Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 1.12.2011 www.osw.waw.pl

Warmer Czech-Bavarian relations

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Horst Seehofer, prime minister of the German federal state of Bavaria made an official visit to the Czech Republic on 23–24 November, during which he met the Czech prime minister, Petr Nečas. The key topics the two politicians raised in their discussion included energy and infrastructural issues, trade co-operation and the co-operation of scientific institutions. Prime Minister Nečas stated that he fully respected Germany's decision to withdraw from nuclear energy, while Prime Minister Seehofer acknowledged the Czech Republic's right to develop its nuclear programme, saying that the Czech policy in this area was "responsible and safe." Prime Minister Nečas met with Seehofer on 23 November and on the same day he sent a letter to the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, in which he expressed his readiness to co-operate in the organisation of a public discussion in Germany on the development of the Czech nuclear power plant in Temelín, which is 70 km away from the German border.

The prime ministers in their joint declaration promised they would continue co-operation for the unification of energy infrastructure. At present, the Gazela transit gas pipeline is under construction in the Czech Republic. This will enable gas to be transported from Saxony to Bavaria. Prime Minister Nečas said that one of the benefits Czech investments in power transmission networks (at around 2 billion euros) is that they will enable a more efficient transmission of energy between the Czech Republic and Bavaria.

The two prime ministers also expressed their support for the modernisation of the Prague-Munich railroad, which this year was put on the list of Trans-European Transport Networks (TEN-T), which already includes the Prague-Nuremberg connection. The European satellite navigation project, Galileo, the headquarters of which is to be located in Prague, was also mentioned as a potential area for Czech-Bavarian scientific co-operation.

Commentary

- This visit, being the second in history, by the Bavarian prime minister to Prague (the first one took place in December 2010) is proof of improving political relations between the Czech Republic and Bavaria, which for many years were complicated due to different perceptions of history (including the displacements of ethnic Germans after World War II). Although neither Czech nor Bavarian politicians have changed their viewpoints (the German delegation included representatives of Sudeten Germans), they do not wish to burden mutual relations with these issues and instead are focusing on improving the investment climate and common infrastructural challenges.

- Horst Seehofer's declaration that he has no reservations against the development of the Czech nuclear energy sector is a success for the Czech Republic. This lack of opposition from Bavaria is probably linked to the fact that since some of the German nuclear power plants have been decommissioned, southern federal states have been forced to buy electricity from France and the Czech Republic (in the first half of 2011 imports from the Czech Republic to Germany reached 5.6 TWh). The Czech Republic is aware of the risk of pressure from Germany and also from Austria – which has traditionally opposed the development of the Temelín nuclear power plant – and is declaring a willingness for dialogue and the complete transparency of the project. However, it cannot be rule out that Bavaria will take a tougher stance on the Czech nuclear projects under pressure from public sentiments and the business lobby.

- A clear improvement in political relations between Bavaria and the Czech Republic is likely to accelerate the development and modernisation of infrastructural connections on the Czech-German border. The development of infrastructure (one motorway connection and no fast railway connections) as yet cannot keep up with the rapid development of trade relations. Bavaria is the largest recipient of Czech exports in Germany (turnover reached 14 billion euros in 2010).