

90 Years of Czech-Romanian Friendship

The history of contacts between Czechs and Romanians reaches far back into history. The first verifiable documents of mutual relations come from the Middle Ages, when the Czech kings took an active interest in events in the areas of what is today's Romania. The visit of Prince Michal Chrabré to the court of Emperor Rudolf II could be evidence of this. Mutual contacts did not only take place on the highest political levels, but also on economic, cultural and educational levels as well. Czech goods were exported to Romania, and Romanian students visited Czech universities.

An intensification of contacts took place beginning with the moment of the Habsburg monarchy's creation; certain parts of today's Romania, especially the area known as Transylvania, was part of the empire. The Habsburgs conducted a long war against the Ottoman Empire over that territory. In the end, the war ended rather successfully for the Habsburg monarchy and part of the territory was joined to the monarchy. During the 19th century, the state supported migration to these lands, especially to the areas of the so-called Banát.

During the 19th century, mainly leaders of the Czech national movement came into contact with Romanians. Mutual cooperation was not burdened by Slavic motifs, which could in many regards be perceived as beneficial. On the other hand, it led to mutual relations not being as warm as with the southern Slavs, for example. The Czechs supported the Romanians in their resistance to pressure from the Budapest government for Hungarianisation, in which they saw an allegory to their own fight against the Germans. In this regard, the national representations tried to cooperate. Standpoints differed, especially toward Russia; the Romanians perceived Russia as a threat and ran into a lack of understanding from Russophile Czechs.

The situation caused by World War I changed mutual relations. Romania joined the states of the Entente and were a natural ally for the Czechoslovak National Council. Mutual contacts played out both on the political level - in 1917 Masaryk was accepted in Romania with all honours befitting a head of state - as well as on the military level, where Czechoslovak soldiers served in Romanian units and Romanians in Czechoslovak units. Romanian soldiers, who made up a large part of Prague's garrisons, also directly influenced the creation of the independent state, when during the days of October 1918 they refused to obey Austrian commanders and joined the side of the National Council.

After the end of the war, voices from both states called for the fastest possible creation of mutual diplomatic contact. This was of course prevented by mutual disputes related especially to the demarcation of the border on the territory of Subcarpathian Ruthenia. The problem was eventually resolved through mutual exchanges of territory. Mutual diplomatic relations were eventually established by an official exchange of ambassadors in 1920.

But meanwhile, leading politicians from both states started to discuss issues of mutual political and military agreements during their meetings at the peace conference in Paris, which were to have been targeted mainly against Hungary and its plans for renewing the integrity of the Kingdom of Hungary. At the beginning, Romania was reluctant to give its agreement to the creation of this alliance and placed a number of requirements.

Attempts by ex-Emperor Charles to renew the government in Hungary in the end greatly assisted the creation of the alliance. An agreement was finally signed in April 1921.

This contractual relationship tied into the agreement between the Czechoslovak Republic and the Kingdom of SHS, and was further expanded with an agreement between Romania and the Kingdom of SHS. Because of this an alliance was created which was called the Little Entente. It became one of the cornerstones of foreign policy for the participating states mainly during the 1920s. In the following decades, however, its importance gradually declined. Economic problems brought by the great depression and Germany's rise to power in the space of Central-Southwestern Europe degraded the importance of the alliance. Individual states were forced to deal with the real status of international relations and tried as much as possible for the greatest safeguarding of their integrity. With its anti-Hungarian alignment, the Little Entente lost its importance. Threatening factors were especially Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union, not Hungary. Romania felt threatened especially by the USSR, and gradually sought backing from Germany, while the Czechoslovak Republic, threatened by Germany, sought backing from the USSR. Friendly relations within the Little Entente brought a number of stimuli for mutual economic, cultural and scientific contacts. The Czechoslovak Republic exported a number of industrial products to Romania, especially machinery, textiles and weapons, and Romania exported raw materials and crude oil to Czechoslovakia.

1938 brought the definitive blow to mutual relations. During the events of September, Romania's position on the events in Czechoslovakia were rather cautious. Despite the sympathy of the public, the Romanian government refused to guarantee Czechoslovakia assistance in the event of a German attack, promising only intervention in the event of Hungarian demands. After the Munich Conference and the occupation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia six months later, Romanian officials proceeded benevolently toward the refugees who headed into exile through Romanian territory.

During World War II, Romania underwent complicated development, when, as a result of Stalin aggression, it found itself on the side of the Axis. This in the end brought it as far as war with Czechoslovakia. The exiled Beneš government reacted to the Romanian attack at the side of the German Wehrmacht on the USSR. The situation reversed during the war, when Romania joined the Allies in 1944. The Romanian army played an important part in the liberation of Czechoslovakia. 66,000 Romanian soldiers were killed and injured in battles in Czechoslovakia.

Both states made efforts to renew mutual diplomatic relations after the end of the war, which occurred in 1946. In the following year, what was previously a mission was upgraded to an embassy, which is proof of good relations. Czechoslovakia, for example, supported Romanian requests in talks on a peace agreement. Together with a renewal of official relations, a revival of economic contacts also occurred.

Mutual relations in the postwar period were strongly influenced by the fact that both countries found themselves in the Soviet sphere of influence. Local communist parties managed to gain power in both countries. In the 2nd part of the 20th century the development of inter-state contacts then played out under Moscow's tutelage, which had the decisive word in the creation of rules for mutual cooperation. An expression of this was the signing of the Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the Romanian People's Republic. Economic cooperation played out within the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, and military cooperation mainly within the Warsaw Pact.

Several attempts at changing relations within the socialist camp occurred during the Soviet reign in Central and Southeastern Europe. One of these attempts was undoubtedly the so-called Prague Spring, as the process of changes within the policy of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia tended to be called. Romania, represented by its leader, Nicolae Ceausescu, expressed support for the process. The Romanian communist leader at the time was an opponent of the Brezhnev Doctrine and advocated the idea of nonintervention instead of it. The Romanian army in the end did not take part in the August occupation, which was perceived in Czechoslovakia with sympathy.

Mutual relations returned to their standard tracks in the following period. The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic was Romania's economic partner, which at the given time became a welcome destination for summer vacations. Economic complications and the corrosion of the Soviet superpower system brought problems to the communist regimes in both countries at the end of the 1980s. Ceausescu's regime gradually took the form of a personal dictatorship. During 1988 and 1989, there was even talk of a Berlin-Prague-Bucharest axis of rigid communist regimes.

Both countries' regimes eventually fell, although the Romanian path was recognisably more radical. In the following period, both countries attempted a transition to democracy, civic society and capitalism with greater and lesser problems.

After the dissolution of the Czechoslovak Federative Republic, the political representation of the Czech Republic maintains friendly relations with Romania. Both countries are members of the EU and NATO.