

Title: Europeanisation of Czech Foreign Policy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Deviating Member or Country with Principles?

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Europeanisation of Czech Foreign Policy and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Deviating Member or Country with Principles?¹

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Abstract

While using the Europeanisation concept to study the Czech foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this article illustrates the limits of the European Union's influence on the Czech position in 2004–2021. Much as the EU tries to influence the foreign policy of its members, Czechia has mostly resisted its influence in the case of the given conflict since it prioritised national interests over the joint (or majority) European position. The Europeanization of Czech foreign policy was highly selective. Czechia generally stood against the mainstream EU opinion. However, sometimes the Czech government advocated its positions by purposely adhering to the “European line” or adopting the opinion of EU officials (usually to avoid deterioration of relations with domestic or foreign allies). At the same time, the paper explores Czechia's inability to project national foreign policy preferences linked to the conflict (e.g., the improvement of EU-Israeli relations) to the EU level.

Keywords: Europeanisation, downloading, uploading, Czech foreign policy, Israel, Palestine, Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Introduction

Introducing the ‘Other’ into the framework of Europeanisation, i.e. adding a third country/region to the network of EU-member state relations, creates new research opportunities to understand the underlying identities, interests, and values in policy download, upload, and interactions. Since the foreign policy of member states can be Europeanized just as other EU policy areas, this article focuses on the foreign policy Europeanisation of one member state – the Czech Republic – concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given Czechia's historically close relationship with Israel and long-term development cooperation with the Palestinian Authority (from now on “Palestine”), this conflict is a suitable case for understanding how the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy might work. In addition, various EC/EU institutions and foreign policy mechanisms have discussed and addressed the conflict and the Middle East Peace Process. The long-term

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efforts to contribute to the solution of this conflict indicate the importance of the peace process for the EU's foreign policy. Thus, the development of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict creates a favourable opportunity for an analysis of EU's and member states' policies and activities using the Europeanisation framework.

This article explores how Europeanisation works in the case of Czech foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and both involved countries between 2004 and 2021. Czechia became a member of the European Union (from now on "the EU") in 2004 and has been adapting to EU's policies, institutional structure, and normative framework ever since. The final year of our research was set by the end of the government of Andrej Babiš. The paper seeks to assess (1) the transformation of priorities, instruments, and practices of the Czech foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by its participation in the CFSP; and (2) Czechia's input to forming the common EU foreign policy towards the conflict.

I argue that the EU's attitude did not fundamentally change the Czech foreign policy towards the conflict. The Czech position was primarily formed and framed by the discussion among the Czech foreign policymakers and the Czech discourse on the topic. The research thus shows that the Europeanisation effect proved too weak to influence a state's approach to an international issue of particular importance to the country under study. At the same time, Czechia failed to influence the EU's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to make it correspond better to its national interests.

The added value of this article is multiple. First, it builds on, updates, and complements previous research on the position and policies of Central European countries within the EU (see f. E. Weiss 2021) and existing literature on the Europeanisation of members' foreign policies towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (see e.g., Dyduch & Müller 2021; Avan 2019; Müller 2011). Second, examining the adaptation of the content and conduct of national foreign policy to the European cooperation framework is still an up-to-date and relevant issue, especially in the case of newer EU members. Besides that, the study implies comparing other Central European countries with different foreign policy traditions and experiences than older EU members. Such a comparison could provide valuable findings about adapting national institutions and policies to European norms and the possibilities of promoting national interests at the EU level.

The first part of the article, after this introduction, discusses the theoretical framework based on the concept of Europeanisation. It explains the two basic dimensions of Europeanisation used in this paper – uploading and downloading – and the mechanisms of the Europeanisation process. The second part describes the research design, i.e. the data collection process and the state's foreign policy indicators designated to research foreign policy transformations under the EU influence, and *vice versa*. The third part introduces Czechia's position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from 2004 until 2021. Using several examples of Czech leaders' statements and the way Czechia made decisions at the level of

international organisations, this part shows how little Europeanized Czech foreign policy was towards the conflict. The concluding part of the article offers a final discussion about the extent and form of Europeanisation's impact on the Czech foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Theoretical Background: Dimensions and Mechanisms of Europeanisation

Some theoretical attempts to define Europeanisation understand this concept primarily as a "top-down" process based on the "downloading" of ideas, shared beliefs, norms, procedures and institutions from the EU level to the national/domestic level (see Radaelli 2003: 30; Vink & Graziano 2007: 7). Other studies explain that it is rather a two-way process including also a "bottom-up" dimension, i.e. the "uploading" of national preferences and policies to the EU level (f.E. Wong 2017: 157; Müller & de Flers 2009: 12). A large part of the literature on Europeanisation published in the last two decades works with the concept that includes both dimensions. Thus, cooperation in foreign policy issues at the EU level restricts members in their activities due to common EU foreign policies, norms and values, and, at the same time, enables states to pursue their objectives.

Europeanisation was initially conceptualised to study the effect of the EU integration in common policy areas with supranational character on member states. Some papers have discussed the challenges stemming from using the concept for studying foreign policy (e.g., Hix & Goetz 2000: 6) since it is an intergovernmental sphere where members keep all decision-making powers and decide unanimously (in most matters). However, several scholars were able to meet these challenges, as evidenced by some theoretical studies trying to grasp the influence of Europeanisation on national foreign policies (and *vice versa*) (e.g., Wong 2017; Wong & Hill 2011; Major 2005; Müller & de Flers 2009; Weiss 2013; Tonra 2003), and empirical studies using the concept to research EU members' foreign policies (Weiss 2021; Müller 2011; Dyducha & Müller 2021; Avan 2019; Pomorska 2007; Wong 2006; Tonra 1999; Tsardanidis & Stavridis 2005).² There is indeed an absence of formal mechanisms pressuring member states to comply with the EU decisions. However, examining Europeanisation in this relatively low-integrated area still makes sense because EU membership transforms the context in which members define their foreign policy preferences and attitudes. In contrast to policy areas governed by supranational institutions, the Europeanisation of foreign policy is "*much more voluntary and non-hierarchical*" (Bulmer & Radaelli 2004: 7). Members consensually form the policies that affect them hereafter. As Wong (2017: 160) adds, the importance of foreign policy Europeanisation is emphasised by

² Besides that, authors have also studied the process of "de-Europeanization" of national foreign policies (e.g., Weiss 2021; Smith 2021).

the fact that *“foreign and security policy is one of the last remaining bastions of national sovereignty, and thus the ultimate hard case.”*

Foreign policy Europeanisation is widely understood as a bi-directional and mutually constitutive process where the EU and national levels influence each other (Wong & Hill 2011: 11; Müller & de Flers 2009: 12, 17; Wong 2006: 8, 14). Foreign policy formation or change occurs due to repeated interactions between members and EU institutions. EU members adapt to EU/CFSP norms and rules and simultaneously shape them. Thus, we can study two vertical dimensions of foreign policy Europeanisation: *“the downloading of EU foreign policy to the national level”* and *“the uploading of national foreign policy preferences to the European level”* (Müller & de Flers 2009: 12).

The “downloading” leads to the adaptation of national foreign policies to ideas, norms, rules, shared beliefs, and institutions connected to the EU foreign policy. A state adjusts the substance, content, goals, and process of foreign policy-making according to requirements and limits resulting from EU positions and “ways of doing things.” The “uploading” dimension is about shaping European foreign policy³ by EU members who strive to influence common norms and policies so they would suit their own preferences. Its outcome is supposed to be the projection of national foreign policy ideas, preferences, and/or policies onto the EU institutions/policies. Europeanizing their national interests can increase members’ influence in EU politics and achieve their goals more effectively and at lower costs while reducing the risk of criticism for pursuing unpopular or controversial policies (Wong 2006: 9, 2017: 155). Under the auspices of the EU, members can achieve their own controversial foreign policy goals and avoid criticism for taking questionable steps (implementation of sanctions being the most common example). A common EU approach thus enables members to pursue their interests multilaterally (avoiding criticism for unilateralism) and increase the credibility of their policies. Moreover, EU members can *“externalise national foreign policy problems to the EU level”* (Müller & de Flers 2009: 13).

Some authors go beyond the two vertical dimensions of Europeanisation and add “crossloading” as its third – horizontal – dimension (Major 2005: 186). Changes at the national level might happen indirectly through cross-border contacts of national actors, exchange of ideas, norms, information, expertise, and “ways of doing things” between European governments and domestic entities (Graziano & Vink 2013: 47; Weiss 2021: 587). Policymakers communicate in working groups, committees, and other institutions connected to the CFSP. This might result in adapting a specific CFSP decision-making culture consisting of information-sharing or consensus-seeking practice, leading to shared principles and ideas.

³ European foreign policy is understood either as a synonym for the CFSP or as broader external relations that include (a) EU external relations handled by supranational institutions, (b) the CFSP, and (c) Member States’ foreign policies (Weiss 2013: 269). This article focuses solely on the CFSP because it is a crucial expression of the EU foreign policy.

As stated above, the area of CFSP is based on intergovernmental decision-making and is, therefore, inherently less hierarchical than common policy areas with supranational character. For this reason, the basic mechanisms in the uploading and downloading dimensions of Europeanisation in CFSP are not compliance but rather socialisation, social learning, peer pressure, etc. (see below). Thus, the horizontal interactions (exchange of ideas, norms, and information) between EU members while discussing foreign policy issues are also part of the uploading and downloading processes. Following that, in this article, the theoretical framework is based on two primary processes of foreign policy Europeanisation – downloading and uploading.

While researching the Europeanisation process, it is necessary to focus also on the mechanisms that govern it. The mechanisms explain *how* individual changes occur as a result of Europeanisation. Numerous articles deal with various mechanisms through which Europeanisation can affect EU members in different policy areas (see, for example, Bauer & Knill & Pitschel 2007: 407–418; Bulmer & Radaelli 2004: 4–13; Radaelli 2003: 40–44; Horký 2010: 3–9). For the topic of this article, only those mechanisms that are valid in the research of foreign policy Europeanisation are introduced, specifically, policy learning and socialisation of actors.

As explained above, the CFSP is specific because of its intergovernmental nature, mostly unanimous decision-making, and predominance of soft law, distinguishing it from policy areas of hierarchical governance (such as the single market). Thus, only some mechanisms of Europeanisation can be used while studying the members' foreign policy, and some must be ruled out (such as compliance or conditionality mechanism applicable to non-members). Policy learning and socialisation are among *"the key mechanisms that drive the Europeanisation of foreign policy"* (Müller & de Flers 2009: 4). Also, Horký (2010: 6) mentions social learning as a way of adapting to the *"non-enforceable soft law."* As a result, either the emergence of common values and rules (socialisation), or the learning from the foreign policy practice of other EU members (policy learning) allow states to adapt to the EU foreign policy objectives and norms.

Socialisation can be understood as a *"process of accepting norms and values from other actors"* (Horký 2010: 6) or as *"a process whereby actors of a given community are inducted into its norms and rules"* (Müller & de Flers 2009: 14). Socialisation of foreign policy elites and the creation of common EU norms in foreign policy area affects all dimensions of Europeanisation. They influence how members adapt to the policies and objectives of the EU and their peers and the uploading strategies that states have at their disposal. In downloading, socialisation in the CFSP can take two forms: (a) states either adapt to the EU/CFSP norms and rules while pursuing their national interests (this *"strategic socialisation"* follows the logic of consequentiality since states behave in a way maximising their benefits), or (b) states internalise EU norms in the way that transforms their national identities and

preferences (they follow the logic of appropriateness because adapting to common EU objectives and values feels appropriate) (Börzel & Risse 2003: 65; Müller & de Flers 2009: 5, 21, 24).

In uploading, decision-making culture in the area of the CFSP impels states to use “normative framing” or “normative suasion” as means of uploading their preferences to the EU level (Müller & de Flers 2009: 22). Normative framing (norm-based arguments) is a strategy that helps member States “frame” their objectives and preferences according to the common EU norms and values in order to strengthen their legitimacy. They “*appeal to common norms and values and make use of ostracisms or peer pressure to advance their interests and sanction defectors of cooperation*” (Müller & de Flers 2009: 14). Peer pressure and ostracism are based on “*naming and shaming of non-complying member states*” (Horký 2010: 2), i.e. on putting pressure on members that do not act according to the majority position. Any unilateral action might violate common EU norms, values, or rules, resulting in criticism of being a “defector” and isolationism in EU-level debates (Müller 2011: 388). The goal of normative framing is to change the behaviour of other states. The strategy of normative suasion aims at changing the mindset of other states that should internalise emerging common values or ideas, and thus, their preferences converge (Müller & de Flers 2009: 14, 25).

As for the second key mechanism of foreign policy Europeanisation, learning is understood as an “*exchange of ideas and policy transfer between the Member States, for which the EU may serve as an arena*” (Müller & de Flers 2009: 19). It leads to the changes of beliefs and attitudes of policymakers, which, in the next step, can result in a foreign policy transformation. Shared understandings of crucial foreign policy issues might affect joint decisions about the EU foreign policy attitudes and actions.

Research design and questions

Using the Europeanisation concept as a framework of analysis, this article studies the impact of EU membership (institutions, cooperation frameworks, and policies) on the content and conduct of Czech foreign policy and the position of Czechia in the EU foreign policy-making concerning the conflict between Israel and Palestine.

The case study begins with the following questions:

1. How was the Czech foreign policy affected by the EU’s and EU members’ position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict when the Czech and EU’s interests and objectives were in disagreement? Was the Czech approach Europeanized, or did it remain largely unaffected?

2. In its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was the Czech foreign policy enabled or limited by the EU/CFSP?

3. What was Czechia's input in shaping crucial EU's and EU members' attitudes towards the conflict between Israel and Palestine? How were Czech national preferences reflected in the EU foreign policy outputs?

The effect of Europeanisation on Czech foreign policy is investigated by processing data connected to the European level and comparing them with the national (Czech) level. The interests, priorities, objectives, and policies regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are investigated in the period under study in the case of Czechia on the one hand and the EU on the other. The subsequent step reveals both, the changes in the Czech foreign policy caused by the pressures from the EU and other members and the changes at the EU level caused by the projection of Czech preferences and objectives.

The research activities are based on the data consisting of legislative, strategic, and advocacy policy documents produced at the European and national levels⁴, and public statements by policymakers and politicians (on social media, press conferences, and within mass media coverage)⁵. Secondary sources supplement this data. The interpretative analysis of discourse and foreign policy analysis is used to process the described data.

This article focuses on two basic dimensions of Europeanisation, namely the downloading and uploading because this procedure allows us to get comprehensive results based on the simultaneous study of both perspectives of the Europeanisation process. The indicators⁶ of national foreign policy allowing us to examine the "downloading" dimension of the Europeanisation of Czech foreign policy are as follows:

1. increasing importance of the EU's political agenda at the national level;
2. adherence to common European values, norms and objectives;
3. prioritising the common European policy approach over national positions;
4. internalisation of EU membership in national identity.

⁴ These include conceptions of the foreign policy of the Czech Republic, statements of governments of the Czech Republic, articles, reports and press statements related to the CFSP and EU institutions addressing the Middle East Peace Process.

⁵ These include public statements by and interviews with Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic and Presidents of the Czech Republic (and also other Czech representatives connected to foreign policy area).

⁶ These were based on the adjusted operationalisation of the two (from the total of three) dimensions of foreign policy Europeanisation as described by Wong & Hill (2011: 7).

The national foreign policy indicators for the research of the “uploading” dimension are as follows:

1. member state’s efforts to use the EU to reinforce its influence in international and/or European politics;
2. member state’s efforts to influence EU foreign policy objectives and practices (or the CFSP, specifically);
3. the EU serves as an auspice for the member state to pursue its national objectives.

Czech Foreign Policy towards Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in 2004–2021: Europeanized or Not?

“Certainly, the Czech Republic is one of those [EU] countries that are pro-Israel, while we are perfectly aware that this is not the majority opinion [within the EU].” This statement by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberger (qtd. in MZV ČR 2010) captures both the Czech Republic’s long-standing attitude towards Israel, i.e. one of the actors of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the prevailing sentiments of the EU countries and the EU as such. Czechia’s membership in the EU (since May 2004) has had a great potential transformative effect on Czechia’s views of Israel, Palestine, and their disputes. In addition, Czechia suddenly gained the ability to influence the common position of the EU towards the conflict. Through describing several events, the following part of the article shows whether Czech attitudes towards the conflict changed under the EU influence and whether Czechia took the opportunity to influence EU attitudes.

In explaining the current good Czech-Israeli relations, a crucial military aid to the newly formed Israel in its first war with Arab states is often mentioned. However, communist Czechoslovakia did not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel since the 1960s. Its policy was pro-Palestinian. After the fall of communism, relations with Palestine were in the doldrums – Czechoslovakia established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1990, and its policy became significantly pro-Israel. According to Bureš (2004: 124), this stance *“symbolised a consistent break with the communist past and a tool for rapid rapprochement with the USA”* to guarantee that the democratic revolutionary development would not be reversed. Czech-Israeli relations have been very good and friendly since the early 1990s, with deepening cooperation in science, research, business, cyber security, etc. As explained below, various Czech politicians made no secret of their sympathies for Israel, regardless of their political affiliation or foreign political ideology. Also, references to cultural-historical ties and shared political values played a major role. This can be demonstrated by the words of the Czech Prime Minister in 2006–2009, Mirek Topolánek (qtd. in Vláda ČR 2007): *“Israel is the bearer of the same values that we profess and defends them firmly. (...) This is the reason why we*

must and want to support you.” In addition, specific activities of the Czech Republic point to a clear inclination towards Israel: e.g., four joint meetings of the Czech and Israeli governments were held in the past as an expression of above-standard relations; on the ground of international organisations, such as the UN, Czechia often voted in favour of Israeli interests.

In its pro-Israel attitude, the Czech foreign policy differs from the majority positions of EU members and from how the EU foreign policy is generally perceived, i.e. as balanced, or sometimes even pro-Palestinian and more critical of Israel. EU’s approach to the Israeli-Arab conflict is based on a two-state solution, an end to the occupation that began in 1967, security arrangements for Palestinians and Israelis, a solution to the Palestinian refugee question, and Jerusalem as the capital for Israel and Palestine (EEAS 2021). Labelling the EU as pro-Palestinian results from some of its decisions and activities. Just to name a few, in 2014, the European Parliament passed a resolution about the recognition of Palestinian statehood; some of the senior representatives for the CFSP have been somewhat critical of Israel in their statements; the European Court of Justice removed Hamas from the EU list of terrorist organisations (European Parliament 2014; euractiv.com 2014), and, above all, the EU considers the construction of Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian Territories as “*illegal*” and as an obstacle to peace and the two-state solution (EEAS 2021). The approach of EU members is more unambiguous as some countries are traditionally closer to Israel (e.g., Czechia, Germany, or Hungary), and others to Palestine (e.g., France, southern European countries, or Sweden).

The positions of the EU and Czechia towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are based on the same foundations – the promotion of a two-state solution and acknowledgement of UN resolutions 242 and 338 which condemn the Israeli occupation of territories obtained in 1967 and 1973. The difference lies in the interpretation and observance of these resolutions – while the EU strictly adheres to their wording, Czechia defends Israel even though its actions sometimes contradict these resolutions.

Czech foreign policy conceptions and program statements of governments after 2004 tended to lean more toward Israel as good relations between the two countries were emphasised with terms such as “*traditional friendship*” and “*strategic partnership with Israel*” (Vláda ČR 2018; MZV ČR 2019). So, as much as some Czech leaders sought a balanced relationship with Israel and Palestine, the strategic partnership with Israel was necessarily reflected in their approach to the peace process. Even though Topolánek (qtd. in Vláda ČR 2008a) declared that Czechia had “*very balanced and friendly relations (...) with most of the countries in the [Middle East] region*”, many statements (including his own) led to the perception of Czechia as a pro-Israel country in the eyes of some Arab countries (Bureš 2008: 278). Even long-term development cooperation with Palestine could not change much.

Immediately after joining the EU, the Czech position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict largely aligned with the EU. Its essence was captured by the then Czech President Václav Klaus (qtd. in klaus.cz 2005), who explained that Czechia wanted to solve the conflict peacefully, Israel should gain security guarantees and the Palestinians "*the opportunity to build their own statehood.*" Klaus was a proponent of a balanced relationship, and while visiting Israel in 2005, he promised that Czechia would strive to ensure that the EU's position is the same (klaus.cz 2005). Cyril Svoboda, Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2002–2006, also sought a balanced approach. Prior to joining the EU, Svoboda met with the EU Special Representative for the Middle East Peace Process, Marc Otte, just before visiting Palestine in 2004, in order to harmonise the Czech position with the EU's position towards the peace process (Bureš 2004: 128). Later that year, Svoboda (qtd. in Kubeczka 2004) visited Israel, where he spoke as an "envoy" of the EU and stated: "*I am here to bring a clear message that the EU is ready to work closely with the State of Israel.*" His belief that the EU's influence in the peace process did not correspond to its economic and political position and that Czechia should contribute to making the EU an essential player in the Middle East (MZV ČR 2005) was repeated in the following years by other Czech politicians, including Topolánek.

During his visit to Israel in 2008, Topolánek (qtd. in Vláda ČR 2008d) promised that the Czechs "*must fix*" the fact that the EU is not "*too active*" in the peace process. He indeed had no idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would escalate at the very end of 2008. The Gaza War took place at the beginning of the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU, which gave Topolánek's government many opportunities to assert its ideas for resolving the conflict at the EU level. However, this potential has not been exploited. When the violence broke out, Czechia, on behalf of the EU, tried to achieve a cessation of hostilities and a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel. The mission visiting the Middle East, led by the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Karel Schwarzenberg (2007–2009, 2010–2013), was also joined by Javier Solana, High Representative for the CFSP, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for the European Neighbourhood Policy, and Swedish and French Ministers of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt and Bernard Kouchner. As active as Czechia tried to be in ending the ongoing violence, several factors contributed to Schwarzenberg's mission being rated a "*relative failure*" (Bureš 2010: 238). First of all, Nicolas Sarkozy's simultaneous visit to the Middle East undermined the efforts of the Czech presidency (neither Sarkozy managed to stop the fighting). According to Střítecký (2010: 96), France disagreed with "*more pro-Israel*" Czech attitude during the Gaza War.

The openly pro-Israel policy was a decisive factor contributing to the failure of the Czech mission. If Czechia wanted to mediate the conflict and represent the EU, it was necessary to take a balanced position. However, many statements made by Czech leaders reflected their personal attitudes, as well as Czech foreign policy priorities. In doing so, the Czech officials caused resentment among the Arab countries and some fellow EU members who often did not share Czechia's pro-Israel attitude. For example, Schwarzenberg and Deputy Prime

Minister Alexandr Vondra assessed the situation in the same way, saying that Hamas had brought about the violence by firing rockets at Israel and that Israel had the right to self-defence (Šupová 2009, Vláda ČR 2008b, 2008c). Even more disillusionment was caused by the Prime Minister's Spokesman for the EU Presidency (qtd. in Tureček 2009), who said Israel's steps were perceived as *"a defensive policy, not an offensive one."* These opinions, however, did not reflect the EU's interpretation of the events in Gaza, as many European leaders (e.g., Bernard Kouchner) criticised Israeli military actions for being inappropriately violent and resulting in many civilian casualties (Bureš 2010: 240, 242–243; Šupová 2009). Although the Czech Presidency later stated that it was *"deeply concerned about the increasing number of civilian casualties"* in Gaza and some of them were *"a consequence of Israeli military action"*, it added that the responsibility rested with those *"who by shelling Israel with rockets (...) unleashed this tragic development"* (MZV ČR 2009b). Bureš (2010: 240) aptly summarised the Czech position by saying that Czechia wanted the EU to solve some issues linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict but simultaneously maintain its good relationship with Israel.

Both the circumstances of the Gaza War (the high number of Palestinian civilians killed) and the position of Czechia as the presiding country demanded another strategy than pro-Israel positions and articulation of its own political goals. This also included one of the the Czech presidency's objectives – improvement of Israel-EU relations. Czechia planned to organise the EU-Israel summit and to discuss a new EU-Israel action plan in the Council of the EU, but neither happened due to the Gaza War. Czechia could not convince many EU opponents (France, above all) about holding the EU-Israel summit. As for the action plan, it was only an extension of the validity of the previous action plan. As we can see, the Czech attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did not change much during the Gaza War under the influence of the EU or other EU countries more critical of Israel. Czech representatives sometimes moderated the strongly pro-Israel statements of their political colleagues. Nevertheless, this move did not reflect a transformation in their position but rather an attempt to mitigate the criticism from some EU states.⁷

The EU influenced Prime Minister Fischer's caretaker government on some issues linked to relations with Israel. The previous Topolánek's government refused to condition the upgrading of mutual EU-Israeli relations on the development of the peace process (O'Donnell 2009: 2). However, in a statement on behalf of the EU after the 9th meeting of the EU-Israel Association Council in mid-June 2009, Fischer's government included compliance with basic principles of the peace process as a criterion for upgrading the level of mutual relations (9th EU-Israel Association Council 2009). Otherwise, the new leadership followed the "traditional" line about Israel and Palestine. Even though, similarly to other Czech politicians, Fischer stated that Czechia had good relations also with Arab states, he also admitted that

⁷ Above all, Belgium, Luxembourg, Sweden, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands and Greece (Braun – Ditrych 2011: 178).

Czechia “defend[ed] positions close to, if not identical to, those of Israel in all multilateral organisations” and, generally, spoke very warmly about mutual Czech-Israeli relations (Fischer qtd. in Vláda ČR 2010). His claims reflected that Israel was of greater importance to Czechia than Palestine, and his efforts at a balanced policy towards the conflict had to be inherently limited. In addition, Fischer’s government took an unclear position on the Israeli intervention against a convoy of ships carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza when Israeli soldiers killed several people. The spokesman of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that the EU, through Catherine Ashton⁸, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2009–2014), already commented on the whole event and that “*it would not make sense for each country to issue a separate statement*” (Hospodářské noviny 2010). Given that it is common for EU countries, including Czechia, to formulate their standpoint on various international political topics, his statement can only be understood as an attempt to avoid Czechia’s assessment of the whole situation and to “hide behind” the EU.

Petr Nečas’s (2010–2013) government continued to improve relations between the EU and Israel and “upload” Czech foreign policy priorities to the EU level. According to Nečas (qtd. in Vláda ČR 2011a, 2011b), promoting Czech interests at the European level was essential, including building “*a very strong strategic partnership*” between the EU and Israel. Although he reiterated this objective numerous times, nothing changed in EU-Israel relations. His government then performed another turnaround in the Czech opinion on the (non)conditioning of deepening of EU-Israeli relations when Nečas (qtd. in Vláda ČR 2011b) declared that the EU-Israel partnership “*should not be conditioned on progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.*” In this respect, Czechia was among the minority of EU countries (e.g., together with the Netherlands) that promoted this approach (O’Donnell 2009: 2).

Recognising Palestine as a 'Non-Member Observer State' in the UN General Assembly in 2012 was another significant event that showed how Czech foreign policy moved away from European majority positions. Czechia was the only EU country that voted against granting this status to Palestine, 14 EU members voted in favour, and 13 abstained from voting (EUISS 2013: 354–355). Czechia was criticised by several EU countries for this step (Čejka – Ježová – Bechyňský 2013: 185), while distancing itself from the EU’s approach. This approach was summarised by Catherine Ashton (qtd. in European Union 2012): “*The EU has repeatedly expressed its support and wish for Palestine to become a full member of the United Nations as part of a solution to the conflict.*” Contrary to Ashton, the Czech government argued that Palestine was taking a unilateral step that was instead a “*complication*” in the peace process (Nečas qtd. in Vláda ČR 2012). Czechia’s refusal to grant the status to Palestine corresponds to its long-term pro-Israel stance and its efforts to maintain close relations with the USA. The foreign policy of Nečas’s centre-right government leaned towards Atlanticism and close relations with the USA, while left-wing opposition was more pro-European. This corresponds

⁸ Ashton expressed regret for the loss of life and called for a thorough investigation into the incident's circumstances.

to the left-wing opposition's criticism of the negative vote on the status of Palestine. For example, Social Democrats criticised "*such a departure from a balanced policy approach and European policy*" (Zaorálek qtd. in Winfrey – Muller 2012). However, it is worth noting that (also) the left-wing parties had inconsistent attitudes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Back in 2011, a group of MPs from various political parties, including some Social Democrats, wrote an open letter asking the government to oppose Palestine's UN recognition request (Aktualne.cz 2011). Others, such as Zaorálek (qtd. in ČSSD 2011), stated that Czechia "*should adopt a favourable attitude towards (...) the recognition of Palestinian statehood,*" which brought him closer to the European mainstream position.

Even though some observers (e.g., Čejka – Ježová – Bechyňský 2013: 185, 194) claim that left-wing political parties tend to coordinate positions on Israel and Palestine with the EU, while right-wing parties are "*uncritical*" vis-à-vis Israel, this statement is not entirely valid. On many occasions, left-wing politicians (e.g., former President Miloš Zeman) expressed themselves uncritically and admiringly towards Israel, while right-wing politicians, although making no secret of their sympathies for Israel, managed to criticise some of its actions. This can be demonstrated by Schwarzenberg's reaction to Israel's announcement that it would continue to build settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories (especially in the E1 area), which was, according to him, "*worse than a crime*", it was "*bullshit*" (qtd. in Hospodářské noviny 2012). In this case, the EU could present a unified position since the Council of the EU (2012a) "*strongly opposed*" the expansion of settlements, as it would jeopardise the existence of a viable Palestinian state.

Finally, the last event concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the period of Nečas' government will be mentioned. During a week-long 2012 Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip, Czechia identified itself with the views of other EU countries, which were reflected in the statement of the Council of the EU (2012b: 8) that "*[a]ll attacks must end immediately*" and that "*Israel has the right to protect its population*" from rocket attacks by Hamas. This was, after all, Schwarzenberg's leading position during the Council meeting (MZV ČR 2012), and it also corresponded to Czechia's long-term position. Czech leaders did not miss any opportunity to repeat this statement (see Vláda ČR 2012), which, as Winfrey and Muller (2012) point out, differed from that of other EU countries since it was "*a sentiment absent from statements from the French and British but one closely resembling comments from U.S. officials.*"

Minister of Foreign Affairs of the new government led by the Social Democrats, Lubomír Zaorálek (2014–2017), made it known he would pursue "*a balanced policy towards Israel and Palestine which had not happened so far*" (qtd. in MZV ČR 2015b). In some aspects (see below), the government deviated from unreserved support for Israel. Nevertheless, many of his statements showed no fundamental shift in Czech foreign policy. On some issues, his approach was identical to the policy of former Minister and right-wing politician

Schwarzenberg. Zaorálek, for example, said that Czechia would not recognise Palestine as a state because it was *“against unilateral steps”* that would escalate the situation (qtd. in MZV ČR 2015b)⁹. He recognised Israel’s right to self-defence but also criticised the humanitarian consequences of Israeli military operations and the settlement of occupied Palestinian territories, which he perceived as *“torpedoing the process of creating two separate states”* (qtd. in E15 2015). However, we can observe that Zaorálek (qtd. in MZV ČR 2014), more often than his predecessors, drew attention to Israeli policies perceived as *“highly problematic”* within the peace process. According to Zaorálek (qtd. in E15 2015), there were more *“things”* that were happening and were *“not evidence of [Israeli] interest in a peaceful solution”*. Several political decisions of Bohuslav Sobotka’s government (2014–2017) indicated a moderate leaning toward the EU majority positions. In 2014, Czechia (similarly to other EU states) abstained from voting on the UN Human Rights Council’s proposal to investigate alleged Israel’s human rights violations related to the military operation in the Gaza Strip (Radio Prague International 2014). Thus, Czechia did not support Israel in this voting (as was usual in similar cases in the past).

Although both right-wing and left-wing governments criticised Israel for building Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, in 2015, the Chamber of Deputies rejected the European Commission’s decision that Israeli goods produced in the occupied Palestinian territories should carry a label stating that the product originated from a Jewish settlement (idnes.cz 2015). Even though some EU countries started to sell goods from settlements with a label about their origin (such as France), Czechia (same as, for example, Germany and Hungary) did not respect the decision. In 2019, following the European Court of Justice’s decision about the mandatory labelling of Israeli products from Jewish settlements, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Czechia would comply with the regulation (Český Rozhlas Plus 2019).

The government of Prime Minister Andrej Babiš (2017–2021), in line with previous governments, repeatedly confirmed that it considered Israel its strategic partner (Vláda ČR 2021). Many steps it took (e.g., the Czech vote in the UN General Assembly on the status of Jerusalem) corresponded to this attitude. On the other hand, Babiš’s government took a somewhat hesitant and unclear stance on some foreign policy issues, which can be demonstrated by the government’s attitude towards moving the embassy to Jerusalem.

After US President Donald Trump announced the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem, Czech President Miloš Zeman repeatedly supported a similar step in the case of the Czech embassy¹⁰ (zemanmilos.cz 2017c). The government’s position was restrained, other times rather evasive. The statements of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Martin Stropnický (2017–

⁹ Nevertheless, in 2011, he claimed that *“[t]he proposal to recognise Palestine as a sovereign state (...) corresponds with the international plan for a peaceful resolution of the conflict”* (ČSSD 2011).

¹⁰ This step would mark a departure from the policy of understanding Jerusalem as the capital of both states.

2018), suggest that the government did not consider moving the embassy to Jerusalem but, at the same time, did not want to antagonise President Zeman and/or Israel by taking an explicitly negative position. Stropnický therefore repeatedly vindicated himself with the “*European position*” on this issue, i.e. that EU states should not move their embassies to Jerusalem.

Stropnický (qtd. in MZV ČR 2018b) admitted that Czechia was “*in an ambivalent situation,*” as evidenced by his statements. Even though Czech leaders wanted to “*stick to the European line*” (Stropnický qtd. in MZV ČR 2017b), they did not want to criticise strategic partners – Israel and the USA. Ultimately, Stropnický did not rule out “*some form of representation*” of Czechia in Jerusalem in the future but, as he added, without jeopardising the dialogue with Palestine (MZV ČR 2018b). The difficulty of the Czech position was reflected in how the country voted in the UN General Assembly on the status of Jerusalem. The UN resolution rejected the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Czechia and five other EU countries abstained, while the rest voted in favour of the proposal. Much as Stropnický defended the government against accusations of alibism, claiming that the abstention from voting was “*a very strong*” and “*relatively clear opinion*” (MZV ČR 2018a), this step ensured that the relationship with Israel would not be tarnished and, at the same time, the country would not be the only “black sheep” in the EU as it was in 2012 during the vote on upgrading Palestine’s status. Although the Czech officials talked about holding the European line on this issue, they again did not join the majority of EU states and did not vote in favour of the proposal. In addition, Czechia was among the three EU states that blocked a joint EU statement condemning the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem (The Times of Israel 2018).

In 2019, Babiš’s government once again hid behind the “*common European position*”¹¹, this time on the issue of the US rejecting unilateral recognition of Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights (Petříček qtd. in Denik.cz 2019). The EU, supported by all its members, declared that it did not recognise Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights.

As the above-described examples show, the general approach of Czechia to Israel and Palestine was quite similar over the research period, as most Czech governments declared a balanced position, took many steps that reflected their close ties with Israel, and sometimes, rather exceptionally, tried to hold the EU line. However, former Czech President Miloš Zeman (2013–2023) stood out with his deep affection for Israel. If anyone on the Czech political scene was utterly uncritical of Israel, critical of the Palestinians (especially Hamas), and entirely detached from the EU’s mainstream position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it was Zeman. According to Zeman, Israel was a country for which he had “*extraordinary sympathy*” (qtd. in zemanmilos.cz 2015). Thus, he often condemned EU’s approach towards the conflict, which, in his words, pursued “*soft policy*” towards Hamas and “*terrorists*”; or he

¹¹ The EU recognises the Golan Heights as an occupied territory.

considered the termination of rocket firing by Hamas as the only possibility to end the conflict (qtd. in zemanmilos.cz 2013, 2014). As Zeman mentioned on numerous occasions, the EU behaved “cowardly” since *“support for Israel is a measure of the courage of democratic states. Unfortunately, most of the European Union [was] completely cowardly”* (qtd. in zemanmilos.cz 2017a). In several issues, Zeman completely deviated from the essential position of the EU (and the Czech governments), e.g., when he controversially stated: *“I do not believe there should be two independent states”, only “one state with two nations”* (qtd. in zemanmilos.cz 2018). However, like other Czech representatives, he spoke about the need to strive for change (i.e. improvement) in the relationship between the EU and Israel (qtd. in zemanmilos.cz 2017b). Zeman, for instance, wished Czechia to become an example for other EU members in moving the Czech embassy to Jerusalem. Even though he proposed to move the Czech embassy in 2013, the then government (and all the following ones) rejected this idea. On the contrary, Zeman welcomed the government’s change of opinion on labelling Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation (zemanmilos.cz 2013). The EU only agreed to do so in 2013. However, the Czech government initially strongly rejected adding Hezbollah (or even its military wing) to the list of terrorist organisations since it feared the destabilisation of Lebanon. Schwarzenberg stated that Israel’s efforts to persuade the EU to include Hezbollah among terrorist organisations were an unnecessary propaganda war (Lidovky.cz 2013). Eventually, Czechia voted in favour because the EU promised to continue supporting Lebanon’s stability and delivering humanitarian aid (Radiožurnál 2013).

Conclusions

In the period under research, Czechia’s position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remained significantly less critical than that of most other EU members and EU officials. This was reflected in the unbalanced position of the Czech government during the Gaza War (2008–2009) or in the way Czechia voted on various issues concerning Israel and Palestine at the UN. Whether the vote was on upgrading the status of Palestine (2012), on the status of Jerusalem (2017), or other topics, Czechia either voted in line with Israeli interests or, at least, abstained from voting. In any case, Czechia usually found itself in a minority (or completely solitary) position within the EU.

Although Czechia has been an EU member since 2004, until the end of the investigated period, there was no fundamental transformation of Czech foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over time, and there was no permanent shift towards a more balanced position held by the EU. All Czech governments in the examined period emphasised the strategic relationship between Czechia and Israel, and this was reflected in their attitude towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since they all pursued to maintain close and good relations with Israel. Even though Czechia wanted to maintain good relations and the development cooperation with Palestine as well, the personal sympathies of Czech leaders

and their references to elements in history and values shared with Israel were necessarily reflected in their pro-Israel attitudes and policies (with no significant difference between right-wing and left-wing governments).

Even though most governments officially declared a balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the right-wing governments were more uncritical of Israel. In contrast, Sobotka's left-wing government sought a more balanced approach. Minister Zaorálek tried to harmonise the traditionally pro-Israel position of many Czech politicians (including President Zeman and MPs across political parties) and the EU majority positions. His more frequent (but carefully worded) criticism of Israel and pointing out that the construction of Jewish settlements, among other problems, hindered the progress of the peace process, brought him closer to the EU mainstream attitude towards Israel.

Much as the EU tries to influence the foreign policy of its members in the long term and reconcile their national foreign policy positions, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Czechia stubbornly and for a long time resisted European influence. As shown in several examples in the third part of this article, Czechia prioritised national interests over the joint (or majority) European position. At the same time, Czechia did not identify with the EU even in terms of the fundamental problems and obstacles to the development of the peace process (a complete exception was Zaorálek, who, in accordance with the EU's opinion, identified the construction of Jewish settlements as an obstacle to the peace process). The Europeanization of Czech foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can thus be understood as highly selective. In most cases, Czechia stood against the mainstream opinion within the EU, but, at other times, the Czech government advocated its positions by purposely adhering to the "European line" or adopting the opinion of EU representatives (mainly to avoid deterioration of relations with domestic or foreign allies).

Although some Czech politicians (e.g., Nečas, Topolánek, Zeman) spoke about the need to promote Czech interests at the European level and support the improvement of EU-Israeli relations, efforts in this area remained unfulfilled. Sometimes, it was because these efforts were left only at the declaratory level. At other times Czechia's pro-Israel positions provoked criticism or opposition on the part of other EU countries, often those that had been critical of Israeli policy for a long time (e.g., France). Suppose membership in the EU helped Czechia fulfil its interests related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its relations with Israel. In that case, it was not because the Czech leaders could advance Czech interests and policies in the EU. Instead, it was because – face to face with the EU and other EU members – the position of Czechia as an unwavering and loyal partner of Israel in the EU strengthened. After all, it was not just a coincidence when Benjamin Netanyahu declared that Israel had "*no better friends in Europe than the Czech Republic*" (Davidovich 2012).

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