

The Czech Republic: Israel's most dependable European ally

Jakub Groszkowski

The Czech Republic was the only European country to oppose Palestine being granted the status of a non-member observer state at the UN General Assembly on 29 November. The Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that although it supports for setting up the Palestinian state, in Prague's opinion, it can only be set up on the basis of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. In the Czech government's opinion, the Palestinian request for being granted non-member observer state status is a "unilateral step" which could put the Middle Eastern peace process at threat. On 5 December, Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu stopped in Prague on his way to Germany to personally express gratitude to the head of the Czech government. This was his third visit to Prague over the past two years.

Commentary

- Backing Israel has been one of the constant features of Czech foreign policy, expressed through tangible actions taken by Prague at international forums. This also concerns Prague's efforts to support EU-Israel co-operation. The Czech Republic has emphasised the ethical aspect of these relations, especially Israel's right to protect itself from non-democratic regimes. Czech-Israeli relations have been consistently strengthened since the 1990s and have thus had a positive impact on Czech-US relations. In practical terms, its exemplary relations with Israel have facilitated the Czech Republic's access to the latest technologies. In turn, Prague is a proven ally for Tel Aviv in defending Israeli interests in the Middle East. The broad range of Czech-Israeli projects covers primarily scientific and technical co-operation (for example, space technologies and the Galileo programme), co-operation in the areas of defence and security (for example, information exchange, exercises, research and development) and education (common scientific projects, generous grant and scholarship offers). Furthermore, Israel is one of the key recipients of Czech exports outside Europe, with trade volume reaching US\$0.9 billion.
- Prague's clearly pro-Israeli orientation in the perception of the Middle Eastern conflict goes hand in hand with its efforts to maintain appropriate relations with Palestinians. In May this year, the Czech minister of foreign affairs, Karel Schwarzenberg paid an official visit to Palestine. Palestine is also a priority area in the Czech development aid programme. Nevertheless, Prague tends to publicly criticise Palestinian actions, while showing more understanding for Israel's policy in the region.

- The need to keep a strategic partnership between the Czech Republic and Israel is emphasised especially strongly by the Czech political right, in whose view it complements trans-Atlantic relations. Czech Social Democrats, who are very likely to take power following the next parliamentary elections, look on Prague's relations with Tel Aviv from a broader perspective. They accuse the Czech government of supporting Israel unconditionally and uncritically. When the Social Democrats take power, the Czech Republic's political support for Israel could become less apparent, but this will not essentially change the pro-Israeli orientation in the Czech Middle Eastern policy. The successor of President Vaclav Klaus following elections in January is also likely to continue the pro-Israeli approach. The two most popular candidates, Jan Fischer and Milos Zeman, clearly favour Israel in the context of the Middle Eastern conflict.