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CZECH REPUBLIC TOWARDS WAR AND INDEPENDENCE OF KOSOVO: MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

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Abstract. The subject of this work is the analysis of the war in Kosovo and the involvement of the Czech Republic in the conflict and independence of Kosovo. The research includes analysis of the participation of the Czech Republic in the ending of the war in Kosovo, and the participation of Czech politicians in resolving the Kosovo conflict.

The aim of this article is to develop an evidence-based comprehensive study of the Czech approach to the conflict in Kosovo by showing and analyzing the key features of the conflict as well as the main issues of Czech participation in it. The key pillar of the approaches is a sovereign state acting in accordance with its national interests and important roles played by individual state agencies as well as by non-state, non-governmental and social actors, but also international organizations.

Key words: war in Kosovo, Czech Republic, foreign policy, peacekeeping missions, Kosovo independence.

Czech Republic involvement in stabilization missions in Kosovo

In 1989, the Czech Republic defined its security policy strategy and the path to integration with the Euro-Atlantic zone, the EU and NATO. An important step towards NATO structures was the accession in 1994 to the Partnership for Peace Program. As part of the completed program, the Czech Armed started ideological, technical and organizational transformation of its Forces, which gradually began to meet the standards of the armies of Western countries in the completed fields. When cooperating with NATO, the Czech government declared the inclusion of Czech units in NATO and EU missions in war-torn regions. After the Czech Republic joined NATO in March 1999, the scope of cooperation with the Alliance was significantly expanded. The NATO command responsible for creating mission forces in the Balkans expected military support from the new members.

When NATO launched the "Deny Flight" air operation in March 1999, the Czech government declared to direct a military unit to future peacekeeping forces that were to ensure peace and stable development of Kosovo. Czech President Vaclav Havel assured that real peace would still require much diplomatic effort. It also meant that the Czech Republic should not only engage in Kosovo not only militarily, but also with efforts to rebuild the region after the war. Foreign Minister Jan Kavan agreed with the president and said that the Czech Republic foresees significant financial assistance after the end of the war (Hospodářské news: 07.06.1999). When Serbian troops withdrew from Kosovo, it was occupied by NATO allied troops (KFOR, Kosovo forces) in Operation Joint Guardian. The Czech Republic also contributed troops to KFOR.

Following the end of the NATO Air Company, KFOR units deployed to Kosovo on 12 July 1999 and were responsible for civil and border protection. The Czech Republic joined the international group "Joint Guardian" and sent a reconnaissance company of 140 soldiers of the Czech army, the number of which was gradually increased. Soon Slovakia joined the Czech Republic.

From February 19, 2002, after the signing of an intergovernmental agreement between the ministries of defense, a joint Czech-Slovak contingent was sent in the strength of a mechanized battalion to the joint base in Sajkovac.

The first troops of NATO forces entered Kosovo on June 12, 1999 (Hospodářské noviny, June 14, 1999). Part of the Czech troops went to Kosovo only on June 28. The company of 126 soldiers later found itself in the Podujeva region in north-eastern Kosovo (Hospodářské noviny, 29 June 1999). The participation of the Czech Republic in Kosovo was the smallest of all 30 NATO countries involved. The government was criticized for this by both President V. Havel and the opposition. Pavel Severa (KDU-ČSL) said that *"the only company of Czech soldiers is not a good showcase for the Czech Republic and it should be shown that we do not want to be a secondary NATO member"* (Hospodářské noviny, June 11, 1999).

As early as mid-2001, the establishment of a joint Czech-Slovak branch of KFOR was considered (Hospodářské noviny, 10. 7. 2001). The Czech and Slovak governments decided to deploy a joint unit of 494 soldiers (including 393 Czechs), which was approved in August 2001 (Hospodářské noviny, 16 August 2001, Hospodářské noviny, 23 August 2001). The first Czech-Slovak battalion in the international units of KFOR in the South Serbian province of Kosovo began operations in April 2002. The battalion was subordinated to the International Center Brigade (Hospodářské noviny, 3 April 2002). Czech soldiers have commanded this international brigade since August 2005. Under their command, a quarter of Kosovo troops and 1,500 allied troops took control (Hospodářské noviny, 1 August 2005).

The Czech campaign operated in the Multinational Brigade "Centrum" and had a base in the village of Gornji Sibovač. Its main tasks included the protection of the 42 km Kosovo-Serbia border, but also ensuring the safe return of refugees and creating conditions for the restoration of peaceful coexistence between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians. Among other things, the campaign constantly protected isolated and particularly vulnerable areas inhabited by Serbs. In May 2001, the number of soldiers increased to 400, and in February of the following year, a joint Czech-Slovak mechanized battalion was created, teaching 500 soldiers. Considering that the above-mentioned battalion was created jointly by two countries, it should be stated that the Czech Republic and Slovakia were involved in the mission almost symbolically from the beginning of KFOR's creation. The Czech Republic officially announced that they could not afford to send more troops and bay equipment for financial reasons.

Against this background, there were strong controversies among the Czech political elite, the ruling party and the forces of the parliamentary opposition. For example, ČSSD wanted to increase the state budget deficit in connection with the expansion of the mission, ODS proposed to finance the soldiers by selling government bonds, with which KDU-ČSL again disagreed (Hospodářské noviny, 9 June 1999).

In the Chamber of Deputies, the majority of ODS, USA and KDU-ČSL MPs voted for the extension of the Czech mission in KFOR, as did most of the Social Democrats. The one who disagreed was KSČM (Hospodářské noviny, June 18, 1999). However, Defense Minister Vladimír Vetchý said that *"the plan to deploy forces in Kosovo is currently closed and that the Czech troops will only be reinforced after six months, when changes in the alliance change."* (Hospodářské noviny, 16. 6. 1999). This point has also been confirmed by NATO. Although the Czech decision was welcomed, the immediate reinforcement of the Czech campaign to the battalion was rejected because the deployment of troops in Kosovo was already agreed by NATO (Hospodářské noviny, 17. 6. 1999).

At the end of 2010, the governments of the Czech Republic and Slovakia announced the withdrawal of their troops from the NATO mission in Kosovo. Slovak forces left Kosovo by the end of 2010, while Czech forces were reduced and ended their mission in mid-2011. The withdrawal from Kosovo, in line with the Alliance's decision to reduce the number of KFOR, allowed to strengthen the Czech contingent in Afghanistan. From 1999, the Czech Republic and Slovakia formed a joint KFOR battalion as part of the Multinational Brigade "Centrum". In October, the Czech contingent was reduced from 270 to 90 soldiers, and by mid-2011 it was completely withdrawn.

At the same time, after the war in Kosovo in 1999, an initiative to create a multinational Czech-Polish-Slovak brigade began to take shape. It was based on Polish experience in the functioning of the

Multinational Corps North-East^{*1}, Lithuanian-Polish Battalion of UN Peacekeepers (LITPOLBAT)^{**2} and the Ukrainian-Polish Battalion of UN Peacekeepers (UKRPOLBAT). As already mentioned, the Czech Republic and Slovakia formed one joint battalion for the mission in Kosovo.

Creating such a brigade on the border of three countries would be an important impulse for further political and European integration and reviving the V-4 Visegrad Group, which is in crisis. The initiative to create a multinational Czech-Polish-Slovak Brigade was initiated in October 2000 by the Minister of Defense of Slovakia during a meeting in Bratislava with the Polish counterpart. In May 2001, the Ministers of Defense of the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia signed a letter of intent on the creation of a joint tripartite unit with the headquarters in Topolčany, Slovakia. The agreement on the formation of the brigade was signed on September 20, 2001 in the Orava Castle in Slovakia.

The tasks of the brigade were to bring the Slovak army closer to NATO; peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, although this has not yet been publicly discussed. The countries assigned 11 officers each to the brigade headquarters, headed by the Slovak colonel Regula. The following national units were responsible for the headquarters: 6th Airborne Battalion from the 6th Brigade of Landing Structures from Glinie; 46 artillery detachment from Pardubice (Czech Republic), quick reaction battalion from Martina (Slovakia). The plan of formation and training of brigade units (their merging into one common component) provided for the completion of this process and the achievement of combat readiness for service in Kosovo by the end of 2005 (P. Prętkiewicz, 2011:48). In March 2003, the brigade staff went on a study trip to Kosovo in order to learn about the geographic and military conditions in the region of future combat service. The officers also visited the UKRPOLBAT in Kačanik and the Czech-Slovak battalion.

The project of creating a multinational Czech-Polish-Slovak Brigade gained great support in NATO, the help of equipping the staff with modern communication equipment, computers and vehicles. In 2004, Slovakia was admitted to NATO. Unexpectedly for Poland, a year later, the Czech Republic proposed disbanding the brigade due to Slovakia's accession to the Alliance (Tůma M., 2009). The agreement on disbanding the brigade was signed by the defense ministers of the three countries on May 30, 2005. The brigade was disbanded on June 22, 2005. The joint statement stated that it had fulfilled its primary objective, which was to bring Slovakia to NATO. Unofficially, the Czech Republic recognized that Poland was beginning to play a dominant role in the brigade, a military leader, and these considerations actually determined the position of the Czech Republic. Thus, an initiative that could have been a positive cooperation within the Visegrad Group and its showcase in the international community was crossed out. On June 22, 2005, in Topolčany, Slovakia, a ceremony was held to disband the multinational Czech-Polish-Slovak Brigade. All three countries continued to be involved in the mission in Kosovo, but to varying degrees and with different international force structures. Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia were forced to return to the idea of a joint brigade – battle group already in 2013. In line with the new defense strategy, the European Union has started to set up regional international battlegroups. The European Union recognized the Visegrad Group countries in 2013 as creating the European Union Visegrad Battle Group. In the V-4 dimension, the brigade, which was disbanded in 2005, began to be recreated. Poland assumed the task of the framework (leading) country. The brigade was on duty as an EU rapid response unit from 1 January to 20 June 2016. It consisted of 3,900 soldiers, including 1,870 Poles. The Visegrad Group countries carried out the same task again in 2018 from 1 January to 30 June. The course of history, the development of new concepts of European security confirmed that the idea of a brigade organized by three

¹ *The Northeast Multinational Corps is a NATO operational compound. It was established in 1997 in Szczecin by Poland, Germany and Denmark. It started functioning on September 18, 1999. In 2005, it reached full efficiency of the staff and operational readiness. In April 2004, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia joined the WKPW. A year later, Slovakia and the Czech Republic joined, and in 2008, the USA and Romania. In the following years, Slovenia, Hungary, Sweden, Great Britain, Turkey, France and the Netherlands did so. In 2019, 18 countries already belong to the Corps.

² **LITPOLBAT – Lithuanian-Polish N+Battalion of UN Peacekeepers, was established in March 1997. It reached operational readiness on December 31, 1998. It was intended to participate in peacekeeping missions. It consisted of 800 soldiers: 420 Polish, 360-380 Lithuanian. He took part in missions in Kosovo, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. It operated until June 30, 2008.

countries of the Visegrad Group for a mission to Kosovo was right and purposeful and should not have been abandoned in 2005.

In addition to military personnel, several dozen Czech citizens were also employed in Kosovo as part of UNMIK (UN Mission in Kosovo), in the administrative or logistics division, in the health service, education and in the UNMIK international police force and other humanitarian organizations. The Czech Republic was also represented at the level of the chief administrator of Pristina. A former Czech politician, Jiří Dienstbier, held a high position in the UN diplomatic structures responsible for the policy towards the states of Kosovo and the former Yugoslavia (Girle, P., 2006: 133).

Political involvement of the Czech Republic in resolving the conflict in Kosovo

The priority of the foreign and security policy of all governments in the Czech Republic in the 1990s was integration with the North Atlantic Alliance. Any other variant, be it neutrality, regional cooperation, or possibly a lower form of cooperation with NATO, was not considered in the Czech Republic (Kohl R., 2004: 32). The decision to join the Alliance was made in 1997 during the governance of the right-wing minority coalition of Vaclav Klaus. Thus, the Czech Republic, together with Poland and Hungary, were the first to enter the process of NATO enlargement. Accession was completed in 1999 under the rule of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD).

Although the change of government from the previous right-wing coalition meant some change in domestic policy, foreign policy priorities remained the same. In the ČSSD election manifesto, in the foreign policy chapter, support for accession to NATO was explicitly expressed. At the same time, the program talked about supporting the vote in the referendum on the accession of the Czech Republic to NATO (ČSSD. Volební program, 1997: 45). This referendum ultimately did not take place and on 12 March 1999 the Czech Republic became a member of the North Atlantic Alliance.

Public support for entry was also needed, and the media campaign served this purpose: *"the communication strategy focused mainly on the basic explanation of NATO's functioning, the essence of membership rights and responsibilities, a number of arguments for and against NATO membership were discussed, and the fundamental transformation of the Alliance after 1989 was emphasized" new a peaceful NATO*" (Kohl R., 2004: 33).

The first public shock to NATO was caused by the war in Kosovo. The Rambouillet negotiations failed and NATO decided to take military action. This move overturned the idea of many people who believed that the new NATO was only oriented towards peacekeeping, leverage, and greatly shook public support. The Czech political scene was strongly divided over the operation and sent conflicting signals abroad. At the beginning of the conflict, most Czech politicians supported the decision of NATO chief Javier Solana, who ordered air strikes on Yugoslavia on March 23, and the next day NATO began bombing.

One of the few supporters of this intervention at the time was President Václav Havel. President Havel called on Yugoslav President Slobodan Milošević to meet the demands of the NATO-led international community to end violence against Kosovo Albanians. Havel interviewed Reuters in 1999, where he said: *"I believe that there is one factor in the NATO intervention in Kosovo that no one can doubt: the air strikes, the bombs, are not motivated by material interests. Purely humanitarian: principles are at stake, human rights, which have been given a priority that goes beyond state sovereignty and which undermines the legitimacy of the Yugoslav Federation, even without a UN mandate. I am equally convinced that only time will allow an objective assessment of what is happening in Yugoslavia today and its impact on NATO."*

Although the government agreed with this action and also allowed NATO aircraft, mainly the US, to fly over the territory of the Czech Republic and rail transports, this attitude was not uniform and convincing. The two largest parties, ČSSD and the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), were not internally united and held different views on the intervention. ODS chairman Vaclav Klaus and ČSSD chairman Miloš Zeman, as well as the UN Minister of Human Rights in the former

Yugoslavia, J. Dienstbier, condemned the military procedure. Overall, the government's response has been quite inconsistent.

Tensions in the ODS between the center of Prague and the regions deepened the opinion of the political council about the effectiveness of NATO's intervention against Yugoslavia. Statements by senior leaders about the bombing of S. Milošević's army reinforced the suspicion of a large part of the members that the Presidium was used to making decisions on its own, ie without feedback from local party organizations. It was probably not so strong tension that appeared a year ago between the ODS parliamentary party and the then prime minister and party chairman V. Klaus. It became clear when V. Klaus stated that Kosovo's ethnic cleansing intensified after the launch of airstrikes against military targets in Yugoslavia. Some party members who understood his words that their leader indirectly accuses the Alliance of having provoked the expulsion of Albanians from Kosovo were offended by V. Klaus' statement. Their unwelcome reaction was to be expected as the earlier embarrassment was due to the prior statement by the ODS Politburo that *"nothing will solve the bombs and recommendations to return to the negotiating table"*. Some regions where the belief prevailed that Milošević could only be taken up as a force demanded that such serious issues be addressed primarily through democratic debate within the party before a final position was adopted. However, according to ODS leadership, the Constitution empowered the bureau to make needed decisions between broader management sessions – that is, the board of directors. Undoubtedly, the management decides the fastest when it has the fewest people. However, such a way of directing is possible only when the party leader, even without party debate, agrees with the party masses. In ODS it was probably the same. However, in the case of NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia, the Civic Democrats applauded as the entire Czech public opinion. As for the situation in the party, the unilateral approach of V. Klaus and the office to the activities of the Alliance made the weakening of democratic mechanisms within the ODS visible.

A similar position was held by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Kavan. Minister J. Kavan proposed a peaceful solution to the Kosovo crisis in cooperation with Greece. The proposal contained *"a clear Czech-Greek demand for the disarmament of the KLA, and in particular a proposal to resolve the conflict after solving the problems related to the stabilization of the region affected by the effects of the Kosovo crisis"* (Kavan, 1999). Propozycja świadczyła, że czeska dyplomacja próbowała aktywnie przyczynić się do rozwiązania konfliktu. W maju kierownictwo NATO przedstawiło tekst wspólnej inicjatywy czesko-greckiej, proponując kroki w kierunku politycznego rozwiązania kryzysu w Kosowie. Najważniejsze było to, że nie był to całkowicie innowacyjny projekt tylko dla Kosowa (choć oczywiście był to projekt podstawowy i centralny), ale propozycja w pełni była zgodna z siedmiopunktową inicjatywą G8. The proposal showed that Czech diplomacy was actively trying to contribute to the resolution of the conflict. In May, the NATO leadership presented the text of a joint Czech-Greek initiative, proposing steps towards a political solution to the Kosovo crisis. The most important thing was that it was not a completely innovative project only for Kosovo (although of course it was a basic and central project), but the proposal was fully in line with the seven-point initiative of the G8. The Czech-Greek project was elaborated and supplemented in detail, perhaps even by a widely discussed UN Security Council resolution. The most controversial was the central chapter of the project on the end of the Yugoslav-Kosovar conflict. Depending on what happened in the past, the Czech-Greek draft, in addition to the mandatory demands to stop fighting and allow all Kosovo refugees to return to ensure comprehensive autonomy for the province of Kosovo, also assumed that: *"... Kosovo will remain and will not be declared Yugoslavia protectorate; most Serbian troops are withdrawing from Kosovo, but some will remain here as a guarantee of Yugoslavia's sovereignty; a brief alliance (48 hours) interrupts the bombing to allow the UN Security Council resolutions to be adopted, and once these resolutions have been adopted by Belgrade, the interruption of the air strikes will gradually turn into a ceasefire; finally, international peacekeeping forces supervising the implementation of UN resolutions will be NATO forces, permanent members of the Security Council*

(Russia and China) and neutral countries associated with the Balkans (Ukraine)". The initiative, the points of which were in many respects similar to the proposals already submitted by the international community, did not cause much reaction in the North Atlantic Alliance.

Prime Minister Zeman refrained from openly criticizing the military attack on Yugoslavia but stated that the crisis had not been resolved diplomatically. He was in favor of the NATO operation, according to which international law allows responding to humanitarian disasters that need to be prevented. However, he stressed that the government preferred a political peace solution to a military one, and therefore the Czech Republic, despite being a member of NATO, would not participate in the operation in Yugoslavia. He also told reporters: *"I think it's naïve to think that seven days after joining NATO, we could exercise our veto power and block a decision that NATO took after many months of careful analysis."* (Mladá fronta Dnes, 30. 3. 1999). Prime Minister M. Zeman has been criticized for his inconsistent policy towards the Kosovo crisis. When M. Zeman said that *"the Czech Republic must fulfill its obligations as a member of NATO"*; at the same time, he said that: *"the decision to bomb Yugoslavia was taken before the accession of the Czech Republic to NATO"*. His interior minister claimed that *"the country would take in 5,000 refugees from Kosovo, but lower-ranking officials said the country could not afford to take in so many."*

The situation inside the two largest parliamentary parties was also unclear. Deputy Vladimír Lásztówka (ČSSD) openly claimed that the airstrikes would not solve anything, and in his opinion it was also an attack without a UN mandate (Hospodářské noviny, 26 March 1999). Senator Ivan Havlichek doubted that all means of resolving the situation had been exhausted. The government of Zeman ČSSD with the bombing of Yugoslavia finally agreed, 341 participants (more than half) of the Social Democratic Congress sent a letter to the Yugoslav ambassador in Prague expressing regret for NATO aggression (Hospodářské noviny, 12. 4. 1999). Paradoxically, however, the entire congress supported the current course of government policy.

The impact of the peace proposal was minimal, and its general message indicated the ambiguous approach of the Czech political scene and public opinion to the NATO action. Even public opinion did not indicate that the Czechs supported the alliance in the intervention. The Czech public condemned the intervention, "however, after a week of bombing, the presence of consensus and dissent was almost equal. 42.1% agreed with the intervention and 45% opposed it, and 12.5% of respondents still had no clear opinion (Český rozhlas 7)."

For Czech foreign policy, the KFOR mission and the direction of development assistance remained the main link. Bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and NATO can be considered as standard, with particular emphasis on supporting the activities of the European Union and profiling the common foreign and security policy in Kosovo. *"Within the CFSP, it promotes the growth of the EU's political role and responsibility for its overall development."* The Czech Republic also supported Serbia and Montenegro's negotiations on a Stabilization and Association Agreement.

After Jerzy Paroubek assumed the position of prime minister in April 2005, the government's policy has not changed. He visited 8-9. June Serbia and Montenegro. Met with Kosovo Foreign Minister Cyril Svoboda. *"During the visit, the Czech Republic offered both sides (Pristina-Belgrade) diplomatic and political assistance in the negotiation process, provided that both sides agreed to it. Any aid will be in line with EU and UN policies."* (Němec, Štěrbá, 2006). However, there was no specific offer of this help from the Czech minister and therefore it could be perceived as declarative.

The Czech Republic also supported Ahtisaari's efforts to negotiate the future status of Kosovo, in which the EU would play a leading role. *"In the context of the negotiations in Kosovo, the Czech Republic underlines the need for a unified and balanced approach by the European Union."* At the same time, the Czech Republic expressed its readiness to participate in the upcoming European Security and Defense Policy civilian mission in Kosovo (Report on the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic, 2008: 42).

With regard to ESDP in the Czech Republic, its complementarity with NATO was underlined. The state also supported the negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement, which were *"the first comprehensive agreements between the EU and the Balkans"* (Cameron F., 2007: 132).

Conclusions. The participation of the Czech Republic in Kosovo was the smallest of all NATO countries involved, the state sent 126 soldiers. The government was criticized for this by both the president of the Czech Republic, V. Havel, and the opposition. There were accusations among politicians that only a company of Czech soldiers is not a good showcase for the Czech Republic. Politicians believed that the Czech Republic could not be a secondary member of NATO. Compared to Poland, the Czech Republic, which together with Slovakia since 1999 formed a joint KFOR battalion as part of the Multinational Brigade "Centrum", quickly withdrew from Kosovo. In October 2010, the Czech contingent was reduced from 270 to 90 soldiers, and by mid-2011 it was completely withdrawn.

In the Czech Republic, the government of M. Zeman had a difficult task. An analysis of the speeches of members of the ČSSD and opposition parties in the parliament shows that many politicians opposed the government's support for NATO, emphasizing historical ties with Serbia. Taking into account the state's strategy of integration with NATO and the EU, Prime Minister M. Zeman publicly announced that he prefers diplomatic solutions and supports the Alliance's attack on preventing a humanitarian catastrophe. He then supported all NATO activities and the Czech Republic made its airspace available to the Alliance's aviation.

A slightly clearer attitude than the Prime Minister was presented by the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, J. Kavan, who advocated that international law should allow for reacting to impending humanitarian disasters. But he, like M. Zeman, stressed that he would prefer a diplomatic solution to the conflict. In this spirit, he began to prepare his own peace initiative for Kosovo, the text of which he withheld at the last moment from both journalists and most constitutional officials. M. Zeman found great support for his plan in Greece, but the country's politicians, especially senators, strongly condemned his initiative. The attitude of Czech politicians was partially compensated by President V. Havel. Even V. Havel was in favor of a peaceful solution to the conflict until the last moment, but when NATO decided to launch air strikes, he opted for them and, through his statements, guided the uncertain statements of the government and other Czech politicians. The position of the Czech politicians' authorities was probably influenced by Russia's reaction to the NATO air strikes, which accused the Alliance of mass bombing being inconsistent with the UN Security Council Resolution.

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