

Areas of cooperation or competition – rapport or conflict? The Polish-Czechoslovakian relations exemplified by the activity of Polish cultural and educational associations in Czechoslovakia in the years 1947–1958

Miroslaw Piwowarczyk / e-mail: miroslawpiwowarczyk@gmail.com
Institut of Pedagogy, University of Wrocław, Poland

Piwowarczyk, M. (2013). Areas of cooperation or competition – rapport or conflict? The Polish-Czechoslovakian relations exemplified by the activity of Polish cultural and educational associations in Czechoslovakia in the years 1947–1958. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 5/1, 29–43.
doi: 10.2478/cphpj-2013-0004

The postwar Czechoslovakian and Polish relations were not the most cordial, as the cooperation was disturbed by mutual territorial claims, as well as by various expectations regarding the national minorities. It caused a rise in mistrust between the Polish and Czech as well as Slovakian nations, generating conflicts and mutual accusations. The state of the relations has changed after the 10th of March 1947 when The Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia was signed. Political agreement helped to improve relations regarding a number of contentious issues, particularly in the treatment of national minorities. One of the main provisions arising from the records of the Protocol-Appendix from the Treaty was necessity of the settlement of the Polish cultural and educational organization on the territory of Czechoslovakia. In June 1947 the government of Czechoslovakia completing the arrangements approved the statutes of the Treaty and allowed the operating of the Polish Cultural and Educational Association in Czechoslovakia. Association conducted a large-scale cultural and educational activity, and therefore played a great role in education and integration of Polish minority in Zaolzie. It affected the nature of the relationship, and mutual contacts between the Polish and the Czechs and Slovaks.

Key words: *Polish-Czechoslovakian cooperation; Polish Cultural and Educational Union in Czechoslovakia*

At the end of the Second World War a new political and economic deal began to shape in Europe and in the rest of the world. Central and Eastern Europe – remaining in the sphere of Soviet influence, began to experience a new quality of a political, social, economic, cultural and educational life. It was manifested by a strong, solid and coherent, economically and ideologically homogenous creation – the bloc of socialistic countries supervised by the USSR. At the same time, to join and strengthen the entire bloc internally, and to gain control over its

members became the top priorities in the policy of Soviet Union. Nevertheless, this process required regulating and empowering the mutual relations between the countries – members of the bloc.

The relations between Poland and Czechoslovakia in the early postwar period were burdensome, as on one hand they were determined by the political and economic specificity of the Eastern bloc (with the political, social and economic character of both countries), and on the other – by the historical resentments and the decisions of the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance from 1947.

Attempts to regulate and normalize the mutual relations, reflected in the above-mentioned Treaty, had been already launched before the end of the Second World War, however, the Polish-Czechoslovakian agreement expected by the Soviet authorities did not follow. The basic obstacle on the way to reach such a consent was the unsettled issue of the frontiers between both countries. Czechoslovakia claimed southern areas of the former German Silesia, that were incorporated into Poland as a part of the Regained Territories on the basis of The Potsdam Conference, whereas Poland claimed Trans-Olza River Silesia which was under Czechoslovakian administration. It became a serious and continuous cause of mutually increasing territorial claims, misunderstandings, and in consequence – cool relationships.¹

Controversies around the state belonging of Kłodzko, Głubczyce and Racibórz, together with the issue of Trans-Olza Silesia, Spiš and Orava affected mutual relationships in the years 1945–1947, having impact on the contents as well as the quality of the Polish-Czechoslovakian relations. It disabled reaching compromises in many cases, becoming a subject of discussions, both between the two countries, as well as considering the entire bloc until 1958.²

Another issue hindering mutual understanding was the problem of acknowledging and recognizing political rights of the national minorities in both of the countries – i.e. the Polish minority in Czechoslovakia, and Czech as well as Slovakian minority groups in Poland. It also affected economic cooperation, e.g. natural resources and food distribution, for

¹ The main initiators of the territorial claims on Czechoslovakian side were the Czechoslovakian national and socialistic party, people's party and the Czechoslovakian social democracy. As the conflict between Poles and Czechoslovakians evolved, the territorial claims from Slovakian side also emerged, claiming Spiš and Orava located within Polish state in 1920 in accordance with the resolutions of the Council of Ambassadors in Spaa.

² Border treaty between the People's Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia was signed on 13th June 1958 in Warsaw.

instance in case of making Polish seaports accessible for Czechoslovakia.

All these issues – negotiated and discussed by both sides with no significant solutions provided whatsoever – constituted essential barrier disabling mutual approach and consent until the first half of 1947. The deadlock in mutual negotiations was made by Czechoslovakia on 24th April 1946, when Czechoslovakia applied to the authorities of the Western European countries to consider the territorial Czechoslovakian claims, addressed by the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The breakthrough in the relations took place on 24th July 1946, when the Soviet ambassadors addressed an appeal of the USSR authority to the Communist President of the Polish Republic Bolesław Bierut and the President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia Edvard Beneš, tackling the issue of Polish and Czechoslovakian relations. The Soviets, referring to the clause in the Soviet-Czechoslovak Treaty of Friendship from 12th December 1943,³ predicting Poland would join the deal, called for establishing “in the nearest future” a political treaty between Poland and Czechoslovakia. According to the USSR authorities, it would soon facilitate circumstances to reach “mutual consent” concerning territorial claims. At the same time, the Soviets strongly emphasized the desire for Czechoslovakian authorities to resign from the idea of the assistance of the Western European countries in settling the territorial claims. The Soviet authorities came to the conclusion that the time, when it would be necessary to establish tight bond within the bloc to oppose those outside, is near. Therefore, they decided to eliminate all points of reference accessible for the Western bloc that could enable the participation of the USA and Great Britain in settling the issues of Central and Eastern Europe.⁴ Stalin simply did not want to provide any excuse for the West to take part in the problems of Eastern and Central Europe, hence awaited high agreement between Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Both Czechoslovakian and Polish government accepted the Soviet proposal, still both sides submitted additional projects regarding the contents of the treaty. Responding to the Soviets, Polish government emphasized that they wish to sign additional document in which Czechoslovakian government would guarantee for Polish inhabitants of Transolza – whose rights in comparison with the period before 1938 had been significantly depleted – the possibility to exercise all political rights, such as legal activity within

³ The treaty of friendship and cooperation with the USSR was signed in Moscow by E. Beneš.

⁴ Kamiński, M. K. (1990): *Polsko-Czechosłowackie stosunki polityczne 1945–1948*. Warszawa, p. 248.

democratic rule of Polish organizations. Czechoslovaks were also to provide for Poles conditions of “unhindered cultural growth”.⁵

Intervention of the Soviet authorities launched Polish-Czechoslovakian talks on 12th August 1946 in Paris.⁶ Nevertheless, neither the talks in Paris, nor further discussion between the two parties (that took place in Prague), led to the signing of the treaty. The main problematic issue – territorial claims (Czechoslovakian authorities claiming Kłodzko, Głubczyce, Racibórz, Kozielsk and Wałbrzych districts) and acknowledging minority rights constituted an essential obstacle.

The discussion was also present in the Polish and Czechoslovakian press. Numerous articles considering the claims together with simultaneous declarations on Slavonic solidarity, accompanied by justification of own perspectives and proving the other side’s guilt for the lack of understanding only exacerbated situation that had already been bothersome. Long-lasting talks, as well as press and diplomatic polemics, proved that none of the partners was able to convince the other to own point of view. The Polish party merely managed to gain Czechoslovakian memorandum dated 9th January 1947 including the Czechoslovakian resignation from territorial claims on the international forum. Still, the problem of frontiers remained present both in the internal political games in Czechoslovakia, as well as in the mutual relations.⁷

Such situation was perceived by the Soviet leaders as unfavourable for the image of the “community of the friendly countries”. Therefore, in the context of approaching conference of the Council of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of USSR, Great Britain, France and the USA in Moscow (the event took place in March and April 1947), the Soviets found it necessary to intervene in the issues of the Polish-Czechoslovakian treaty. On 25th February 1947, the prime minister Klement Gottwald got a telegram from Stalin and Molotow stating that “any further delay in reaching Polish-Czechoslovakian agreement on mutual cooperation will bring about a scandalous situation, causing unwelcomed reception both in the USSR and other friendly countries”.⁸

⁵ Ibidem, p. 51.

⁶ The talks took place in Paris – the place of The Paris Peace Conference (29th July to 15th October 1946), participated by 21 countries, among which Poland and Czechoslovakia had their representatives. Polish, Czechoslovakian and Soviet delegates met between the sessions of various commissions of the conferences in order to discuss problems related to the Polish-Czechoslovakian treaty. See: Kamiński, M. K.: op. cit., p. 250.

⁷ Pałys, P. (1997): *Kłodzko, Racibórz i Głubczyce w stosunkach polsko-czechosłowackich w latach 1945–1947*. Opole, p. 62.

⁸ Kaplan, K. (1985): *Poválečné Československo*. Mnichov, p. 214; See also: Kamiński, M. K.: op. cit., p. 308.

On 10th March 1947 The Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia was ceremonially signed in Warsaw by Józef Cyrankiewicz and Klement Gottwald, as well as by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs – Zygmunt Modzelewski and Jan Masaryk.⁹ At the same time the period of „forced friendship” officially began.

In the Protocol-Appendix attached to the Treaty, two signatory parties committed themselves to settle the issues tackling territorial aspects within the next two years. Hence, formally the frontier issues remained open, however practically both sides came to terms with the current state location of Trans-Olza Silesia and southern as well as western districts of the Polish regained territories. It obviously did not end the discussions and polemics in diplomacy or in Czechoslovakian or Polish press.

The issue of territorial claims were mainly remembered by the non-communistic Czechoslovakian press where – contrary to Polish newspapers that threw positive light – sceptical voices assessing the Treaty emerged, emphasized lack of enthusiasm for further objectives of Czechoslovakian policy towards Poland.¹⁰ The issue of frontiers was finally settled in Warsaw where the on 13th June 1958, a border treaty between the People’s Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia was signed, finally resolving the border issue, ending the border dispute.¹¹ Concurrently, the question of exercising the stipulations and resolutions of the Appendix-Protocol from 10th March tackling the minority issues became of paramount importance.¹² Still, both signatory

⁹ Dziennik Ustaw Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej (Dz.U.R.P.) 1948 nr 7, poz. 47. (Polish Journal of Laws)

¹⁰ Kamiński, M. K.: op. cit., pp. 312–314. Kamiński recalls the opinions from Czech and Slovakian press referring to the Treaty, e.g. periodicals such as „Rudé právo”, „Svobodný zítřek”, „Obzory”, „Čas”. In „Svobodné slovo” from 9th March 1947 it was stated that „the Poles are obliged to prove that they really want to establish peaceful relations with Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovakian party may only forget the part stigmatized by poor relations between the two countries solely because of Poles. Therefore, Poland should resign from Trans-Olza Silesia and give up claims for minority rights for the Polish living in Czechoslovakia, giving away the districts of Kłodzko, Głubczyce and Racibórz in exchange for Czechoslovakian support for the Polish frontier on the Odra and Nysa Łużycka river”.

¹¹ Dz.U.R.P. 1959 nr 25, poz. 159.

¹² The Protocol-Appendix to The Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Czechoslovakia includes a mutual declaration that “the parties with settle on the way of agreement, not later than within two years (...) all territorial issues currently existing between both of the countries, and that taking into consideration possibly quickest economic and cultural reconstructions of the both countries, they will enter as early as possible talks leading to conclusion of the treaty for this purpose (...)”, Dz.U.R.P. 1948 nr 7, poz. 47.