

Czech-Ukrainian relations cool off again

Jakub Groszkowski

Two weeks after the Ukrainian Prime Minister Mykola Azarov's visit to Prague, which was aimed at thawing Czech-Ukrainian relations, the Czech government has given political asylum to Oleksandr Tymoshenko, the husband of the former Prime Minister of Ukraine who has been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment. Mr Tymoshenko is an entrepreneur (and also has stakes in a company in the Czech Republic), and had hitherto not been involved in political life in Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, however, he declared his active participation in the struggle against the Ukrainian president and that country's ruling Party of Regions.

In January last year, the Czech government also gave political asylum to the former economy minister in Yulia Tymoshenko's government, Bohdan Danylyshyn, who had been accused of fraud. In May, Ukraine deemed two Czech diplomats to be *personae non grata*, which met with a tit-for-tat response from the Czech side. Ukrainians are the largest community of foreigners in the Czech Republic (according to the results of last year's census, they number almost 120,000), and are also the most common asylum seekers.

Commentary

- Czech-Ukrainian relations have been cool for many years. Oleksandr Tymoshenko's political asylum will halt any attempts at a thaw, which last month's meeting of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic and Ukraine in Prague was supposed to have achieved. Problems in bilateral relations were also apparent under Yulia Tymoshenko's government, particularly during the gas crisis in 2009. Therefore, the decision to grant asylum to Mr Tymoshenko does not translate into political support of the former Ukrainian Prime Minister's circle.
- The Czech Republic, as part of its involvement in the Eastern Partnership, was willing to bring Ukraine closer to the EU, although it has raised objections connected with the state of Ukrainian democracy and President Viktor Yanukovich's treatment of the opposition. After the troubles connected with the EU's association agreement with Ukraine, Czech diplomacy will be more concerned with emphasising issues of democracy and human rights than making progress in restoring political dialogue with the government in Kiev. The Czech Republic is interested in supporting civil society and interpersonal contacts in Ukraine. Ukraine is one of the priority countries for transformational assistance from Prague.

- Helping people who are in conflict with the government in Ukraine (such as Danylyshyn and Tymoshenko) and Belarus (Ales Mikhalevich) is part of a policy of building up the Czech Republic's international prestige as a country which actively supports democracy and human rights. We can expect the Czech Republic to continue specifically to emphasise and monitor those questions within the EU's relations with the countries covered by the Eastern Partnership.
- For the Ukrainian government, the Czech Republic is not a very important political or economic partner. However, Prague's activity in shaping the EU's neighbourhood policy, and its very good relations with the United States, are of some importance to Kiev. The Ukrainian government is also interested in using the Odessa-Brody oil pipeline to transport oil from Azerbaijan to the Czech refinery in Kralupy. This project, which the Czech side is also interested in, has faced quite a few obstacles over many years (most recently the reluctance of Slovakia's state operator of the Druzhba oil pipeline).

Jakub Groszkowski, with assistance from Tadeusz Iwański