

Russian attacks in the Czech Republic: domestic context, implications, perspectives

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At a press conference on 17 April, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and Deputy Prime Minister Jan Hamáček announced the expulsion of 18 employees (16 percent of the staff) from the embassy of the Russian Federation. This is in response to the outcome of an investigation conducted by the Czech intelligence service and police, which concluded that there were reasonable suspicions of a connection between officers of the Russian Military Intelligence (the GU SG, formerly the GRU) with the 2014 ammunition depot explosions in Vrbětice (Zlín region). The explosions at two depots owned by the Military Institute of Technology, then leased by Imex Group, a private company from Ostrava, occurred on 16 October and 3 December 2014. Two Imex Group employees were killed in the first of the explosions. According to the Czech side, the stored ammunition belonged to the Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev (see Appendix), who was supposed to deliver it to Ukraine and Syria, among others, but in a special statement his company denied the allegations.

Prime Minister Babiš received written information about the involvement of Russian services in the planting of explosives in 2014 on Friday, 16 April, and had been informed about it orally as early as 7 April. Attorney General Pavel Zeman and the head of the National Centre for Combating Organised Crime Jiří Mazánek indicated that the perpetrators, who used Russian, Moldovan and Tajik passports, were the same Russian military intelligence officers responsible for the failed attempt to poison Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018. The Prime Minister announced that he would ask the head of the Security Information Service (BIS) to declassify the report summarising the involvement of Russian services in the Vrbětice explosions case. In response to the Czech Republic's actions, the Russian side announced its decision to expel 20 employees of the Czech embassy in Moscow (45% of the staff, including the deputy ambassador). Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said in a statement on 18 April that Prague's accusations were absurd, an anti-Russian provocation and a manifestation of US influence, and were intended to divert public attention from an alleged coup attempt in Belarus being prepared by US special services. The Russian side has habitually rejected allegations against the Russian special services, considering them unfounded. Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov stated that such accusations are provocative and hostile.

There were protests in front of the Russian embassy in Prague against the Russian government's actions, and the centre-right opposition called on the government to take decisive action. Among other things, it has called for the number of diplomats expelled to be increased (even covering all of them). On 20 April, Hamáček announced that the Czech

ambassadors to EU and NATO countries would ask the governments of allied countries for a joint action in solidarity, while summoning Russian ambassadors to the Czech foreign ministry and expelling identified Russian secret service agents (the Russian ambassador was duly summoned to the Czech foreign ministry on 21 April). The issue has not been addressed by President Miloš Zeman, who has only announced that he will make a statement on 25 April.

Commentary

- The report about the attack on Czech territory, which had features of an act of terrorism and resulted in the deaths of Czech citizens, forced the authorities to react strongly and thwarted attempts to patch up Czech-Russian relations. In 2020, after a series of tensions that culminated in the removal of a monument to Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague, there were signs that the Czech side were ready to improve relations and rebuild channels of dialogue. This task, supported by President Zeman, was undertaken by Rudolf Jindrák, who has begun to combine the functions of director for foreign affairs in the Presidential Chancellery and adviser to Prime Minister Babiš. He was supposed to lead bilateral Czech-Russian consultations, but preparations were halted by the outbreak of the pandemic. Prague's order of Sputnik V vaccines was supposed to symbolise the country's improved relations with Moscow. In recent weeks Zeman, who among other moves has resorted to demands to order this vaccine, has been putting ever more pressure on the Babiš government; the resignations of the ministers of health and foreign affairs, are symptoms of the situation.
- The publicity surrounding the work of the counterintelligence and investigative bodies has strongly undermined the position of President Zeman and strengthened Prime Minister Babiš, for whom his tactical alliance with the head of state has become increasingly costly. The Security Information Service (BIS), which is investigating the case of the explosions in Vrbětice and is subordinate to the prime minister, has been in conflict with Zeman for years. He has made it clear that he would welcome the resignation of its head, and that he belittled the BIS's reports on Russian threats and questioned the service's credibility. The announcement of the investigation's results came amid rising international tensions and the implementation of US sanctions against Russia. At the same time, the Czech Republic is now entering the run-up to elections; the political position of the president has strengthened, while that of the Babiš government has weakened after losing its majority in parliament (the Communists have formally withdrawn their support). This has increased the risk of a collapse and the appointment of a technical cabinet under Zeman's auspices. Following the disclosure of the affair, the parliamentary opposition will probably be more cautious in taking any actions that would lead to the fall of the government and the formation of a cabinet loyal to the president.
- It is also worth noting that the smaller coalition partner, the social democrats, are drifting towards closer cooperation with Zeman and supporting the improvement in relations with Russia that would result (a move which would be welcomed by the president and a large part of the left-wing electorate). The social democrat Jan Hamáček – deputy prime minister and head of the interior ministry, now acting temporarily as the foreign minister – was supposed to be holding talks in Moscow on Monday, 19 April about deliveries of Sputnik V; he has also said he is ready to organise a meeting between Presidents Biden

and Putin in Prague. His current claim, that the announcement of his plans to visit Moscow was intended to lull the Russian side into vigilance before the scandal broke, does not sound credible. Nevertheless, the actions that the Babiš government has taken since the scandal emerged allowed Hamáček to present himself as a tough politician defending Czech interests, which will have a positive impact on the cohesion of the coalition during the election campaign. At the same time, the relatively uncompromising reaction to the scandal, which came as a great shock to the public, has enabled the government to neutralise some of the opposition's accusations of its close collaboration with Zeman and its dependence on the Communists. It is also significant that the scandal has effectively diverted public attention from the controversy over the government's ineffective fight with the pandemic.

- The affair has dented Russia's interests in the Czech Republic, and will likely result in increased fears of aggressive actions by Moscow. The Czech side has already announced that Rosatom will not be considered in plans to build new units of the Dukovany nuclear power plant. Officially, the bidding procedures in this matter have not yet begun, but the government has already announced that the Russian side will not be allowed to participate for security reasons. However, the scandal does not necessarily mean the end of discussions on the purchase of the Sputnik V vaccine: on the evening of 19 April the new health minister Petr Arenberger declared that he had a "neutral" attitude to its use in the Czech Republic, and the ministry is still waiting for the documentation necessary to obtain a permit for its use. Nor will the reduction in the number of Russian diplomatic personnel significantly weaken the activity of the Russian services on Czech territory. They have found footholds in business structures, among others, and will be able to continue their aggressive operations.
- The Czech government is uninterested in further escalating the tension in its relations with Russia. Instead it is asking its allies for solidarity by retaliation in the form of summoning Russian ambassadors and expelling identified Russian agents. Nevertheless, the relatively tame (compared to earlier rhetoric) statements by Czech representatives in the EU and NATO, as well as Prime Minister Babiš's shaky stance on describing the attack as "state terrorism", may have stemmed from the realisation that it would be difficult to bring the European partners together to take more resolute action. On the other hand, it could also be linked to the lack of irrefutable evidence that the explosion on Czech territory was intentionally provoked by the Russians. Czech intelligence has proven that there was an indisputable operation by Russian special services aimed at the stocked munitions and at intimidating possible Ukraine's contractors. It has been confirmed that the Russians were interested in visiting the ammunition depot, but no conclusive evidence has been presented that they eventually did. What is more, the Czech side has painted a picture of the explosion happening earlier than actually intended, and may not be able to produce such evidence (if only because of the scale of destruction at the explosion site). The prevailing view in the Czech Republic is that even in the deepest crisis, it is necessary to keep channels of communication with Russia open, which would be very difficult if the Czech embassy in Moscow ceased to function as a result of further retortions. This is also why, despite pressure from the centre-right opposition, the government may consider the expulsion of 18 agents and the showcase exclusion of Rosatom from the tender for the power plant to be a sufficient response.

APPENDIX: The attempted murder of Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev

Czech and British media have been linking the explosion of the Czech ammunition depot to the attempted poisoning of Bulgarian arms dealer Emilian Gebrev, his son and one of his associates, as revealed by the British investigative journalism website Bellingcat in February 2019. According to Bellingcat's findings, Gebrev was present in Vrbětice on the day of the attack, and in early 2015 there were two explosions at Bulgarian ammunition depots fulfilling foreign contracts (Sofia considered these to be acts of sabotage). The three men were poisoned in late April 2015 with a chemical substance showing paralysing effects. The British linked this with the fact that the three GRU agents accused of carrying out the attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter in March 2018 were present on Bulgarian territory at the same time. According to the media, the motive for the operation against Gebrev was his sale of ammunition produced in Bulgaria to Ukraine, Georgia and Syrian opposition forces, among others. In February 2020, the Bulgarian prosecution office formally charged *in absentia* three Russians, identified as Sergei Fedotov, Sergei Pavlov, and Georgi Gorshkov, with the attempted murder of Gebrev and two other individuals. However, in September 2020 it dropped the case due to the absence of the defendants and the lack of cooperation from Russia. The Russian military intelligence strike at the companies supplying Russia's opponents is a measure intended to intimidate anyone who chooses to act against Russian interests. Politically, such special operations are aimed at maintaining a high level of threat towards other countries, in order to discourage them from taking actions against the interests of the Russian Federation.