



The Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary on the Relocation of the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem

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The Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania blocked a joint EU statement criticising the relocation of the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. EU unity against the violation of international law was subordinated by these states to domestic competition for influence and to gain U.S. support. This decision not only weakened the effectiveness of EU cohesion and diplomatic efforts but also caused a deterioration in relations between these countries and part of the Arab world.

Following a decision by President Donald Trump in December 2017,¹ the U.S. moved its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on 14 May. Representatives of Austria, the Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary took part in the reception at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem. Of this group, all but Austria had three days earlier vetoed an EU statement criticising the U.S. and urging the EU Member States not to transfer their diplomatic missions to Jerusalem. On 21 December 2017, they, along with Croatia, Latvia and Poland, also abstained from voting on the UN General Assembly resolution on the recognition of Jerusalem by the United States as the capital of Israel and the transfer of the embassy there.

The Czech Republic. The Czech government blocked the EU statement, arguing that there was no reason for the EU to become involved in the matter. Martin Stropnický, the Czech foreign minister, said the urgent procedure for accepting the statement and the lack of consultation about its content were also unacceptable. It can be assumed that the decision of the Czech government also reflects Prague's willingness to strengthen relations with Israel. In December 2017, the Czech Republic recognised Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, based on the 1967 borders. At the same time, the government supports the EU position that, in the framework of a two-state solution, Jerusalem should become the future capital of both Israel and Palestine.

The reaction of the Czech Republic to the transfer of the U.S. embassy prove limited coordination in the field of foreign policy between President Miloš Zeman and the government of Andrej Babiš, who is seeking a vote of confidence from parliament. For Zeman, the transfer of the U.S. embassy was an opportunity to strengthen his internal political position by appealing to his country and to other EU Member States to follow in the U.S. footsteps. In his speech on 25 April, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of Israel, he outlined a three-point plan according to which the Czech Republic should open an honorary consulate in Jerusalem, operate there such government institutions as CzechInvest (promoting entrepreneurship) and then move its own embassy. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a special letter to Zeman, expressed his hope that the Czech embassy would open in Jerusalem during the visit of the Czech head of state to Israel planned for the end of the year and suggested the swift implementation of this move. Zeman's plan, however, only partially overlaps with the government's activities. On 29 May, the Czech Republic made a symbolic gesture by opening an honorary consulate in Jerusalem. The Czech Centre, a government unit

¹ M. Wojnarowicz, "Consequences of the U.S. Decision Regarding Jerusalem," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 77/2017, 8 December 2017.

promoting the country, is also due to open there by the end of the year. Yet Babiš' cabinet has thus far ruled out the transfer of the embassy in the near future.

Romania. Romania appreciates close relations with Israel but advocates a two-state solution to its conflict with Palestine. The alliance with the U.S. and EU membership are pillars of cross-party consensus in Romanian foreign policy. That is why the division between the U.S. and the EU on Jerusalem became a source of conflict between President Klaus Iohannis and Social Democratic Party (PSD) leader Liviu Dragnea, who in fact runs the government of Viorica Dăncilă. Although the Romanian constitution grants the president the prerogative of running foreign policy, it is the government, which according to the ordinary act is responsible for day-to-day management of it, that unilaterally blocked the "unbalanced" EU statement. What's more, Dragnea announced that in April the government had adopted a memorandum on the transfer of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, making it the first EU Member State to do so and earning Bucharest special gratitude from the U.S. and Israel. It is likely that Dragnea sought to compromise Iohannis by forcing him to criticise the U.S. indirectly. It cannot be excluded that he also counted on the assistance of Israeli politicians to change the critical U.S. stance on the Romanian government's attempts to commute its anti-corruption law. At the end of April, Dragnea and Dăncilă visited Israel, where they discussed the transfer of the Romanian embassy. Iohannis stated that neither the visit nor the government's plans had been agreed with him, were in violation of his prerogatives and demanded Dăncilă's resignation. Iohannis accused her of undermining Romanian credibility and warned about the violation of international law.

Faced with Iohannis' refusal to back down, the government retracted its statement about the embassy transfer. Dăncilă, recalling that the relocation of embassies in Nigeria and Kazakhstan had been made on the basis of presidential decrees, recognised Iohannis' prerogative. It is likely that this decision was influenced by the objection of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats, governing in coalition with the PSD. Alliance leader Călin Popescu-Tăriceanu opposed the confrontation with EU partners and the violation of UN resolutions, while Teodor Meleșcanu, minister of foreign affairs, warned against damaging country's chances of UN Security Council non-permanent membership in 2020–2021. Until now, Romania has enjoyed the sympathy of Arab states.

Hungary. After the U.S. recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, Hungary argued that the EU did not need to react to this decision. At the same time, Budapest supported the confirmation of the EU's current position towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This approach favoured the U.S. and Israel but did not translate into a declaration to move the Hungarian embassy to Jerusalem, although Hungarian leaders have not excluded it.

The Hungarian intention behind blocking the EU joint declaration was to improve bilateral relations with the United States, which is crucial for Budapest. The Trump Administration, similarly to the previous one, criticises restrictions on press freedom and the activities of non-governmental organisations and universities in Hungary, as well as the ill-treatment of refugees there. In spite of that, Hungary's minister of foreign affairs, Péter Szijjártó, was received on 30 May in Washington, D.C., by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. This was the first high-level bilateral meeting between Hungary and the U.S. since 2012 and confirms the accuracy of the Hungarian calculations.

At the same time, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is steadily building good relations with Israel, which he also takes advantage of in domestic politics. These relations serve to legitimise the government's refusal to accept refugees and to rebuff charges of anti-Semitism. Orbán presents the inflow of immigrants from Muslim countries as dangerous for Europe and Israel as a country facing similar problems. He and Netanyahu also share similar views. They both treat the financier George Soros as a political enemy. Israeli regulations were among the models of the Hungarian law limiting the activities of NGOs. In addition, the two politicians maintain a good personal relationship. Netanyahu was the first foreign leader to congratulate Orbán after his election victory in April 2018, inviting him to visit Israel in the near future.

Conclusions. Confronted with discord between the U.S. and the EU over the move of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary supported Israel and the U.S. at the expense of EU unity. The main motivation, especially of the governments in Budapest and Bucharest, was to gain political capital in order to improve contacts with the Trump Administration, which had been critical of them. Such actions, however, are leading to a deterioration of relations between the Czech Republic, Romania and Hungary with part of the Arab world, including the Palestinian authorities. The Czech president and the Romanian government, which have limited power in foreign policy, also used the potential move of their own embassies in their struggle for domestic political influence.

Poland's partners from the V4 will be interested in closer contacts with Israel. This is indicated by cooperation between the Visegrad Group and Israel in the V4+ format, initiated in 2017 by Hungary and confirmed by the Slovak presidency (from July 2018), as well as by good relations between the Czech Republic and Israel. It is in Poland's interests that the cooperation of Central Europe with non-EU countries, including Israel, does not take place at the expense of EU cohesion. Poland, which acknowledges international law as the foundation of world order, should preserve its current policy towards the possible relocation of other embassies to Jerusalem.