes the pursuit of this larger set of interests much more elusive.

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