



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group
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Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group

Summary

On July 1, the Czech Republic assumed the presidency of the Visegrad Group which is the most important regional group in Central Europe, consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The presidency has come amid both internal and external turbulences which left visible traces on the agenda. The briefing analyses the Programme of the Czech Presidency which is based on three pillars: safe and advanced society, innovative and interconnected economy and support to Ukraine. The analysis pays attention to the shared as well as dividing issues and puts the individual priorities into a broader politico-economic context.

Introduction

The Czech Republic took over the presidency of the Visegrad Group in mid-2023. This Central European grouping will thus be managed by Prague amid growing discrepancies among individual members. Even though there always were varied positions in some areas and the group has never aspired to unanimity and inner homogeneity, the ongoing large-scale and multilayered geopolitical transformation has brought about a serious crisis of the platform, especially due to a different attitude toward the war in Ukraine, different perception of threats and the overall vision of foreign policy and geopolitical identity of a small continental country in the global political landscape.

Geopolitical differences and defence cooperation

Assuming the presidency on July 1, the Czech side presented its programme.¹ The document is introduced by a tough statement which is fully in line with the Czech Republic's current course in foreign policy but is in sharp contrast to the position of Hungary at the same time. It creates disagreement from the very beginning and leaves no room for seeking consensual positions. The initial section is an unambiguous declaration of the national

¹ *Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2023/2024* (2023). Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic. https://www.mzv.cz/file/5119287/MZV_V4_program_A4_ENG_20_6_23_final.pdf

perspective that corresponds with the hegemonic Western discourse embedded in the US strategic interests but fails to reflect the specific interests and needs of Central Europe. The first sentence of the document addresses the war in Ukraine in typical terms of the Western discourse when speaking about an “unprovoked, unjustified and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine”. The following sentence explicitly calls the Belarussian political representation illegitimate (“Lukashenko’s illegitimate regime”), lambasting it as Russia’s accomplice. Concurrently, the Eurasian major power is marked as a direct security threat to global security, referring to the Kremlin’s negative attitude towards the “rules-based international order”. This introductory part is followed by a pledge to support Kiev to its final victory over Russian “aggressors”. One must ask why a programme of the presidency of the Visegrad Group deals with these issues as a priority, moreover, in an extremely one-sided, nonconsensual way which creates division instead of seeking unity and mutual understanding.

The Czech programme is centred around three keystones: (1) a safe and advanced society; (2) an innovative and interconnected economy; and (3) support for Ukraine. The first area is focused on people-to-people exchanges and cooperation throughout civil societies in individual countries in culture, education, science or sport. Concurrently, it includes enhancement of both internal and external security, improvement of resilience of societies and development of more effective mechanisms of public administration and health care systems. An important role is played by the International Visegrad Fund which was founded in 2000 to support regional cooperation between civil society actors. The annual budget amounts to 10 million EUR.² The Czech Presidency wants to cope with the imminent problem of migration which belongs to a very sensitive topic in the region over a long period. Nevertheless, Prague pays attention mostly to illegal forms of migration in contrast to Hungary whose stance differs. The incumbent Czech government is very active as far as the security, defence and military issues are concerned which tells on its agenda within the presidency as well. The set priorities are strengthening the interoperability of the V4 armed forces including through joint military exercises.

The flagship of the military exercises is the V4 Czech Lion exercise which was held in 2019 for the last time. The presidency will also develop other projects such as the EU Visegrad Battle Group (BG) and the V4 Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters (JLSG HQ). The former is one of the most important results of the defence cooperation in the Visegrad region, contributing to the EU’s rapid response capabilities. So far, the battlegroup has been on standby in 2016, 2019 and 2023, being reinforced by units from other CEE countries, for instance,

² *About Us* (2023). Visegrad Fund. <https://www.visegradfund.org/about-us/the-fund/>

Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, and also Ukraine. The full operational capability of both the BG and the JLSG HQ was reached last year. Overall, the V4 defence cooperation was given a stronger impetus in 2014 with a conclusion of the *Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening Their Defence Cooperation* which was further developed in 2020. All strategic documents are concerned with strengthening the transatlantic military capabilities within NATO.³

Economic and social cooperation

The second key area of the Czech programme is the development of modern, advanced, competitive, resilient and integrated economies. It includes the preparation and construction of high-speed railways whose network is so needed in the region. There are practically no high-speed rails in the V4 countries with some minor exceptions in Poland where one can find several sections enabling a speed of up to 230 km/h. The high-speed railway infrastructure, nonetheless, is to be constructed within the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T), a strategy adopted by the European Commission. Its origins trace back to the 1990s and the current roadmap envisages its completion by 2050. Out of the core TEN-T corridors, the V4 region is to be integrated into the following ones: Baltic-Adriatic Corridor, North Sea-Baltic Corridor, Mediterranean Corridor, Orient/East-Med Corridor and Rhine-Danube Corridor.⁴

Another priority of the second pillar of the presidency programme is the development of a digital and data economy inclusive of the Digital Single Market. Prague would like to exchange know-how and best practices from the Digital Europe Programme which focuses on the expansion of digital technology to businesses, citizens as well as state administration. Aside from digital issues and the challenge posed by the rapid evolution of artificial intelligence, a strong emphasis is to be put on energy and raw materials. It applies not only to the goal of diversification of sources and strengthening economic resilience but also to the integration of the energy market with Ukraine and Moldova. There is a consensus among the V4 countries regarding nuclear energy which is perceived in positive terms unlike Austria, Germany and some other Western European countries. The Czech presidency, therefore, is interested in sharing knowledge about the development and introduction of small, medium and large-sized

³ *Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation* (2023). Visegrad Group. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/cooperation/visegrad-group-defence>

⁴ *Trans-European Transport Network* (2021). European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/transport/infrastructure/tentec/tentec-portal/site/maps_upload/SchematicA0_EUcorridor_map.pdf

modular reactors as an additional form of energy production. Besides nuclear technologies, attention will be paid to the use of hydrogen in transport and other fields. It will be discussed in relation to the European Hydrogen Backbone Initiative and Central European Hydrogen Corridor. The former represents a group of 32 energy infrastructure operators whose aim is to accelerate decarbonisation through the construction of a liquid and renewable pan-European hydrogen market. The latter, in turn, is an initiative launched in 2021 by four gas infrastructure companies from the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovakia and Ukraine interested in the construction of a hydrogen pipeline corridor to transport hydrogen from Ukraine to Germany by 2030.⁵ These examples indicate that Prague has an ambition to accelerate the integration of Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries into the EU and related structures.

The last pillar of the Czech presidency programme is the support to Ukraine not only in terms of military, economic and political assistance but also in terms of integration of the Ukrainian refugees and migrants into majority societies. The Visegrad region has been strongly affected by the inflow of refugees and, not by coincidence, Poland and the Czech Republic are the countries with the largest numbers of them after Russia and Germany. The following table sums up the official figures of the refugees from Ukraine after February 24, 2022, and their share of the entire population in the V4 countries plus adjacent Austria and Germany (the actual figures are likely higher).⁶

Country	Number	Share of population
Germany	1.076.680	1.29 %
Poland	999.690	2.44 %
Czech Republic	352.315	3.36 %
Slovakia	104.290	1.80 %
Austria	100.175	1.12 %
Hungary	52.335	0.52 %

⁵ *Project vision* (2023). Central European Hydrogen Corridor. <https://www.cehc.eu/cehc-project/>

⁶ *Estimated number of refugees from Ukraine recorded in Europe and Asia since February 2022 as of July 11, 2023, by selected country* (2023, July 11). Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1312584/ukrainian-refugees-by-country/>. *Countries in the world by population* (2023, July 16). Worldometer. <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/>

These data can help us to explain why the Czech government has been so engaged in the Ukrainian question. It is, therefore, not too surprising why Prague wants to make use of its presidency to address the problem of the integration of the Ukrainians into the education systems and labour markets from a comparative perspective.

Conclusion

The *Programme of the Czech Presidency* puts forward both consensual and nonconsensual goals. It seems that the Visegrad Group will be able to cooperate efficiently largely at lower levels to the detriment of coordination of political positions and actions at the highest political level. The existing divergencies are serious. Even though the Czech government is formally supportive of the V4, some members of the coalition (especially TOP 09) as well as the president are increasingly critical, pointing, first of all, to Hungary whose policies allegedly make the V4 dysfunctional. In this regard, prominent representatives of TOP 09 call Prime Minister Viktor Orbán a “gravedigger” of the V4, demanding a shift towards Poland, the Baltic states and the Three Seas Initiative instead.⁷ Unlike the last years, the Visegrad cooperation has got stuck.

⁷ Ženišek (TOP 09): Orbán je hlavní hrobník V4. Nikomu to vlastně nevadí (2023, July 25). Parlamentnílisty.cz. <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/politika/politici-volicum/Zenisek-TOP-09-Orban-je-hlavni-hrobnik-V4-Nikomuto-vlastne-nevadi-740155>. Černý pasažér Orbán. Czernin doporučuje se raději přátelit s Pobaltím (2023, June 26). Parlamentnílisty.cz. <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Cerny-pasazer-Orban-Czernin-doporucuje-se-radeji-pratelit-s-Pobaltim-738633>. Prezident Pavel: V4 nebudu škrtat. Ale možná rozšiřovat... (2023, March 13). Parlamentnílisty.cz. <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Prezident-Pavel-V4-nebudu-skrtat-Ale-mozna-rozsirovat-731925>