



## Modernization of the Czech and Slovak armed forces in the context of the changing security environment<sup>1</sup>

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In recent months, the governments of the Czech Republic and Slovakia have made a series of important decisions which strengthen and modernize their respective armed forces. The deteriorating security situation around the EU has raised the political importance of security and defense policy in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, to its highest level since these countries became NATO members.

After several years of declining military expenses and capabilities, the governments in Prague and Bratislava are slowly starting to increase army budgets, buy new strategic military equipment, and prepare important changes in their strategic security documents and defense legislation. The common dual-aim of these decisions is to prepare the armies for new potential threats, and to reduce dependence on Russian military equipment. The majority of these processes began a few years ago, and therefore are not merely an immediate reaction to the current state of regional security. For many years, however, the majority of military modernization plans in both countries were very low on the priority list and did not receive sufficient financial support. This is changing, due to Russian aggression on Ukraine, the activities of ISIL, and the migration pressure on EU borders which, regardless of its real threat to the Czech Republic and Slovakia, have a negative impact on the sense of security within the society and therefore make it easier to persuade citizens to accept military expenditures.

An important change in the security and defense policies of the Czech Republic and Slovakia is linked to their relations with Russia. In both Central European states, the decision has been made to gradually dispose of strategic equipment that is dependent on service or replacements from Russia, and to replace it with new equipment of Western origin. This includes among others helicopters, jet fighters, and radars. The new purchases will not only enhance the capabilities of the Czech and Slovak armies, but will also open new possibilities for bilateral (and wider) cooperation. Nevertheless, Czechs and Slovaks are not breaking off relations with Russians, especially as Bratislava openly declares its desire to continue its economic relations with Moscow. Contacts with Russian military companies have become very problematic, however, due to sanctions which cover also the Russian armaments industry.

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## Threat perception

Both Czech and Slovak governments agree that Europe's security architecture has been negatively impacted by the war in Ukraine, the activities of the Islamic State, and migration pressure from the south. They do not presume that their states' territories are directly at risk – however, they state that the security situation in the region is unstable, and that the reaction time for a potential threat has shortened significantly. Nevertheless, both countries are reluctant to allow the deployment of multinational NATO forces close to the Alliance's eastern border. They fear that such a step could hamper the delicate negotiation process between the West, Ukraine and Russia.

As compared to the Czech Republic, Slovakia is rather cautious when it comes to accusing Russia of aggressive activities in Ukraine. At least officially, Slovakia avoids the question of who is the aggressor in this conflict, or whether Russia is a threat to the Central European region. So far, this war in a neighboring country is not reflected in Slovak strategic documents. The only threats from the East that the government mentions publicly are the potential humanitarian crisis and illegal migration.

Meanwhile, the Czech Republic openly points the finger at Russia as a threat to peace. In the Conceptual Basis of Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic adopted by the Czech cabinet this spring, it is stated that Russia "destabilizes the European security architecture in a fundamental way."<sup>2</sup> Also, the Czech Republic's new security strategy approved by the government in February 2015,<sup>3</sup> as compared to that of 2011, brought in significant changes as regards the perception of threats. This document classifies the risk of a military attack on the Czech Republic as low, noting however that an attack on one of the EU or NATO member states cannot be ruled out. Even though Russia is not mentioned directly, the document points out the threat posed by countries which "attempt to build exclusive zones of influence by destabilizing the situation in their neighboring countries and capitalizing on local conflicts." The Czechs regard threats coming from unstable and failed states as having the same importance as those coming from non-state actors that provoke radicalism, extremism and mass migration to Europe. Czech military officials claim that such trends require a flexible army ready to act mostly abroad but also at home, both in conventional and unconventional conflicts.<sup>4</sup>

## More money

In the cases of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, an unfavorable security situation does not translate into an immediate, large growth of the military budget. In 2015, the Slovak defense

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- <sup>2</sup> See "Konceptce zahraniční politiky ČR," [Conceptual Basis of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 2015. Nevertheless it is also stated in the document, that Russia – given its potential – remains an important political and economic partner for the Czech Republic and the entire EU, and Prague wants to co-operate with it on constructive terms.
- <sup>3</sup> "Bezpečnostní strategie České republiky 2015," [Security Strategy of the Czech Republic 2015], Government of the Czech Republic, 2015. Available online: <http://www.vlada.cz/assets/ppov/brs/dokumenty/bezpecnostni-strategie-2015.pdf> (accessed on August 31, 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> "Česko a EU budou čelit dlouhodobým hrozbám, varuje dokument," [Czech Republic and EU will face long-term threats, document warns] *České noviny*, June 14, 2015. Available online: [http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/tema/zpravy/cesko-a-eu-budou-celit-dlouhodobym-hrozbam-varuje-dokument/1227324&id\\_seznam=316](http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/tema/zpravy/cesko-a-eu-budou-celit-dlouhodobym-hrozbam-varuje-dokument/1227324&id_seznam=316) (accessed on August 31, 2015).

ministry will receive 804 million euros, which translates into 1.03 per cent of GDP.<sup>5</sup> This is slightly more than the previous year, and this trend will continue. According to the defense ministry, the military expenditure will reach 1.6 per cent of GDP in 2020. Simultaneously, modernization expenses will rise from around 16 per cent to 20 per cent of the military budget in 2020. These calculations, however, do not represent all the military spending in Slovakia. Recently, large modernization programs have been based on intergovernmental agreements and financed with an earmarked fund, usually in installments. This helps the Slovak government to control its military expenses, which is important especially before the parliamentary elections next spring, as in previous years there were a number of scandals involving army tenders. Prime Minister Fico must also bear in mind that part of his electorate sympathizes with the Kremlin and has an aversion to NATO, tending to claim that the prime minister is an "American puppet" whenever the government wants to cooperate with the Allies.

In the Czech Republic, the main political parties had already agreed before the Ukrainian war that the military budget had to grow, as further cuts would result in the gradual loss of military capabilities. In September 2014, the coalition parties undertook to progressively increase the level of defense spending, to reach 1.4 per cent of GDP by 2020. As compared to 2014, this year's military budget grew in nominal terms by 4 per cent, but declined as a share of GDP from 1.08 per cent to 1.04 per cent in 2015.<sup>6</sup> A more serious increase will come in 2016 as military expenses will grow nominally by 8.5 per cent.<sup>7</sup> The Czech defense minister promises the rapid growth of military expenditures beginning in 2017.<sup>8</sup>

## More soldiers

Several years of low army budgets in the Czech Republic and Slovakia have resulted not only in aging military equipment, but also in a decreasing number of soldiers. When the professional armed forces in these countries were established (2005 in the Czech Republic, 2006 in Slovakia), both countries discontinued registering new reservists, thus the number of reservists is decreasing very fast.<sup>9</sup> To tackle this challenge, both the Czechs and Slovaks are changing their laws in order to make their armed forces a better and more competitive work place with a clear and stable career track. In the Czech Republic, the armed forces have less than 21,000 soldiers, and according to army calculations there should be almost one third more in order to fulfill all the tasks the armed forces are charged with. Within the

<sup>5</sup> "Obrana potrebuje podľa Glváča vyšší rozpočet, no uskomní sa," [According to Glváč, defense needs higher budget, however it will tighten its belt] *Webnoviny*, December 5, 2014. Available online: <http://www.webnoviny.sk/ekonomika/clanok/897816-obrana-potrebuje-podla-glvaca-vyssi-rozpocet-no-uskomni-sa/> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> See "Resortní rozpočet," [Budget of the Defense Ministry]. Available online: <http://www.mocr.army.cz/finance-a-zakazky/resortni-rozpocet/resortni-rozpocet-5146/> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> "Na obranu půjde příští rok o 4 miliardy víc než letos, hlavně na nové vojáky," [There will be 4 billion more for defense next year, mainly for soldiers] *rozhlas.cz*, August 15, 2015. Available online: [http://www.rozhlas.cz/zpravy/politika/\\_zprava/na-obranu-pujde-pristi-rok-o-4-miliardy-vic-nez-letos-hlavne-na-nove-vojaky--1521807](http://www.rozhlas.cz/zpravy/politika/_zprava/na-obranu-pujde-pristi-rok-o-4-miliardy-vic-nez-letos-hlavne-na-nove-vojaky--1521807) (accessed on August 31, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> "Ministr Stropnický chce do pěti let zvýšit počet vojáků o 6000," [Minister Stropnický wants to increase the number of soldiers by 6,000 in five years] *České noviny*, <http://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/ministr-stropnicky-chce-do-peti-let-zvysit-pocet-vojaku-o-6000/1243214> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> In the Czech Republic there are 1.4 million citizens in reserve, but only 0.5 per cent of them have had recent training and could possibly be useful without additional preparation. See: "PŘEHLEDNĚ: Největší změna za 10 let. K čemu jsou odvody a zálohy?," [The greatest change in 10 years. What are the drafts and reserves for?] *idnes.cz*, April 18, 2015. Available online: [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/armada-odvody-a-zalohy-06q-/domaci.aspx?c=A150416\\_145038\\_domaci\\_jw](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/armada-odvody-a-zalohy-06q-/domaci.aspx?c=A150416_145038_domaci_jw) (accessed on August 31, 2015).

next five years, the Czech defense ministry plans to employ six thousand soldiers. In Slovakia, with an army of about 12,500 men, the shortage of professional soldiers is not such a serious problem. However, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are trying to develop a so called active reserve service, in order to support and relieve the professional soldiers. Such an institution, moreover, helps to raise awareness of questions concerning defense and security within the society; and furthermore an active reservist is a few times cheaper from the state budget perspective than a professional soldier. The Czech Republic has already introduced this service, but instead of the hoped-for five thousand men, the active reserve has attracted so far only about 1,200. The government has a few ideas as to how to change this: the draft legislation doubles the reward for reservists and introduces financial compensation for their employees. The training of active reservists will be lengthened to four weeks yearly. And although their role within the Czech military is mainly to replace professional soldiers in carrying out less complicated tasks, the government also wants to offer them the possibility of serving in foreign missions.<sup>10</sup> Similar service legislation is being drafted in Slovakia, however only few details have been made public so far.

For such citizens, who do not wish to engage in military service on a regular basis, both states are preparing the option to register for reserve service and undertake a single training. The legislative drafts currently under discussion in the Czech Republic and Slovakia will most probably allow men (and women in the Czech case) to take part in a three-month military training beginning next year.

## New units

The unconventional character of the new threats facing the eastern and southern neighborhoods of the EU – especially the phenomena of hybrid war – have induced both the Czech Republic and Slovakia to create new units whose aim is to support the special forces. The units are to be used in missions abroad and in close cooperation with the allied partners. In July 2014, the Slovak army formed the ISTAR Battalion, which is based in Prešov and being prepared, as the name suggests, for intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition, and reconnaissance. The ISTAR Battalion seems to be a show-off unit of the Slovak army, a large share of the new military equipment bought by Slovakia is going to this unit: among others, all new armored personnel vehicles, assault rifles, semi-automatic pistols and grenade launchers. In the Czech Republic, the government decided to form a unit called the ÚPSO<sup>11</sup> in order to provide military support for the elite 601<sup>st</sup> Special Forces Group. The new unit will consist of a combat platoon and group of troops dealing with psychological and informational warfare. The ÚPSO, based in Olomouc, will be ready for deployment in 2017, hoping in five years to reach its planned size of 200 soldiers.

<sup>10</sup> "V 18 k odvodu.Vláda schválila novelu branného zákona, týkat se má i žen," In front of the draft committee at 18. The government has approved the draft law, and it will concern women too| *idnes.cz*, April 8, 2015. Available online: [http://zpravy.idnes.cz/vlada-schvalila-novelu-ktera-armade-v-budoucnu-umozni-odvody-ptp-/domaci.aspx?c=A150408\\_224946\\_domaci\\_fer](http://zpravy.idnes.cz/vlada-schvalila-novelu-ktera-armade-v-budoucnu-umozni-odvody-ptp-/domaci.aspx?c=A150408_224946_domaci_fer) (accessed on August 31, 2015); "PŘEHLEDNÉ: Největší změna za 10 let. K čemu jsou odvody a zálohy?," op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> From ÚPSO: Útvar podpory speciálních operací, which means Special Operations Support Unit.

## Bilateral relations and regional cooperation

The similarity of their threat perceptions, together with a will to save money and very good bilateral political relations, has led the Czech Republic and Slovakia to develop a number of common projects in the area of security and defense. However, although the motivation to save money is an important one, it does not mean that the main goal is to cut expenses. In contrast to previous years, there is now rather a "more capabilities for less money" logic, and both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are ready to develop cooperation even though this implies a costly modernization.

The flagship bilateral Czech-Slovak project concerns jet fighters and air space defense. As specified in the Slovak Strategy of Air Force Development adopted by the government in 2014, Slovakia plans to replace its MiG-21 jets with the JAS-39 Gripen, the same plane the Czech Republic uses. As with the Czechs, instead of buying new planes the Slovaks want to lease 1200 hours of flight (about 8 jets) from the Swedish company. The transaction is planned for after 2016, when the service agreement for the current Slovak MiG-21 fighters signed with the Russian company will expire. The Slovaks are not concealing the fact that one of the key reasons for this decision is to make their air force less dependent on Russia. The lease of Gripens by the Slovak air force will boost Czech-Slovak cooperation in air defense, which is developed under a "single sky" project. This cooperation is ongoing and the two air forces are coordinating logistical support and training, having signed an agreement in 2014 on cross-border operations. This gradual integration of the two air forces may finally lead to the creation of single Czech-Slovak unit of Gripens. The Slovak government supports this concept, while the Czechs, however, seem to be less enthusiastic about such a close cooperation. Both sides nevertheless support the idea of signing cross-border agreements and the development of air defense cooperation within the Visegrad Group.

Another example of Czech-Slovak cooperation leading to modernization concerns the unification of hand guns. The Czech and Slovak defense ministries signed a formal agreement on this issue in 2014. In practice, this means that the Slovak armed forces buy guns from the private company Česká Zbrojovka, which is the main supplier of guns for the Czech army. In return, Česká Zbrojovka has agreed to invest several million euros in a plant in Slovakia, where it is developing a joint venture with the Slovak company MSM Martin. A part of Česká Zbrojovka gun production, therefore, is located in the Slovak town of Nováky.

The Czech and Slovak armaments industry has another common project involving the EVA 155mm 6x6 self-propelled howitzer, which is constructed by the Slovak DMD Group from Dubnica nad Váhom, and mounted on a truck made by the Czech company Tatra Trucks. Although such an artillery product is not currently regarded as priority equipment by the Czech and Slovak defense ministries, it may nevertheless be purchased by both armies in the mid-term perspective.

## Other acquisition and modernization projects

Among the general public in Slovakia and especially in the Czech Republic, the purchase of military equipment is often viewed with distrust. In previous years in both countries, it was often linked (justifiably or not) with accusations of corruption. Military deals were seen as shady deals, and untransparent businessmen linked closely to politicians (for example

Miroslav Výboh being a friend of Slovak PM Robert Fico, or Richard Háva linked to former Czech finance minister Miroslav Kalousek). In recent and current acquisitions, both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have tried to minimize the business element of the deals, and tended to move them to the political level. Both governments claim that as a rule new equipment is to be purchased without a tender, via intergovernmental negotiations preceded by a market survey or request for proposals. In both countries this method raises questions about a lack of competition and possibly higher prices, but both cabinets have claimed that this scheme is faster, more transparent, and can be cheaper than a tender.

An important part of the Slovak acquisition program is based on the Strategy of Air Force Development (2014), which defines the needs and tasks of this branch of the Slovak armed forces. The most important decision the document has brought with it is the replacement of the old aircrafts manufactured in the USSR with new planes made in the West. Besides the jet fighters mentioned above, the Slovak government is also replacing transport planes and helicopters.

The first serious military purchase made in Slovakia after the start of Russian-Ukrainian tensions was that of two Italian C-27J Spartan transport planes (for 69 million euros for both), which will replace the old Soviet An-26. The decision, made by the Slovak government in October 2014, came six years after Alenia Aeronautica won the Slovak tender. The new planes will join the Slovak air force in 2016–2017.

In April 2015, the Slovaks decided to buy nine Black Hawk UH60M helicopters, in the framework of the FMS program, based on an intergovernmental agreement with the USA. The price of the helicopters – including logistics, service and training – was settled at 261 million US dollars for all nine. In order to make full potential use of this transaction, Slovakia wants to create a training facility for the Black Hawk crews, which would become part of the Multinational Aviation Training Centre.<sup>12</sup> The idea behind the MATC is to create a multinational training center for helicopter crews by sharing the specific training capacities of participating countries. The MATC project was initiated by the Czech Republic in 2012 as a smart defense initiative, and was joined by Slovakia, Croatia and Hungary, and supported by the USA.

American helicopters will progressively replace the Slovak-owned Soviet Mi-17. Regardless of this decision, however, Slovakia intends to continue its cooperation with Russian companies. During his visit to Moscow in June 2015, Prime Minister Fico announced that a Russian-Slovak agreement on the modernization and service of Mi-17 helicopters would shortly be signed. Pursuant to this agreement, the military aviation maintenance works in Trenčín, Slovakia would not only service Slovak helicopters (until all Black Hawks are delivered to Slovakia), but also perform commercial service and modernization on Mi-17 helicopters from third countries. During his trip to Moscow, PM Fico also expressed his country's interest in modernizing the S-300PMU missile defense system used by the Slovak army.

As with Slovakia, the Czech ministry of defense also plans to obtain new, multi-role Western-type helicopters in order to replace the old Soviet-type Mi-24 and the majority of Mi-17s. At the end of June, Prague sent a request for proposals to the cabinets in Washington, Paris and Rome, and this autumn it hopes to receive offers from companies such as Bell Helicopter,

<sup>12</sup> M. Glváč: "Podpis memoranda posilní vrtulníkové spôsobilosti a zlepši interoperabilitu," Ministry of Defense of the Slovak Republic, 2015. Available online: <http://www.mod.gov.sk/35275-sk/m-glvac-podpis-memoranda-posilni-vrtulnikove-sposobilosti-a-zleps-i-interoperabilitu/> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

Sikorsky Aircraft, Airbus Helicopters and AgustaWestland. There is also speculation in the Czech media about an offer from Korean Airspace. The precise number and specification of needed helicopters is not clear. At first, the Czech government declared its interest in buying only 12–18 planes, but later the defense ministry announced it could buy about 30 helicopters within next few years.<sup>13</sup> Theoretically the Czech army will need new planes in 2017, due to the condition of the oldest Mi-24s. Nevertheless, at least when it comes to the future of the Mi-17, the process of their replacement with Western planes may take about 10 years. In April, the Czech special forces received seven modernized Mi-171š helicopters with US help (27 million USD from the SOF II program).

New equipment also goes to land forces in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In July 2015, the Polish and Slovak prime ministers signed a letter of intent concerning the acquisition of 30 8x8 Rosomak armored personnel vehicles for approximately 29 million euros, financed by a Polish government-sponsored loan.<sup>14</sup> The altered Rosomak, equipped with the Slovak TURRA 30 unmanned turret, will be renamed Scipio and will replace the old BVP-1 and BVP-2 as well as OT-64 vehicles in the Slovak army. Altogether, Bratislava plans to buy 66 Scipio carriers in order to equip two out of three of its land battalions. The Czech Republic is also seeking an alternative to its tracked Infantry Fighting Vehicle (BVP-2). So far, however, this is only a general plan and no formal efforts have been made to carry out this purchase. The Czech media claim that potential offers could be made on the ASCOD from General Dynamics European Land Systems (GDELS) or the CV90 from BAE Systems. This year, however, the Czech defence ministry plans to buy an additional 20 Pandur II wheeled armored vehicles (it currently has 107). Furthermore, it seeks to buy 42 wheeled armored vehicles for tactical and signal corps purposes, based on a chassis from the Czech company Tatra Trucks.

Both the Czech and Slovak armies are faced with the urgent task of purchasing a 3D Mobile Air Defense Radar (MADR). The Czech Republic needs five MADRs, and Slovakia four. Bratislava has already received offers from six companies, while Prague has done a market survey which shows that France and Israel have biggest chance of selling their products. As Poland and Hungary also need to replace their old radars, there were long negotiations held within the Visegrad Group in order to organize a single tender for all four countries. These efforts did not succeed, the governments agreeing instead that the radars they buy independently will share certain specifications.

## Conclusion

Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are making up for the lost years of low army modernization budgets, and Slovakia especially is experiencing some of its biggest military acquisitions in history. Some government critics in the Czech Republic and Slovakia point out that these purchases are not based on complex enough defense planning, and that therefore the current efforts and money being spent do not guarantee that future defense ministers or chiefs of staff will continue along the same trajectory. The dynamic security situation,

<sup>13</sup> J. Kominek, "Czech Republic expands helicopter requirement," IHS Jane's Defence Weekly, August 6, 2015. Available online: <http://www.janes.com/article/53510/czech-republic-expands-helicopter-requirement#.VchRshRIUsM.twitter> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> Data according to the Polish government. On the Slovak side they mentioned about 31 vehicles and did not reveal the value of the transaction.

however, and the poor condition of the Czech and Slovak armed forces, make it quite risky to suspend equipment acquisition until serious conceptual work has been done. Although it is not clearly stated just what kind of armies the Czech Republic and Slovakia hope to build, the political and financial engagement in security and defense policies within the two countries make it much more likely that both states will have modern forces, something which was hard to imagine only a year ago.