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From Historical Arguments to Cost Calculations: The Czech Public Debate on Russia's War with Ukraine

The change of power in the Czech Republic did not lead to a fundamental shift in foreign policy toward Russia and the war in Ukraine; however, it clearly affected the way this policy has been legitimised in public debate. References to the historical experiences of 1938 and 1968 – which, after the annexation of Crimea and especially following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, functioned as a moral imperative to support Ukraine – are gradually losing their mobilising significance and increasingly being replaced by a narrative of pragmatism that emphasises economic costs, inflationary pressure, and social fatigue resulting from the protracted conflict. This shift is reflected in the decisions of Andrej Babiš's government, which have limited the Czech Republic's financial engagement in supporting Ukraine while simultaneously maintaining a coordinating role. Against this background, tension is evident between the government's pragmatic approach and the narrative of President Petr Pavel, who consistently views the war as a threat to security across Europe.

Foreign policy and collective memory. After 2014, and even more clearly after 2022, the collective memory of the Munich Dictate of 1938, together with the invasion by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968, constituted one of the main reference points in the Czech public debate on Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The invasion was interpreted not only as a violation of international law, but also as a repetition of an imperial pattern of Russian actions already known from the past, including from the history of the Czech lands. The years 1938 and 1968 served as a moral imperative and a political injunction justifying unequivocal support for Ukraine and a firm stance toward Russia. However, over the past several months, a gradual weakening of this narrative can be observed. This does not entail a questioning of the importance of the events of 1938 and 1968, but rather their neutralisation in the current political discourse. Historical references appear less frequently, and when they do, they tend to be declarative in nature, devoid of direct political consequences. In place of the language of historical analogies, a rhetoric of pragmatism, national interest, and the need for a "realistic" assessment of the international situation is increasingly taking hold.

This approach is the result not only of so-called "war fatigue" observable in many European societies but also of the continuously rising cost of living in the Czech Republic. These increases are a consequence of persistently high inflation in recent years as well as rising prices for basic goods and services. Between 2021 and 2023, inflation in the Czech Republic significantly exceeded the inflation target, largely due to the overlap of external factors such as disruptions to global supply chains after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the sharp rise in energy prices following Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Despite a gradual slowdown in inflation and the implementation of a restrictive monetary policy by the Czech National Bank, price levels have remained high, leading to a sustained erosion of households' real purchasing power. Particularly severe was the increase in energy and heating costs, which forced a significant portion of society to reduce consumption and adopt savings strategies ([Komentarze IEŚ, no. 914](#), [Komentarze IEŚ, no. 883](#)). As a result, rising living costs have become an important factor shaping social moods and political attitudes, while reinforcing a sense of economic insecurity and a critical assessment of government actions. Despite signs of macroeconomic stabilisation, cost pressures remain one of the key socio-economic challenges in the Czech Republic.

Whereas in the first years following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, support for Ukraine in the public debate was presented as a natural consequence of the Czech historical experience, the emphasis today is on the

economic, social, and political costs of this engagement. The past is ceasing to be an impulse for action, becoming merely a backdrop – an element that no longer determines political decisions. This approach intensified during the parliamentary election campaign and after Andrej Babiš's government assumed power. From the outset of the campaign, the Czech public debate on the war in Ukraine and relations with Russia has employed the language of pragmatism. The dominant motifs are cost calculation and fatigue with the war and its consequences. This transformation does not consist of a complete rejection of support for Ukraine but rather signals a shift in emphasis from moralising historical references to arguments related to costs, interests, and the realities of politics. Moreover, both Czech and international media predict that Babiš or parties associated with him may seek a softer narrative toward Russia, which is interpreted as a possible adjustment of the existing political course toward the Russian–Ukrainian war.

These phenomena are reflected in political decisions. As early as December 2025, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš stated that the Czech Republic would no longer guarantee financial support for Ukraine, arguing that there were insufficient funds in the budget and that spending needed to be focused on the domestic needs of his citizens, stating that “our coffers are empty” and that resources must be allocated primarily to domestic expenditure. This resonated widely among the Czech public as an example of a pragmatic political logic prevailing over the rhetoric of solidarity. This narrative line was also confirmed in operational decisions; although the Czech Republic continues to coordinate an international initiative for the supply of ammunition to Ukraine, it has ceased to commit its own financial resources, focusing instead on an intermediary role.

At the same time, the President of the Czech Republic, Petr Pavel, in numerous public statements referring to talks conducted along the Russia–USA–Ukraine line aimed at ending the war, has consistently emphasised that Russia is not seeking compromise but rather striving to gain an advantage, which necessitates the continuation of military and political support for Ukraine. In interviews and commentaries on the international situation, Pavel argued that a reduction in Western engagement could serve the Kremlin's interests, since the alternative to joint support would be Russia's success, one that would undermine the security of all of Europe and the international law-based order. This position stems from his assessment that Russia still possesses the capacity to conduct aggression and shows no willingness to conclude a lasting peace agreement based on respect for Ukraine's territorial integrity, which implies the need to further strengthen the defensive capabilities of Ukraine and allied states. Pavel has not only opposed limiting military assistance (calling for full equipment support and ammunition deliveries) but has also emphasised the need for strategic engagement by allies in ensuring long-term peace in the region, pointing out that only a resolute stance toward the aggressor can prevent further escalation and thereby stabilise security in Central Europe.

Commentary. The abovementioned process should be interpreted as a manifestation of structural tension between the normative dimensions of foreign policy and its socio-economic determinants. The weakening of references to the memory of 1968 does not signify its disappearance or a revision of its historical significance but rather indicates a change in the function of this memory in the public debate – from a tool of political mobilisation to a symbolic point of reference with limited decision-making agency. Under the conditions of a protracted war, cost pressures, and growing economic uncertainty, political elites increasingly abandon arguments based on historical analogies in favour of the language of risk management, prioritisation of national interests, and selective international engagement. At the same time, the visible dichotomy between the government's position and the presidential narrative reveals an internal fragmentation of Czech foreign policy, in which the logic of fiscal pragmatism and strategic thinking about regional security compete with one another. In the longer term, this may lead to a lasting reconfiguration of the Czech approach to international conflicts – not through a rupture with the existing course, but rather through its functional limitation, which depends on the social and economic condition of the state and on the ability of elites to maintain consensus around the costs of international solidarity.