

The Czech Republic Tests a New Approach for Dealing with Paramilitary Groups

Matej Kandřík

The Czech Republic's Ministry of the Interior recently proposed broad reforms to the legislation and regulations governing firearms that include a new law banning non-state paramilitary-type armed groups. This reportedly seeks to prevent potentially dangerous or radical individuals and groups from participating in a proposed new firearms training program that aims to keep firearms ownership as open as possible despite the 2015 EU Firearms Directive. The training program would grant individuals that complete it successfully exemptions from restrictions on owning firearms, cartridges, and ammunition.

A formal or informal group would be banned and fined up to CZK 200,000 if the three following conditions are met: if it has a paramilitary character; if it seeks to fulfill its political, religious, social, or ideological goals through the use of arms; and if it or its members seek or possess firearms legally.

Previous attempts by the country's paramilitary groups with radical agendas to conduct patrols with local police or to organize "civil defense days" in schools suggest that the government's proposal is needed. Its proposal has attracted media interest but also led to heated reactions. Critics complain that the proposed legal definition of "paramilitary" is too vague or that the mechanism will be toothless—even though one of home-defense organization announced the termination of its activities in reaction to the reforms.

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While very small, fringe far-right groups existed in the Czech Republic before, the latest paramilitary organizations emerged in reaction to the war in eastern Ukraine since 2014. They are very strongly pro-Russian and began mobilizing in opposition to NATO and its alleged intent to wage war with Russia. The first group founded was called Czechoslovak Army Reservists Against War with Russia Planned by NATO Command (now mostly inactive and functioning as a hate group on Facebook). More recently these groups have also exploited anti-refugee sentiments. Among the most prominent are National Home Guard, Czechoslovak Army Reservists for Peace, and Land Home Guard. All the groups from the outset were politically active (typically as fierce supporters of President Miloš Zeman), critics of the EU and NATO, and actively engaged

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in anti-government or anti-immigration protests. Several individuals from the leadership of these groups have ties to pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine or to Russia's secret services.

The paramilitary and home-defense groups immediately came under scrutiny from the media and state institutions like the Ministry of the Interior and the Security Intelligence Service. A recent report by the latter claims that the groups are stagnating and do not present a real security threat to the Czech Republic because their dramatic vision of full-scale war between NATO and Russia or an apocalyptic wave of migrants never materialized. Yet even with only fringe support and no real societal or political impact, these groups can easily serve as platforms to radicalize individuals.

A Central European Phenomenon

The Czech Republic is not alone in Central Europe in facing a challenge posed by self-proclaimed, non-state paramilitary organizations. Since 2014–2015, other countries have witnessed a similar upsurge of such activities. In their case, too, this can be attributed to the conflict in Ukraine and to the migrant crisis.

In Poland, the non-state paramilitary sector existed before 2014 but began to thrive in response to the crisis in Ukraine. Organizations grew in membership and received a lot of media attention at home and abroad, but their cooperation with the state developed to a new level. Especially under then Minister of Defense Antoni Macierewicz, the “proobroni” (for organizacje proobronne or pro-defense organizations) enjoyed special treatment. This included developing a new cooperative program under the ministry's Office for Pro-defense Matters and increasing grant programs. Closer cooperation with the armed forces was also encouraged, and several paramilitary units repeatedly took part in the country's biggest military exercises, like Anakonda and Dragon, in which NATO allies also participated.

In Slovakia, Slovak Conscripts recently celebrated eight years of existence. Last December, it attracted public attention by patrolling Roma settlements. Previously it made headlines in when it cooperated with the Night Wolves, the Russian motorcycle club associated with President Vladimir Putin, when one of their former members joined pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine. Slovak Conscripts also became recognized as a result of an HBO documentary about their activities. The organization is one of the best documented paramilitary groups in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia.

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Almost every formally existing non-state paramilitary organization in Central Europe functions typically as a legal civic association or non-profit, non-governmental organization. What connects these is the ambiguous and multifaceted character of the paramilitary phenomenon.

The case of Slovak Conscripts, for example, demonstrates how easy it is to wear several hats for different audiences. From 2012 to 2017 it functioned with no formal legal basis. Later it registered as a civic association under the name Our Homeland is the Future and presented Slovak Conscripts simply as one of several projects. To the general public, it presents itself as a national, civic, independent, and apolitical home-defense organiza-

tion, even when its representatives openly participate in public debates and clearly hold political ambitions. In 2018 the General Prosecutor's Office was requested to investigate the legality of Slovak Conscripts' activities and its existence. No legal actions or decisions have yet been taken.

Even in Poland, where the majority of paramilitary associations are loyal to the state and rarely have extremists in their ranks, several problems with their activities have been brought to light. The Supreme Audit Office report on the Ministry of Defense's cooperation with paramilitary organizations raised several serious issues, ranging from a lack of a binding legal definition of pro-defense and paramilitary organization to little or no authority in law and regulations for such ministry-run programs. It also noted financial irregularities and an absence of assessment measurements, as well as questioning the effectiveness of grants and donations provided by the ministry to paramilitaries.

The Czech Republic is testing an approach that deals with the potential threats posed by paramilitary groups through the issue of access to firearms rather than through that of extremism. Finding a reasonable balance between not interfering in the right to associate and not allowing radical and extremist elements to misuse this right is not easy. How the Czech effort fares will be watched closely across Central Europe.

Matej Kandrik is a GMF ReThink.CEE fellow and executive director and researcher at STRATPOL—Strategic Policy Institute in Slovakia.

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