

Post-Zieleniec policies offer chance for change

By Jiří Pehe

The departure of Czech Foreign Minister Josef Zieleniec represents a chance to modify — although not necessarily significantly — the course and style of Czech foreign policy.

The main objectives of Czech foreign policy — membership in NATO and the European Union — remain the same. But, in trying to achieve these objectives, the Czech Republic should return to some of the premises it was built on during the tenure of Zieleniec's predecessor, Jiří Dienstbier. The fact that Jaroslav Šedivý, the new foreign minister, was Dienstbier's close associate, should make such an effort easier.

Foreign policy under Dienstbier promoted the idea of close cooperation among the so-called Visegrád states — that is, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Such cooperation made sense not only because Western states and organizations saw post-communist Central Europe as a common geopolitical entity, but also because a common strategy and close cooperation of the Visegrád countries could help each of them integrate faster into Western structures.

However, following the split of Czechoslovakia, Czech foreign policy under Zieleniec pursued a different course. The Czechs came to believe that they could best reach their integration objectives by politically distancing themselves from the other Visegrád countries. Economic cooperation was promoted strictly through the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA), while closer coordination of foreign policies within the Visegrád grouping was shunned. Czech leaders also rejected any suggestions that the Visegrád grouping could be institutionalized. In short, the Czech Republic, which consid-

ered itself to be the distant front-runner of political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe, did not want to be slowed down by its post-communist neighbors.

Zieleniec's foreign policy relentlessly promoted the ideology of Czech success and superiority, in line with the convictions of the Czech government. President Václav Havel's repeated calls for closer cooperation with Visegrád neighbors were an exception. It was only in 1995 that Czech foreign policy again began to pursue closer cooperation with both Poland and Hungary. One reason was that Western countries made it increasingly clear that such cooperation was expected of potential NATO and EU members. Czech leaders also began to realize that an individual race against Poland, in particular, for NATO membership was counterproductive. Poland, with its size and strategic importance, was clearly a favorite for early NATO membership. Close relations with Poland could thus only benefit Czech NATO aspirations.

Although relations with both Poland and Hungary have gradually improved, the damage caused by the Czechs' initial rejections of closer relations has never been fully repaired. Šedivý, who represents the legacy of Dienstbier's efforts to establish closer regional cooperation, is in a better position than Zieleniec to overcome lingering suspicions.

Another legacy of Zieleniec's foreign policy that Šedivý may have to struggle with is the discrepancy between the country's image abroad and the situation at home. Zieleniec and his team have been extremely successful in "selling" the country abroad. The Czech Republic was indeed considered by most Western leaders, investors and rating firms to be the "success story" of Eastern

Europe. In reality, Czech foreign policy was marketing a "product" that had many flaws — most of which are becoming apparent only now.

Zieleniec and other Czech leaders should certainly not be blamed for being as successful as they were in marketing their country. Zieleniec, in particular, merely did what diplomats of any country are expected to do. However, as the worsening economic indicators and a rather moribund state of domestic political affairs suggest, the country would now be better served by projecting more humility.

The Czech Republic can, of course, boast of significant achievements. Both the EU and NATO recognized those achievements when they included the Czech Republic as a candidate for membership. On the other hand, the Czechs could also learn from the Polish and Hungarian examples. Although both countries have also justifiably engaged in self-promotion, they have not concealed many of their deficiencies and have worked hard to prepare themselves for membership in both organizations.

Šedivý will have to present the Czech Republic abroad in a more modest way. Both the EU and NATO are now well aware of the real situation here. Despite all the problems, they still see the country — and rightly so — as a candidate for membership. But the Czech Republic needs to work more vigorously to rectify various shortcomings and be more humble in presenting its achievements. It is the only way to avoid a new wave of the disappointment that the failed expectations already have caused both at home and abroad.

— *The writer is the director of President Havel's Foreign Policy Department*