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ANALYSIS

The New Reality of International Relations: Do Czechs Still Want to Belong to the West?

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Summary

The actions of Donald Trump's administration on the international stage have sparked strong reactions. Whether it is the new tariff policy, cuts to USAID, pressure on Iran and support for Israel, or the new security strategy published in the autumn of 2025, it is now beyond doubt that U.S. policy—and with it the international order—is facing a fundamental transformation, possibly the most profound since the Second World War. Responses to this new reality typically follow a familiar pattern: initial shock, followed by anger, bargaining, depression, and ultimately acceptance. In the Czech Republic, we currently find ourselves somewhere between the second and third stages, and the present situation raises more questions than it provides answers. Where are we heading, and what is our objective? Is Europe truly in decline? Is Europe's greatest threat Putin's Russia, or rather its lagging position in the ongoing scientific and technological revolution? How should the Czech Republic respond to changes in the international order, and should a Babiš-led government strengthen the Euro-Atlantic bond? These are the questions addressed in this paper.

Key Takeaways

- Smaller The Trump era accelerated deeper shifts in the global order that extend beyond any single administration and will continue to shape international politics in the years ahead.
- The West is not disappearing, but transforming—placing greater emphasis on national interests, security, and strategic autonomy.
- The Czech Republic must respond proactively rather than passively waiting for the return of old certainties, and clearly define its role in a changing world.

The Mystical West and the End of the Post-1989 Order

No one ever truly knows the era in which they are living. Historical periodisation is always constructed ex post. Just as a landless peasant in fourteenth-century Luxembourg Bohemia could not have known that the age in which he toiled in sweat on a feudal estate would one day be described as the High Middle Ages and the golden age of the Czech lands, today's inhabitants of the Czech Republic have no idea how the first half of the twenty-first century will be labelled several hundred years from now.

We therefore have no choice but to rely on our own observation and on the experience provided by the past century. With a tolerable degree of simplification, the twentieth century can be divided into roughly six periods defined by major global conflicts: the Belle Époque (1900–1914), the First World War (1914–1918), the interwar period (1918–1939), the Second World War (1939–1945), the Cold War (1946/1947–1991), and the era of globalisation (1992–2000). By contrast, the first quarter of the twenty-first century (2001–2025) has so far produced relatively few "global turning points".

Among the key events shaping the Czech Republic and the broader Euro-Atlantic space, one might list the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, Islamist terrorist attacks in Spain (2004), the United Kingdom (2005), France (2015), and Germany (2016), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), and the war in Ukraine (2014/2022–present). Yet this focus on wars and major international crises reflects the distinctly conflict-centred lens of the twentieth century and, as will be shown, is both limited and outdated for our purposes.

For the future—and for understanding our own time—other developments are likely to prove far more important: events that may have occurred long ago, but whose effects have not yet fully materialised, or whose broader implications we are still unable to grasp or disentangle in terms of cause and consequence. Looking at contemporary "Western society", one might reasonably conclude that, in hindsight, the year 2006 and the founding of Facebook will be seen as a moment of exceptional importance—an event that triggered fundamental changes in the information society.

Other developments likely to be regarded as equally significant include the full onset of the demographic crisis in advanced economies in the 2020s, the decline of parties belonging to the social-democratic family, the overall breakdown of traditional party systems accompanied by rising voter turnout[1] in liberal democracies, and global deglobalisation trends linked to deindustrialisation in the United States and the European Union. The changes we are currently facing are far deeper in nature than familiar threats such as conventional warfare or viral epidemics. Humanity stands on the threshold of a new era—one that also requires a new way of thinking.

Closely related to this is the fact that the outdated lens through which we view contemporary global developments fundamentally shapes which events we consider most important and how we evaluate them. The second election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, for example, can be interpreted in radically different ways.

From a radically liberal worldview, Trump embodies the worst possible outcome for the United States and the West. According to this perspective, an alliance of racists, xenophobes, Islamophobes, homophobes and transphobes, Christian fundamentalists, "rednecks", and frustrated white men has created a new dictatorship that is dismantling everything that makes the United States a free country.

[1] In the Czech Republic, higher voter turnout is generally perceived as a positive, pro-democratic indicator, as a larger share of participating voters is theoretically associated with greater democratic legitimacy. However, researchers since the 1960s (e.g. Seymour Martin Lipset) have pointed out that high voter turnout may also signal a fundamental dispute over the nature of the political regime itself. Moreover, if increased turnout is driven by broad support for an anti-democratic actor, it is difficult to interpret it as evidence of greater democratic legitimacy.

In this narrative, Trump is portrayed as a modern-day Hitler who is "creating a fascist regime" (Smits, 2025b). Resistance to him is therefore seen as not only justified but desirable, and anyone who supports him must, by definition, also be a fascist.

By contrast, a radical conservative may see Donald Trump's victory as the salvation of a world that was under acute threat from the left and the "woke agenda". According to this interpretation, degenerate liberal elites, in cooperation with immigrants, promoted unnatural and harmful ideological projects aimed at irreversibly altering the ethnic composition of Western societies and encouraging uncontrolled immigration. The state and its administration are portrayed as systematically advancing anti-white racism concealed behind inclusive policies. When combined with the promotion of "gender ideology" or the concept of hate crime—allegedly designed to punish critics of the liberal regime—the contours of a liberal dystopia in the United States appear almost self-evident. For conservatives, Trump becomes a messianic figure who, with personal courage and at the risk of his own life—including a failed but narrowly avoided assassination attempt in Butler—has taken on corrupt elites, the deep state, globalists, the left, and communists. Anyone opposed to Trump must therefore be a communist, an Islamist, or even the Antichrist.

What do these two extreme positions have in common? First, a form of radicalism that relies on vague concepts and their deliberate distortion. A typical example is the inflationary use of labels such as "fascist" or "communist". Sympathy for the current U.S. president does not automatically make someone a fascist. Many studies concluding that the current U.S. regime exhibits elements of fascism (e.g. Smits, 2025a) rely on definitions so eclectic that they can be applied to almost anything. If we were to use a robust and well-established definition of fascism (e.g. Nolte, 1999), it would be difficult to describe the current U.S. administration as an anti-capitalist and anti-bourgeois movement—two of the four core defining features of fascism.

Similarly problematic is labelling Trump's opponents as "communists" or "neo-Marxists", since very few of them genuinely advocate the large-scale redistribution of property or the overthrow of capitalism in coordination with a global communist movement. Precise definitions have always been an obstacle to demagoguery—and the twenty-first century is no exception.

Second, both approaches share an exhausting search for parallels with the twentieth century, particularly Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, often entirely detached from reality. George Santayana's famous quote—"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it"—is among the most abused aphorisms of our time. Pointing to nationalism as the root of all evil in international politics ignores the fact that the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918 was the culmination of nationalist politics pursued par excellence by Czech elites. Likewise, interpreting economic crisis as the key factor behind Hitler's rise overlooks the fact that Benito Mussolini seized power as early as 1922, during a period of post-war economic expansion. Criticism of Trump's disregard for Venezuelan sovereignty in the case of Nicolás Maduro similarly ignores the minimal concern shown by the Barack Obama administration for Pakistan's sovereignty during the operation that killed Osama bin Laden.

History does not repeat itself, and it does not move in circles—only our minds attempt to identify familiar patterns in new events. This may be comforting, but it is analytically misleading.

In the Czech Republic, we may laugh at America's culture wars; nevertheless, similar conceptual vagueness and confusion also characterise our own post-1989 history. A prime example is the notion of "the West". After the fall of the communist regime, the central slogan of Czech politics became "return"—a return to the West, understood as the realm of democracy, freedom, capitalism, and the rule of law. A vaguely defined place without corruption and endowed with cultural superiority deemed worthy of emulation. Even after nearly four decades of freedom, this theme remains alive;

in the 2025 parliamentary elections, the governing coalition adopted the slogan "We Belong to the West".

But what does "the West" actually mean for Czechs today? Trump's United States? Post-Brexit Britain? Macron's France? Germany with its nuclear power plants shut down and roughly twenty million residents of migrant origin? Scandinavia? Israel? Or an amorphous Brussels? Agreement on a concrete model was never the aim of this concept. Its purpose was to draw a dividing line between "us" and "the others". A form of polarisation that may have served a purpose in the 1990s has today lost its substance.

The end of the post-1989 order did not come with Andrej Babiš's entry into politics, nor with the election of Petr Pavel as president, but effectively with the Czech Republic's accession to the European Union in 2004. Since then, political elites have failed to articulate a new, positive vision of a shared goal. Abstract debates about orientation toward the West or the East do not define our future. This is a framework trapped in the mindset of the twentieth century—about as relevant to today's world as the Austro-Prussian War.

The Revolution Is Elsewhere

Imagine yourself in a hypothetical situation. In 2004, amid the celebrations marking the European Union accession of the Czech Republic, you hit your head, fall into a coma, and wake up on 1 January 2026. What would you notice first upon looking around?

Undoubtedly, the most striking changes would be the profound transformations of society brought about by new media and the internet. Mobile phones, for instance. Compared to 2004, the vast majority of people in public spaces are now staring at small black slabs without buttons, all wearing headphones like members of some secret service. News websites and television discuss statements that were never actually spoken by anyone—no one uttered them aloud; they were merely written into the virtual space of the internet—yet others take them entirely seriously, as if they had been shouted by a flesh-and-blood individual on Wenceslas Square at five o'clock in the afternoon.

People no longer buy newspapers, and on television they curate their own programmes from an endless array of content. They work from home and use artificial intelligence even for the simplest tasks. Anyone unable to work with the internet, apps, and spreadsheets is effectively excluded. Neighbours no longer go shopping at bakeries or supermarkets; instead, groceries arrive at their homes in paper bags. Privacy has shrunk to whatever people choose not to share about themselves on social media. The number of children born in 2025 is the lowest since the eighteenth century (Cechl, 2026).

Against the backdrop of these profound changes in Czech society, international politics would likely strike our unwilling time traveler as almost boringly familiar. The Czech Republic is still a member of the EU and NATO. The United Nations is still headquartered in New York. The United States remains the world's leading power in innovation and military strength and is once again represented by an ageing white man who pursues national interests regardless of the UN. Iraq, Afghanistan, or Venezuela; George W. Bush or Donald Trump.

In Russia, the same Vladimir Putin remains in power, still longing to restore the Soviet empire and attacking his closest neighbours with varying degrees of success. The war in Chechnya or the war in Ukraine. In China, communists remain firmly at the helm, as they do in Vietnam, Cuba, and North Korea—except that China, compared to 2004, has become a massive industrial giant with scientific progress comparable to that of the United States (see below). The Arab world continues to oscillate

between brutal dictatorships, Islamist fanaticism, and endless chaos. Africa remains among the poorest regions of the world, just as it was in 2004.

The main differences are that the EU no longer includes the United Kingdom, whose place has been taken by Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia. Meanwhile, NATO has expanded to include Albania, Finland, Sweden, Croatia, and North Macedonia. Integration is clearly continuing—at least in Eastern Europe.

This hypothetical observation highlights one fundamental fact. While a scientific and technological revolution is raging within our societies, international order appears, by comparison, surprisingly stable. This can mean only one thing: changes to the global order are coming—and most likely very soon. What will trigger them? An aggressive Russia attacking European NATO members? An aggressive China militarily subjugating Taiwan? Or the United States under Donald Trump annexing Greenland? Anything is possible, but it is far more likely that the catalyst will not be a classic military conflict.

The battlefield of the twenty-first century will be the virtual domain, and the struggle will centre on two competing visions of human society: a free, capitalist democracy of the Western type versus Chinese state capitalism.

This dichotomy is reinforced by the fact that today there are essentially two regions in the world where the aforementioned scientific and technological revolution—encompassing artificial intelligence and advanced neural networks—is taking place. On one side stand the United States and its partners, such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan; on the other, the People's Republic of China. That Europe largely stands aside is, in itself, a telling symptom.

Many European politicians took issue with the fact that the Trump administration, in its new security strategy, explicitly mentioned the declining importance of continental European states. As evidence, they point to the fact that the share of European countries in global GDP fell from 25 per cent in 1990 to 14 per cent in 2025 (NSS, 2025: 25). Yet economic output remains a relatively favourable metric for Europe.

If we look at statistics on new patents in the field of artificial intelligence, the trend is unmistakable. Globally, the largest number of AI patents has been granted to entities from China and the United States, with Chinese patents concentrating primarily on machine learning. Between 2000 and 2022, approximately 190,000 AI-related patents were granted worldwide. In 2022 alone, around 40,000 patents were awarded to Chinese entities, compared with roughly 9,000 in the United States (NSF, 2024). These data clearly indicate that the world is heading toward a new polarisation—United States versus China—or, more precisely, that only the United States together with its allies can realistically compete with China's technological expansion.

All the more interesting, then, is how the Trump administration assesses previous U.S. policy toward China: "President Trump single-handedly reversed more than three decades of mistaken American assumptions about China: namely, that by opening our markets to China, encouraging American business to invest in China, and outsourcing our manufacturing to China, we would facilitate China's entry into the so-called "rules-based international order." This did not happen. China got rich and powerful, and used its wealth and power to its considerable advantage." (NSS, 2025: 19).

This relatively sober assessment is followed by measures aimed at limiting the outsourcing of production from the United States to China, rebalancing economic relations (that is, increasing the U.S. share of profits generated by the Chinese economy), and above all restricting the export of technologies and know-how from which China's non-democratic regime subsequently develops its own advanced technologies. For the free world, this need not necessarily be bad news.

A Lesson for the Czech Republic

What, then, should the Czech Republic take away from all this? Quite a lot—but much depends on which factors we choose to emphasise. We can either assume that the threats of the twenty-first century will be virtually identical to those of the twentieth. In that case, the greatest enemy may indeed be Putin's Russia and its attempt to restore the Soviet empire, along with the risk of a broader conventional war in Europe that such ambitions could trigger. Alternatively, we can abandon the twentieth-century lens and identify our most serious challenges as our position on the scientific and technological periphery, catastrophically low birth rates, and extensive dependence on China and its industrial base.

This is not to suggest that the danger of Russian imperialism is diminishing, nor that Ukraine should be "thrown overboard". The issue is rather what we are preparing for—and what we expect to happen.

During the Trump era, the Czech Republic, as a self-confident Central European country, has several possible courses of action. The first is the ostrich strategy. We wait for the end of Trump's second term and hope that it will prove to be a closed chapter in American politics, after which everything will return to the old normal: the United States will rejoin international organisations, globalists will regain the upper hand, USAID will be restored, and we will return to roughly where we were around 2015. This option is favoured mainly by Czech elites closely linked to the Democratic Party and American liberal circles. The belief that everything will "turn out well" again in 2029, however, is naïve and resembles wishful thinking more than strategy. Simply waiting three years in the hope that electing a Democrat to the White House will restore order and allow Europe to once again enjoy the American security umbrella is a poor strategy in a rapidly changing world.

The second option is to abandon nearly four decades of Czech foreign policy and cease orienting ourselves toward the United States. Numerous arguments can be made in support of this approach: instability, loss of credibility, fascist tendencies, or an alleged betrayal of values. The Czech Republic could then align itself as closely as possible with the European Union, which is seen through this lens as the last bastion of freedom and democracy. The result of such a policy might be a rift with our most important ally, accompanied by the moral satisfaction of having "remained faithful to our ideals"—perhaps even by supporting Denmark in maintaining its colonial possessions. What remains unclear, however, is how such a reorientation of foreign policy would help us confront Russia, China's expansion, or Europe's technological lag.

The third option is to accept the United States' decision to fundamentally reshape its international policy and, rather than resisting this shift, attempt to turn it to our advantage. This would mean systematically building relations even with Trump's America—particularly in research and development, security guarantees, and new strategic alliances. This would apply even in a situation where the United States clearly prefers bilateral relations with individual European states over cooperation with the European Union as a whole. Such a choice would inevitably generate a number of uncomfortable dilemmas. For example, to what extent should the Czech Republic support its European ally—specifically Denmark? And conversely, how strategically advantageous would it be to support the claims of the Trump administration, even at the risk of being perceived by older EU member states as a Trojan horse of America's MAGA policy?

From the perspective of the future, the first option is naïve, the second moral, and the third realistic. Which of them will ensure security, prosperity, and wealth for the Czech Republic is a question each reader must answer for themselves. The "West" will not wait for us—whatever that term may mean today.

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