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Little Moscow on the Vltava river – Russian communities in the Czech Republic in the context of socio-political order and homeland security

Mała Moskwa nad Wełtawą – rosyjska społeczność w Republice Czeskiej w kontekście ładu społeczno-politycznego i bezpieczeństwa narodowego

Abstract: The central concern of this paper is the growing influx of Russian migrants to the Czech Republic and the consequences for political and social order. With nearly 40,000 migrants, Russians are the fourth biggest foreign community in Czechia. Due to their material status, the history of bilateral relations, and the significant role of their homeland in Czech politics, the growing Russian community poses a problem for Czech society. The fear of Russian dominance – in political as well as economical dimensions – as well as resentment about the communistic era, is still present among Czech people. Although most Russians come to Czech to study or to do business and are not engaged in political activity, relations between migrants and the host society can be strained. Mutual prejudices make themselves felt in moments of the political crisis between two countries, such as the recent row over Soviet monuments in Prague. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the Russian community could easily become a tool for Kremlin propaganda. Russians appreciate the opportunity to live in a rich, liberal and democratic society and even though they keep strong emotional ties with their homeland they are not keen to affirm all of Moscow's deeds.

Keywords: the Czech Republic, migration, Russia, Russian community, historical memory, Central Europe

Streszczenie: Na tle pozostałych państw Europy Środkowej Czechy postrzegane są jako państwo umiarkowanie prorosyjskie, co w dużej mierze jest wynikiem pozytywnych opinii o Rosji wyrażanych przez wielu przedstawicieli czeskiej klasy politycznej. Republika Czeska jest też jednym z największych ośrodków migracyjnych Rosjan w Europie. Rosyjscy migranci cechują się wysokim stopniem zorganizowania, dużym odsetkiem osób z wyższym wykształceniem oraz zasobnością kapitału. Funkcjonowanie w obrębie cze-

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skiego społeczeństwa sporej rosyjskiej grupy narodowościowej coraz częściej rodzi napięcia społeczne. Mają one podłoże zarówno ekonomiczne, jak i historyczno-kulturowe. Dodatkowo do czeskiej opinii publicznej docierają sygnały o nadmiernej aktywności wywiadowczej Rosji oraz o zagrożeniach hybrydowych. W tym kontekście istnienie dużej społeczności rosyjskiej postrzegane jest przez niektórych jako dodatkowe zagrożenie i potencjalne narzędzie wpływu Moskwy. Jednak utrwalony model funkcjonowania Rosjan w Czechach nie wskazuje na ich aktywne zaangażowanie w działalność polityczną. Pomimo utrzymywania silnych więzów społecznych i kulturowych z krajem pochodzenia Rosjanie mieszkający w Czechach dystansują się od bieżących napięć w relacjach dwustronnych. Kulturowanie w obrębie państwa przyjmującego własnej kultury czy pamięci historycznej nie jest silnie nacechowane antyczesko lub antyeuropejsko. Dominującą postawą społeczności rosyjskiej w Czechach jest skupienie się na działalności, która zapewni jej bezpieczeństwo materialne i możliwość długotrwałego osiedlenia się.

Słowa kluczowe: Czechy, Rosja, migracja, bezpieczeństwo, Europa Centralna

Introduction

The beginning of 2020 was marked with a Czech-Russian skirmish about history. Reacting to the removal of the statue of Soviet Marshall Ivan Konev from a square in Prague, Russian authorities accused the Czech Republic of violating the provisions of the Czech-Russian Friendship Agreement and filed criminal charges. A few weeks earlier, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had criticized the Czech government's approval of a new public holiday to commemorate the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia during the summer of 1968. A dispute over commemorations had also flared up in late 2019, when the local council of Prague's western Řeporyje district voted unanimously in favor of erecting a memorial to the fallen soldiers of the Russian Liberation Army (ROA), who had taken part in the liberation of Prague at the end of the World War II. Russia, which sees the Vlasov troops as traitors, called this initiative provocative and "absolutely mad."

Disputes on the background of history have caused significant controversy on the political level and deterioration of bilateral relations, which had not been seen in a very long time. Politically inspired hooligan attacks on Czech diplomatic missions in Russia, as well as criminal charges by the Russian parliament against Prague local government leaders, led many commentators to raise questions about excessive Russian interference in Czech internal affairs. The situation became far more serious when news broke in the Czech media in April 2020 that a Russian diplomat had traveled to Prague carrying a poi-

sonous substance in his baggage. In Prague, local mayors were given police protection as a precautionary measure. Ultimately the suspicions of the Czech intelligence service were not confirmed, but the affair led to the expulsion of two Russian diplomats and an equivalent reaction from Moscow.

Current tensions between Prague and Moscow in some ways resemble events in Estonia in 2007. After the removal of the statue of a Red Army soldier from the city center in Tallinn, Estonia was targeted by the Kremlin propaganda machine with aggressive hybrid actions. Apart from severe cyberattacks, other retaliatory actions taken by Moscow included the organization of mass protests and riots in the Estonian capital. The Russian minority, which comprises approximately one-third of the population of the country, played a key role in the protests.¹ Admittedly there is no simple or direct analogy between the events in Tallinn and Prague: Russia's actions against the Czech Republic were less severe and were of a different character. Nevertheless, this comparison may lead to interesting reflections about the growing Russian minority in the Czech Republic and its potential influence on homeland security. As can be seen in Baltic states, Russia takes advantage of its national minorities not only for promotion of its culture and language, as the role of national minorities in Russian foreign policy goes far beyond the field of soft diplomacy. They are an important tool of Kremlin's leverage abroad as potential advocates of pro-Russian narratives.² The Czech Republic is one of the biggest centers of Russian emigration in Europe, with the percentage of Russian residents in Czech society constantly growing, and with it their impact on the economic, social and political affairs of the country. Czech services have registered a large upsurge in the flow of Russians in recent times: according to the Czech Ministry of Interior, in the last decade the number of Russian immigrants rose from 23,000 to 37,000 in 2018. Russians are currently the fourth biggest group of foreigners with long-term residency in the Czech Republic, after Viet-

1 M. Piotrowski, K. Raś, 'Wzrost zagrożenia rosyjskiego w raportach bałtyckich służb specjalnych', *Biuletyn PISM*, 15 July 2015, https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/Wzrost_zagro_enia_rosyjskiego_w_raportach_ba_tyckich_s_u_b_specjalnych [2020-08-03].

2 K. Baraniuk, 'Mniejszości rosyjskojęzyczne w polityce zagranicznej Federacji Rosyjskiej – przykład Estonii', *Wschodnioznawstwo*, no. 10, 2016, p. 289.

namese, Slovak and Ukrainian nationals. This number will probably rise in near future because most Russians who come to Czechia are not interested in short-term stays, but want to settle over the long-term.

This paper intends to develop an understanding of the phenomena of the growing Russian community in the Czech Republic. I will try to clarify several aspects of Czech migration policy and examine the nature of Russian influences in Czechia, characterizing the social, economic and political background of contact between these two nations. All of this aims for a better understanding of whether the increasing presence of Russian citizens in Czech society can become a meaningful tool of influence in bilateral relations and what impact it could have on Czech internal security. I also review the discourse on the subject in scientific articles, analysis, and media reports. Due to the limits of the article, the analyzed materials constitute only a fragment of the discursive reality, however, they are sufficient to formulate certain hypotheses on the topic.

1. Russian community in the Czech Republic against the background of local migration policy

Central Europe has for a long time has been characterized by a large outflow of people, mainly to the Western states, with minimal inflow rates. However, political changes and dynamic economic growth in the last decades have made this region a very attractive place for work and settlement. Among Central European countries the Czech Republic was the first country to introduce an active migration policy, adopting the first Act on foreigner settlement in 2000. Three years later a pilot program was launched in order to attract a foreign labor force, favoring young, well-educated and highly-qualified immigrants. Knowledge of the Czech language and a previous stay in the Czech Republic were an added advantage for the candidates. In the following years, the scope of the project was extended to include an increasing number of participants. The Czech Republic represents a mixed (selective) model of migration policy, focused on meeting the needs

of labor market.³ Based on the experience of countries with similar economic situations, it has developed its own approach to regulation of migration flows, with regulatory instruments such as an Employee Card, a scoring system for foreigners with relevant competences, temporary work permits in particular sectors of economy, and a system of scholarships for talented students and alumni of leading universities. In recent years some restrictive measures have been also introduced concerning mandatory health insurance, minimal amount of money for their stay, as well as confirmation of accommodation upon arrival.

In the last decade, the attitude of Czechs towards immigrants has been one of reluctant acceptance. As with other Central European countries, Czech society has been wary about the wide influence of foreign residents, perceiving it more as a threat to homogeneity than a chance for economic and cultural development. Although xenophobia is not widespread, Czechs strongly expect migrants to adapt and assimilate.⁴

One of the most meaningful chapters in the history of Czech-Russian relations in the 20th century was the fate of so-called “white wave” of Russian emigration. Thousands of representatives of old aristocratic families, officers, and intelligentsia, forced to leave their houses and fortunes in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, found shelter in the newly established Czechoslovak Republic. In the inter-war period, Czechoslovakia was one of the biggest and most significant centers of the Russian state in exile. Guided by political and ideological views, as well as a sincere commitment to Russian culture, the former Czechoslovak political elite showed their generous support for Russian migrants and their political, social, cultural, and religious initiatives.⁵ The former Czechoslovak state had special credits in support of Russian scientific life. The city of Prague with its numerous Russian academies and scientific associations became an educational center for Russian migrants and gained the honorable nickname “Russian Ox-

3 R. Orłowska, *Uwarunkowania i skutki rozwoju migracji ekonomicznych w Unii Europejskiej w świetle wybranych teorii migracji międzynarodowych*, Gdańsk 2013, pp. 197-199.

4 M. Janičko, ‘Pražští Rusové’, *Naše společnost. Časopis Centra pro výzkum veřejného mínění Sociologického ústavu AV ČR*, v.v.i, no. 10 (2), 2012, p. 5.

5 See more: *Dom v izgnanii: Oчерки о русской эмиграции в Чехословакии 1918-1945*, ed. M. Dobush-eva, V. Krymova, Prague 2008 [*Дом в изгнании: Очерки о русской эмиграции в Чехословакии 1918-1945*, ред. М. Добушева, В. Крымова, Прага 2008].

ford.” The Second World War and the period of socialism put a stop to Russian “white emigration” in Czechoslovakia. However, the traditions and social networks as well as the political, cultural and economic attractiveness of the country lay the foundation for the restoration of migration flows from Russia to Czechia, which has been witnessed since its pro-democratic transformation.

The character of the recent inflow of Russian citizens to Czechia reflects the general trends of Russian emigration processes in the post-Soviet period. The research shows that after 1990, pro-emigration sentiments prevailed mostly among middle-class people who used opportunities to go to Western countries to find well-paid professional jobs, to pursue business in a more favorable market environment, and to live permanently in a more comfortable and secure place. Over time many of them were able to buy real estate for permanent or temporary residence and establish communities which became a kind of magnet for close and distant relatives and acquaintances.⁶

According to a questionnaire survey conducted in 2015 for a project monitoring the integration process of non-EU foreigners in the Czech Republic, the majority of the Russians living in Prague (the biggest migration center in the country) emigrated because of the poor economic situation in Russia: low salaries, unfavorable business conditions, the financial crisis, and high unemployment rates. Other push factors included poorly functioning public services, a high level of corruption, and an overall lower quality of life. Russians who settled in Czechia appreciated the well-functioning public services (e.g. education, transport, health), which were cheap or free of charge, and greater security in the country. Compared to the Russian Federation, respondents also pointed to greater civil liberties and less social tension.⁷

The Czech Republic has also become a shelter for Russians who decided or were forced to leave Russia because of their political views. According to journalist Ondřej Soukup, nowadays Prague is the third

6 I. Aleshkovsky, A. Grebenyuk, O. Vorobyeva, 'The Evolution of Russian Emigration in the Post-Soviet Period', *Social Evolution & History*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2018, pp. 140-155, https://www.sociostudies.org/upload/sociostudies.org/journal/seh/2018_2/140-155.pdf [2020-04-13].

7 *Začlenění ruské komunity do většinové společnosti*, ed. J. Vavrečková, K. Dobiášová, Prague 2013, <https://www.cizinci.cz/documents/551336/568661/Za%C4%8Dlen%C4%9Bn%C3%AD+rusk%C3%A9+komunity+do+v%C4%9Bt%C5%A1inov%C3%A9+spole%C4%8Dnosti+%282015%29.pdf/080a281c-d226-2c92-4657-d8e09720f953> [2020-04-16].

most popular center for political émigrés from Russia, after London and Berlin. Approximately 200 oppositional activists have migrated to the Czech Republic in recent years over concern for their safety.⁸ Many of these people provide expert frameworks for local centers and institutions dealing with promotion of human rights or combating pro-Kremlin propaganda.⁹

Over the last decades, Russians have been very successful in establishing their own community among Czech society. In Czech cities it is easy to find shops offering typical Russian products, where many Russians prefer to buy food and other goods. In addition to commerce, the service market is also flourishing. This includes education, cultural activities, publications, medicine, law, and accounting, to name a few. The website *Zlaté stránky Ruskeho Česka* gives contact information on several hundred companies in Prague and other Czech cities which provide services in the Russian language.

The ability to develop a well-organized network of contacts and services inside the community may be proof of the adaptive capabilities of the migrants. On the other hand, it can be an obstacle in integration and building good relations with the population of the host country. As noted by journalist and writer Perta Procházková, even the pro-democratic and pro-European representatives of Russian minority still keep some distance between themselves and the host society. There is a language barrier, and also Russian national character and intellectual posture can manifest itself in a way that can hinder mutual co-existence. Procházková writes:

The Russian community consists of several enclaves [...] I am mostly in touch with the journalistic community around Radio Liberty, it is a really exceptional group of people, pro-western liberals. But they live in a ghetto! They do not speak Czech, live a community life, shop in Russian shops, in fact, they have no interest whatsoever to adapt to the Czech Republic, to fathom the Czech

8 M. Mikule, "Putinovi emigrant" v Praze. Kdo jsou Rusové, kteří do Česka přišli z politických důvodů, ct24.cz, 3 December 2018, <https://ct24.ceskatelevize.cz/svet/2668793-putinovi-emigranti-v-praze-kdo-jsou-rusove-keri-do-ceska-prisli-z-politickyh-duvodu> [2020-04-17].

9 One example of such institutions is *The Boris Nemtsov Academic Centre for the Study of Russia* (BNAC), launched on February 2018 at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. The Czech minister of foreign affairs Martin Stropnický, and Zhanna Nemtsova, daughter of the murdered Russian politician, took part in the center's opening ceremonies.

culture and understand the Czechs. As I see it, it might be the consciousness or even the self-confidence of being a part of a great nation, which, historically, attributed itself a missionary role. They indeed see themselves as missionaries who dispense the better, the good. They do not wish us ill, they wish us well. But they absolutely deny our right to have a say.¹⁰

2. Russian influence in the Czech Republic – roots, areas of activity and possible threats

Czechs, more than any other nation in Central Europe, have the opportunity to be in touch with Russians in their everyday life. The Czech Public Opinion Research Centre regularly evaluates the Czech public's attitude towards other countries. The most recent survey (November 2019) shows middling sympathy for Russia. On a five-level rating scale (where 1 stands for great sympathy and 5 for hostility) 35% of respondents pointed to 3. Only 5% perceived Russians as very friendly, 16 as rather friendly, whereas 27 chose rather unfriendly and 16 very unfriendly.¹¹ An interesting production about the troubled relationship between Russians and Czechs is a documentary by journalist and playwright Daniel Kupšovský.¹² He spotlights the fears and objections shared by the majority of Czech citizens when it comes to the growing Russian community in their country. These objections include reluctance to learn Czech and to integrate with Czech society; settlement of whole streets and districts where Czech residents become a minority; non-compliance with local rules, rude and aggressive behavior towards locals; imperialistic way of thinking; disparaging attitude to the Czech country and its history; European values; and painful memories of the Communist regime.

The past still strongly affects the relationship between Czechs and Russians. In the aftermath of Communist era, Czech's attitude towards

10 D. Kupšovský, 'Má soukromá rusofobie: Jak se naučit žít s ruskými imigranty v Praze?', portal. rozhlas.cz, 6 October 2018, <https://wave.rozhlas.cz/ma-soukroma-rusofobie-jak-se-naucit-zit-s-ruskymi-imigranty-v-praze-7633162> [2020-03-24].

11 Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, 'Sympatie české veřejnosti k některým zemím – listopad 2019', 13 December 2019, <https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/en/press-releases/political/international-relations/5074-czech-public-s-attitudes-to-foreign-countries-november-2019> [2020-04-13].

12 D. Kupšovský, 'Má soukromá rusofobie...'

Russia is still to a large extent based on fear of Russian domination. Many Russians who shared their experienced of living in the Czech Republic acknowledged that the 1968 Russian-led invasion of Czechoslovakia remains an unhealed wound. Even nowadays it is not unusual for Russian citizens to meet with hostility because of this historical fact. Somewhat surprisingly, traumatic feelings over the “Prague Spring” are not only the domain of older generations. Jana Svobodová, the author of a multi-media theatre performance about young Russians in Prague admits: “This is something you cannot erase, it is something we Czechs all have buried deep inside us, even young Czechs have it from their parents, and it is part of the nation’s memory.”¹³

However, it must be noted that in Czech society there is no uniform position about modern history, and according to the latest survey research, more than half of Czechs believe that it is being falsely reinterpreted. The surveys were conducted against a background of public debate about Red Army memorials in Prague. The views of many in Czech society and their critical look at the official historical narrative are somewhat convergent with the official statements of Russian authorities, who accused the Czech government, after the monument of Marshall Konev had been removed, of a “dangerous attempt to rewrite history.” Asked about their attitude about erasing all traces of the Communist era, about two-thirds of respondents said that they do not support the removal of objects commemorating events or personalities connected with World War II or the construction of new memorials resulting from a shift in the historical narrative.¹⁴

The social approach towards the material heritage of the Soviet Union and the strategies adopted by the Czech authorities has been changing over the last three decades. Thanks to the involvement of local communities and groups of artists, many monuments and memorials of the bygone era changed their original symbolic importance and became artistic performances. While Soviet symbols systemati-

13 D. Lazarová, L. Kukul, ‘Young Russians in Prague find that 1968 Russian-led invasion casts long shadow’, radio.cz, 13 August 2018, <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/young-russians-in-prague-find-that-1968-russian-led-invasion-casts-long-shadow> [2020-04-19].

14 K. Součková, ‘Historie se podle více než poloviny Čechů začíná falšovat. Vadí jim také rušení i stavění památníků’, irozhlas.cz, 3 February 2020, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/pruzkum-historie-konev-vlasovci-pavel-novotny_2001030600_pj [2020-04-19].

cally disappear from urban space in Prague, the province is still quite rich in such memorabilia. This results both from the sentiments of many people for the socialist past, as well as widespread pro-Russian sympathies.¹⁵ According to an opinion poll, the post-Communist developments since 1989 have not met the expectations of nearly 50% of Czechs. Many of these people have a positive attitude towards Russia and follow with interest information on pro-Russian TV channels and websites.¹⁶

Positive attitudes towards Russia among certain segments of the population are reflected in the Czech political scene. Approval of Putin's regime and its aggressive foreign policy is widespread – not only on the margin of public debate, but also in the political mainstream. Among representatives of the Czech parliament, those involved in pro-Russian and anti-EU and anti-NATO programs share the views of two anti-system groups – the anti-immigrant SPD and the communist KSČM. Those with favorable views towards Russia include some members of co-ruling Social Democrats ČSSD, as well as Conservatives, who emphasize cultural ties between Czechs and Russians and see Putin as a defender of religious and traditional values.¹⁷ The president of the Czech Republic, Miloš Zeman, has distinguished himself with many pro-Russian statements, which confused not only his allies in the EU and NATO but also some members of the Czech government. Another strong advocate of Russian interests is former president Vaclav Klaus. In the political sphere, old networks remain vitally important and serve as a springboard for business development and the influx of Russian capital. There are a few influential former politicians who have good contacts with Russian businessmen and diplomats and who have constantly lobbied for Russian interests. According to an estimation by The Prague Security Studies Institute, there are some 17,000 firms operating in the Czech Republic in which the owners come from Russia. The exact number of Kremlin-friendly businesses

15 A. Tatarenko, 'Relikty komunizmu: polityka historyczna wobec materialnego dziedzictwa sowieckiego w Republice Czeskiej', *Prace IES*, no. 1, 2019, p. 58, <https://ies.lublin.pl/pub/publikacje/prace/ies-prace-1-1-2019.pdf> [2020-04-24].

16 I. Smolenova, 'Russia's Propaganda War', *Forbes*, 25 March 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2015/03/25/russias-propaganda-war/#4246ef345bf4> [2020-08-03].

17 O. Ditrych, 'Byle nie do kawiarni', *Nowa Europa Wschodnia*, no. 5, 2015, p. 186.

is hard to assess due to the fact that a number of companies operate through shell entities registered in different countries.¹⁸

Another sphere of Russian influence in the Czech Republic are certain NGOs and cultural organizations as well as some media platforms. One of the best-known NGOs is The Institute of Slavic Strategic Studies. It belongs to a pan-Slavic congress and provides networking opportunities and further integration within the informal club of pro-Kremlin NGOs.¹⁹ Pro-Russian disinformation in Czech language is actively spread on about fifty internet portals. The most successful platform in previous years has been *Parlamentni listy*, attracting attention with emotionally-charged articles and catchy headlines.²⁰ The source of financing for most media is unclear; only in the case of *Sputnik.news* can it be proven that financing comes directly from the Kremlin. There is also one internet portal, *Eurodenik.cz*, which is owned by Russians living in Prague.²¹ Pro-Russian propaganda finds fertile ground mainly among far-right organizations with extremist or military profiles. Members of these organizations represent anti-establishment and xenophobic worldviews. They view Putin's policies supporting conservative values, national pride, and sovereignty very favorably. Czech scholars Petra Vejvodová, Jakub Janda and Veronika Víchová, the authors of the report about pro-Russian extreme-right movements in the Czech Republic, argue: "The ultimate goal for many of these actors is to form both a domestic and an international pro-Russian geopolitical platform opposed to liberal democratic institutions, the European Union and NATO. Political parties like Freedom and Direct Democracy or National Democracy openly delegitimize Czech democratic institutions, while supporting the Kremlin's narrative on Crimea and opposing the economic sanctions against Russia."²² Influence on political and social life in the country is limited; however,

18 Prague Security Studies Institute, 'United We Stand, Divided We Fall: The Kremlin's Leverage in the Visegrad Countries. Executive Summary', 2015, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/492_en-executive-summary.pdf [2020-08-03].

19 Prague Security Studies Institute, 'Summary of an Expert Roundtable Russian Influence in Central Europe', 2015, http://www.pssi.cz/download/docs/402_russia-s-influence-tools-roundtable-summary-27-2-2017.pdf [2020-08-03].

20 Ibidem.

21 Ibidem.

22 P. Vejvodová, J. Janda, V. Víchová, *The Russian connections of far-right and paramilitary organizations in the Czech Republic*, Budapest 2017, <https://www.kremlinwatch.eu/userfiles/the-russian->

such parties do pay attention to the Czech intelligence service, which since 2017 has begun intensive monitoring and challenging of propaganda and disinformation campaigns.²³

Czech intelligence services acknowledge the risk of excessive Russian interference in internal affairs. In late 2019 the annual report of the Czech Security Information Services was published. The report notes increased activity by Russian intelligence in Czechia and numerous attempts to establish influence around politicians who can impact Russian interests. It also pays attention to increasingly intensive disinformation campaigns and active exploitation of internet and social media for spreading various conspiracy theories and pro-Russian propaganda. Intelligence services have confirmed that undercover diplomatic officers, members and co-operators of all Russian intelligence services are present and are conducting increased intelligence activities.²⁴ Security experts have been paying attention to the overrepresentation of the Russian diplomatic service in the Czech Republic for quite some time. It is believed that the Czech Republic has become a regional hub for Russian intelligence and that around one-third of the Russian Embassy staff are intelligence personnel.²⁵ Prague itself has overtaken the role of Vienna as the center of espionage in this part of Europe.²⁶ The excessive activity of Russia both in the area of disinformation and propaganda as well as intelligence services proves that the region of Central Europe is one of Moscow's special interests, as Kremlin decision-makers still perceive former socialist-block countries as a special zone of interest. The ideological background for these policies are geopolitical concepts of rebuilding the great Eurasian Empire, which are popular among the Russian political elite. In this view,

connections-of-far-right-and-paramilitary-organizations-in-the-czech-republic_15273212518405.pdf [2020-08-04].

23 Ibidem.

24 The Security Information Service (BIS), 'Annual Report of the Security Information Service for 2018', 26 November 2019, p. 6, <https://www.bis.cz/annual-reports/annual-report-of-the-security-information-service-for-2018-0ee1b64b.html> [2020-04-23].

25 Prague Security Studies Institute, 'United We Stand...'

26 P. Bajda, 'Are Czechs Russophiles', *The Warsaw Institute Review*, no. 11, 2019/4, p. 23, https://warwainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WIR_NO_11.pdf [2020-03-25].

the region of East-Central Europe is seen as a buffer zone and area of competition with the West.²⁷

3. Russians among Czechs – could Prague become like Tallinn?

One important aspect of security studies is the question of how international migration may create a threat to states and their citizens. The growing rate of migrants is an important factor for economic development, but it is also a significant challenge for the people and governments trying to maintain socio-political order. International migration refers to the autonomy of states, their sovereign prerogative to control all phenomena occurring within their territories, and the ability of states to implement public action and enforce the law. Large population movements have always been associated with some form of confrontation between newcomers and the local population and for this reason migration should be seen as a potential source of political conflict.²⁸ The three main types of threats assigned to the functioning of large groups of foreigners within the host society are cultural, economic, and political.²⁹ People of migrant origin may pose a challenge to the cultural status quo due to their religious identity or religious practices. As Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller note, a political threat is associated with the potential of foreigners to manifest political disloyalty: “It is a very nature of nation-state that one can belong to only one community. Meanwhile, migrants are linked to more than one country. It happens that they are citizens of two countries. Or they can be citizens of one country and live in another. Situations of this type may give rise to transnational awareness or divisible loyalty.”³⁰

The above remarks once again bring to mind the problems with the existence of Russian minorities in the Baltic states. However, it is

27 J. Bornio, ‘Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia we współczesnych rosyjskich koncepcjach geopolitycznych’, *Wschodnioznawstwo*, no. 11, 2017, pp. 85-107.

28 K. Kozłowski, ‘Współczesne migracje jako źródło konfliktów politycznych’, in: *Migracje międzynarodowe a modernizacja systemu politycznego i społecznego. Materiały z XIII Konferencji Naukowej Wydziału Dziennikarstwa i Nauk Politycznych Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 12 stycznia 2007*, ed. G. Firlit-Fesnak, Warszawa 2008, p. 49.

29 S. Castles, M.J. Miller, *Migracja we współczesnym świecie*, Warszawa 2011, p. 262.

30 Ibidem.

crucial to mention that the case of Czechia differs significantly from former Soviet republics. The characteristic features of the Russian minority in the Czech Republic, represented in large part by well-educated, settled, wealthy middle-class, determine their functioning in Czech society. Russians are very active and successful in business. With about 15,000 registered companies they are second, only after Czechs, as local business owners. The capital of Russian-owned companies is estimated to be nearly 8.3 billion Czech crowns. One area dominated by Russian entrepreneurs is real estate. They willingly buy luxurious apartments in the city centers as well as cheaper flats to rent. Development agencies confirm that Russian companies frequently acquire newly established flats by the dozens, scooping whole settlements in one fell swoop. Russians, who do not have to pay university fees at public schools, are the second largest group of foreign students in the Czech Republic, after Slovaks. Russians are among the most educated ethnic minorities in Czechia, with 43% of the adult immigrants being university graduates. University degrees and minor problems with surmounting the language barrier help Russians to find well-paid jobs in the local labor market.

In comparison with other groups of foreigners living in Czechia, Russians show minimal interest in branches of the second sector of the labor market. They possess determination, resourcefulness and an uncommon capacity to adapt to the local business environment. By thinking about future profits, they are ready to bear the cost of their children's education, as a diploma from a European university is a status symbol as well as a passport for living and working inside the EU. Russians are represented not only in business but also in scientific and specialist communities and that generates respect from the host society.

There is a stark divide in the Russian community in the Czech Republic between their commitments to life in a democratic and liberal environment, which gives them chance for a secure and affluent life, and their political outlook. During the last presidential election, Putin gained 61% of votes cast in Prague, almost 55% in Brno and 76% in Karlove Vary. These results should not be interpreted as evidence for strong support for the ruling regime in Russia. It is rather the confirmation of a phenomenon diagnosed by Jan Strzelecki, the Centre for Eastern Studies expert, who examined the strategies of passive adap-

tation in Russian society in the aftermath of political and economic crises.³¹ After mass protests in 2011 and 2012, the middle class in Russia has been perceived by many as a social group with the potential to stand up against Putin's regime to invoke a democratic transformation. In fact, the middle class is deeply dependent economically on the regime and has very low potential to stir up public opinion. Even though the representatives of middle class frequently complain about the situation of the country, their ability to adapt to the rules of the regime is very high. They are not keen to risk their fortune and stability, and thus many prefer drifting to revolting. The Russian community in Czechia generally fits this pattern.

The majority of Russians declare their desire to settle in Czechia for the long haul. Most of them are successful in the labor market and are able to succeed in their new social and political environment. They benefit from and highly appreciate freedom of movement, civil liberties, freedom of speech, high levels of social security, and a high living standard. Having the opportunity to participate in the social, economic and to some extent political life of the Western host country, they can be more critical of pro-Kremlin propaganda and its disinformation campaigns. Regardless of some obstacles, the process of integration with the host society forges ahead and the network of professional, economic, and private contacts between Russians and Czechs continues to grow, allowing both sides to combat stereotypes. All of that however does not result in a radical change in the social and political attitudes of Russian migrants, or in their values, beliefs, and perception of the past or the contemporary situation of their homeland. A part of Russians living in the Czech Republic, who can feel discrimination against themselves, are keen to blame the liberal media which they claim distorts the picture of Russia and falsely re-interprets common history.

There is still a long list of mutual claims between Russians and Czechs. More and more Czechs share the opinion that the influence of Russians on the domestic real estate market is too great and should

31 J. Strzelecki, 'Painful Adaptation. The social consequences of the crisis in Russia', *OSW Studies*, no. 60, 2017, pp. 19-20, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-studies/2017-02-06/painful-adaptation-social-consequences-crisis-russia> [2020-04-15].

be limited. However, the daily functioning of Czech-Russian co-existence is not so problematic as some see it. Over the years the Russians have become part of the social picture in many Czech cities which have profited highly from their presence. The majority of Russians follow the rules of the host society and do not want any tensions with their Czech neighbors. A big part of Czech society, as well as the government, are aware that the economy needs foreign labor and the human resources of migrants may be a profitable factor for further development of the country. If the presence of migrants is inevitable it will be better to live among people who share similar values and culture and demonstrate a strong devotion to hard work.

Conclusions

The presence of a large Russian community within Czech society undoubtedly has an impact on bilateral relations, especially in its social aspects. While Czechs declare themselves as generally reluctant to accept foreigners, they are also very pragmatic. They understand that the presence of Russians positively affects their economy and the development of the country.

It is unlikely that the influx of Russians to the Czech Republic will drastically fall in the near future. Migration networks between both countries are tight. The existence of the large and well-organized Russian community allows even those with poor knowledge of the Czech language to settle and create a new life. Another important pull factor is that on the Czech political scene, many parties hold a positive attitude towards Russia. In this respect, Czechia stands out from the majority of countries in the region.

The presence of Russian citizens in the Czech Republic is overwhelmingly economically motivated. Most Russians declare their willingness to settle in Czechia because they highly appreciate living in a safe, well-organized, free and democratic state. This situation strongly contrasts with memories from their homeland, which many of them were forced to abandon because of poverty and social insecurity. However, a critical look at the country does not deprive them of their attachment to national values. They become resistant to pro-Kremlin propaganda but also reject harsh criticism of Russia and speaking about the country in terms of gloom and doom. Most incomers try

to integrate with the host country, but – at the same time – they keep an emotional commitment to their national culture. They speak Russian at home, take part in Russian cultural events, buy Russian products, read Russian newspapers and spend their free time among their Russian friends. The “Russian world” established within Czech society tends to be rather conservative where political and ideological issues are concerned and it seems that radical pro-democratic or pro-liberal ideas have little chance to dominate it.

Russian-Czech co-existence does not run without tensions. Some parts of Czech society feel strong dissatisfaction seeing a big influx of Russian capital. Russians managed to dominate some of the very profitable branches and they make profits which are unachievable for the average Czech citizen. As a result, part of Czech society started to feel pushed out to the margins while the real wealth and profits fall into the hands of foreigners. In this context, the recent spectacular actions over Russian monuments should be perceived not only as an expression of ongoing public debate and controversies about modern history, but also as a sign of opposition to Russian pressure in many aspects of public and economic life.

It is possible that tensions between Prague and Moscow over history will result in greater conflict, and could affect the internal political scene in the Czech Republic, which remains divided in its attitude towards Russia.³² However it is unlikely that the presence of a large Russian community will be a major factor. Occasional tensions between the host society and the migrant community are mainly about social and economic ties or historical memory, usually have a local dimension, and do not affect the general direction of policy in or between the two countries.

At least for now the Russian community in the Czech Republic does not have the potential to become a tool of influence in bilateral relations. To a large extent, this is due to the character of the current migration flow, which consists mostly of the people who strive to improve their life conditions in economic as well as social dimensions.

32 A. Tatarenko, 'Demontaż pomnika marszałka Koniewa w Pradze: kryzys w relacjach czesko-rosyjskich', *Komentarze IEŚ*, no. 166, 2020, p. 3, <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/demontaz-pomnika-marszalka-koniewa-w-pradze-kryzys-w-relacjach-czesko-rosyjskich-166-69-2020> [2020-04-23].

Excessive political activity may not escape the attention of local public opinion and as a consequence jeopardize their calm and profitable existence in Czech society. Although the feeling of national identity is strong in the Russian community, it does not seem likely that they would uncritically praise all deeds of the authorities in Moscow.

Despite the fact that a big part of the political elite and society more generally have positive feelings towards Russia, the authorities and security agencies are not blind to the activity of Russian intelligence and the risk it could have for political stability in the country. This knowledge is deliberately shared with the public. On the one hand, it should demonstrate to the Russian authorities that their deeds do not go unnoticed. On the other hand, by striking fear, it can make also society more aware of existing threats and more vigilant for Russian provocation and propaganda. If Russians ever cross the line with their pressure, we may expect that Czech society would swiftly demonstrate that their tolerance and hospitality are also limited.

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