



The Visegrad Group in Czech Policy

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The Czech Republic sees the Visegrad Group as a platform to build regional economic ties and an ad hoc political alliance, mainly, at present, as an instrument of collective opposition to mandatory migrant quotas proposed by the European Commission. Czech policy in the V4 is based on the principle that cooperation within the group cannot take place at the expense of close relations with Germany, nor can it become a policy of sustained opposition to European integration. The parliamentary election scheduled for autumn 2017, and the related focus of Czech politicians on internal matters, will reduce their activity in international forums, including the V4.

The V4 in Czech Foreign Policy. From the perspective of the Czech Republic, the Visegrad Group is a platform for building regional economic ties and strengthening sectoral cooperation. It is useful primarily in the areas of infrastructure development, security and, to a lesser extent, as a permanent political alliance. The favourable economic climate reflected in this year budget surplus (for the first time in last two decades) is derived, among other things, from the intensification of trade, including with V4 countries. Although the gas market in the Czech Republic is more diversified than in Slovakia or Hungary, Bohuslav Sobotka's government sees the need to build new connections in energy infrastructure, such as a second gas interconnector with Poland. For the Czech Republic, the V4 also represents an opportunity to develop military cooperation in respect to NATO and the EU, including through joint exercises, the Visegrad Battle Group and other initiatives.

The Czech government wants to use the V4 as a tool to influence the decision-making process in the EU, and in other Member States. From the perspective of the Czech Republic, it is desirable that the group has a unified voice in the European Union, because of Prague's moderate influence arising from the country's limited political potential. Therefore, when working out a compromise in February this year, which should have encouraged the UK to remain in the EU, the Czech Republic first sought agreement within the V4, in order to strengthen its own voice in the European Council.

The Czech Republic in Other Regional Alliances. A multi-vector foreign policy will strengthen the Czech Republic's effectiveness in the EU. This approach determines the country's activity in the V4 and allows it simultaneously to build strong regional ties with other countries. Germany remains the Czech Republic's strategic neighbour, and is also the country's largest trading partner (accounting for 29.5% of foreign trade in 2015). In 2015, exports worth €46 billion and imports calculated at €38 billion gave the Czech Republic a clearly favourable balance of trade with its western neighbour. Strong economic ties, translated into political relations, influenced the initial pause in Czech protests against the Nord Stream II gas pipeline. Special relations between the Czech Republic and Germany were confirmed by the visit of Chancellor Angela Merkel to Prague, shortly before the prime ministers of the V4 countries met in Warsaw, in August. The meeting aimed to establish a common position on the migrant crisis and possible Brexit, before the September EU summit.

The search for a new political alignment to increase Czech impact on EU policy was reflected in the establishment of the "Slavkov Triangle" in 2015, which was intended to strengthen relations between the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria. It was no coincidence that the former Austrian presidential candidate Norbert Hofer chose Prague to share the concept of expanding the Visegrad Group to include Austria. This was in the interests of the Czech Republic, which seeks to build unity in its closest neighbourhood, which means closer relations with both Germany and Austria.

The Czech Republic remains interested in cooperation within a broader group of countries in the V4+ format. Apart from Austria and Germany, Slovenia is considered to be the preferred partner in this formula. The Czech prime minister is willing to use regional forums for contacts with large global players, and was present at the "16+1" summit of Central and Eastern Europe with China in Riga.

At the same time, Sobotka's cabinet remains sceptical about the Three Seas initiative, a forum of countries between the Adriatic, the Baltic and the Black Sea. The Czech Republic expressed this attitude in August, at a meeting in Dubrovnik, to which it sent only the deputy foreign minister. In contrast, Poland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Lithuania and Hungary were represented by heads of state. Scepticism about this idea may stem from wariness about the emergence of a possible alternative to the "old EU countries," with which the Czech Republic would wish to maintain close relationships.

The EU from the Perspective of the Czech Republic as a V4 Member. The Czech government is trying to avoid a situation in which the position of the V4 would be contrary to the opinion of most EU Member States or EU institutions. This approach gained strength after the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) came to power at the beginning of 2014. Czechs support major EU projects, such as work on the establishment of a European army, which corresponds to the proposals of the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker. An ambitious, though still distant intention, is the adoption of the common currency, declared in the government's 2015 plans and the ČSSD manifesto from August this year. By joining the Eurozone, following in Slovakia's footsteps, the Czech Republic would show willingness to build closer integration with other EU economies.

Concerns about the weakening of the Czech Republic's position in the EU have increased since the result of the British referendum. The prospect of the UK leaving will, from the Czech point of view, not only reduce EU funds, but will also weaken the position of countries opposing the deepening of EU integration by giving more competences to the EU institutions. Because the Visegrad countries hold similar positions in this respect, the Czech Republic will coordinate closely with other group members on V4 talks on the future of EU relations with the UK. This was confirmed, for example, by a Prague meeting of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group and Germany just after the British referendum. At the same time, the Czech Republic perceives in the V4 a force capable of balancing the positions of countries such as Italy, which would like to see a more federal EU.

Despite opposing compulsory refugee quotas, the Czech Republic has been involved in solving the migration crisis. On the one hand, Prague emphasises the necessity for voluntary action by Member States, while on the other, in a symbolic dimension, the country accepts refugees from Syria in the framework of an agreement between the EU and Turkey, as well as the refugee quota system. Opposition to mandatory quotas can be explained by public opinion in the Czech Republic. According to research from October this year, only 15% of Czechs were in favour of granting shelter to refugees from the Middle East and North Africa, with 79% saying "no." At the same time, Czech politicians have suggested the need to work on the image of the V4, which has suffered in connection with its members' positions on the refugee crisis.

Conclusions. From the point of view of the Czech Republic, building a V4 coalition within the EU remains crucial regarding issues such as negotiating the next EU budget with the greatest possible share of the funds for cohesion policy.

Due to strong ties with Germany, and concern about its own marginalisation in the EU, it is possible that the Czech Republic will distance itself from the policies of Hungary and Poland, if they are perceived as confrontational. Such an attitude was indicated in the statements of Czech politicians, including foreign minister Lubomir Zaoralek, who has explicitly excluded the possibility of the V4 taking a permanent stance against Germany or the EU institutions. Poland can count on Czech support in correcting the functioning of the EU, but not on a reform treaty. Currently, the Czech Republic should be excluded from a possible alliance of states that would like to reduce the competences of the EU institutions. The Visegrad Group can still be used as an instrument of influence on the EU through expressing common positions, for instance on topics such as European integration and protecting the EU's external borders.

The Czech parliamentary election scheduled for autumn 2017 will probably result in friction within the coalition government. During the election campaign, and shortly after the formation of the next government in Prague, Poland should take into account the weakening of the Czech involvement in the Visegrad Group. Possible post-election changes (the liberal Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO), current coalition partner of ČSSD, is leading in the polls) may further affect Visegrad cooperation and relations between Poland and the Czech Republic. Andrej Babiš, ANO chairman, a businessman, billionaire, current deputy prime minister and finance minister, and likely future prime minister, may be regarded as an opponent of closer relations with Poland. There is a visible conflict of interests between his business and political roles. Babiš has made some negative statements on, for example, Polish food, and the Agrofert group, under his control, was in litigation with PKN Orlen. However, Babiš is considered as uncompromising in relation to EU institutions, which could induce him to seek European partners presenting a similar position.