



Weekly Briefing

**Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Political realignment in Europe:
Czech-French Partnership and V4's Decline**
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Political realignment in Europe: Czech-French Partnership and V4's Decline

Summary

The briefing analyses the recent evolution of Czech foreign policy in relation to the strategic partnership with France and the Visegrad Group (V4). The dynamic of Czech-French relations is put into a historical context and the present agenda is addressed with a focus on energy and military cooperation. It turns out that France becomes one of the closest allies of the Czech Republic, which is accompanied by intensifying cooperation between Prague and Warsaw, and within the Weimar Triangle. It has negative impacts on Visegrad cooperation as well as bilateral relations with Hungary and Slovakia. The February and March V4 summits in Prague demonstrated mutual differences as well as the aversion of the Czech government to a peaceful solution to the war in Eastern Europe.

Introduction

The Czech capital became a place of important political meetings in February and March. French President Emmanuel Macron paid an official visit to the country, focusing on larger military support for Ukraine and the development of nuclear energy in Europe in general, and bilateral cooperation between Prague and Paris in this field in particular. The positive dynamic of Czech-French relations coincides with a wide consensus between the Czech Republic and Poland in contrast to the estrangement in relation to Slovakia and Hungary. In light of these processes, the Visegrad Group lacks unity and coherence among its members, being V2+V2 rather than V4. Nevertheless, such a constellation is not a new phenomenon, and thus does not necessarily imply the disintegration of the platform.

Czech-French relations

Relations between Prague and Paris have belonged to the most important ones traditionally. France was the first country to recognise the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918. The new Central European country was one of the pillars of the French influence in the region. Paris supported the Little Entente, composed of Czechoslovakia,

Romania, and Yugoslavia, as a counterweight to Hungary and Austria, as well as a possible restoration of the Habsburg rule in former Austro-Hungary. Interestingly, the first two chiefs of the General Staff of Czechoslovakia were French, and the defence and military structures of the new state were largely formed by French military forces present in Czechoslovakia. The bond between Czechoslovakia and France was strengthened by a bilateral defence agreement concluded in 1925. This treaty was supplemented with an agreement with the Soviet Union ten years later. This trilateral defence mechanism was aimed primarily against Germany and its growing international ambitions. Active military support in favour of Czechoslovakia in the case of aggression was, nevertheless, conditioned by joint actions on the part of Paris and Moscow. However, France refused to meet its obligations amid the growing tensions and gave consent to the annexation of the Czechoslovak Sudetenland by Germany in Munich in September 1938. The conference was attended by France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom while both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were ignored. Moscow was willing to take active steps in favour of Prague in line with the agreement, but Édouard Daladier's deal with Adolf Hitler thwarted such plans.¹

In the following decades, bilateral relations were strongly affected by overall politico-economic circumstances in Europe, Prague's pivot to the Soviet Union, and the Cold War. Czechoslovakia as a part of the Soviet bloc had limited possibilities to conduct an independent foreign policy, and France was important rather as one of the centres of Czechoslovak exile. Close relations between France and Czechoslovak émigrés as well as domestic dissidents laid foundations for the revival of bilateral relationship after the demise of the Communist regime. Paris supported the integration of the Czech Republic into the transatlantic structures, first and foremost, the EU and NATO. In 2008, a strategic partnership between the two countries was concluded for the first time. France became an important partner not only in political, but also in economic terms. France is the main trade partner together with the adjacent countries (Germany, Austria, Poland, and Slovakia) and China. The mutual economic exchanges have been on the rise, hitting the record level in 2022. France became the fourth most important destination for Czech export. The figure amounted to nearly 260 billion CZK (10.40 billion EUR) compared to 151 billion CZK (6.04 billion EUR) of imports from France. Bilateral trade balance has been positive for a long time as exports to the West European country have exceeded imports. Leading Czech enterprises have conducted their business in France, including companies owned by fourth-richest Czech Daniel Křetínský, Škoda, ČEZ, Sotio,

¹ Horáčková, A. (2019, September 16). *Začíná výstava o rozbití Československa roku 1938. Čerpá i z ruských archivů.* Akademie věd České republiky. <https://www.avcr.cz/cs/o-nas/aktuality/Zacina-vystava-o-rozbiti-Ceskoslovenska-roku-1938.-Cerpa-i-z-ruskych-archivu>

Zetor, and Lasvit. France is also increasingly accentuated by PPF, whose business activities move from Asian and Russian markets to Western countries after the decease of the company's founder Petr Kellner in 2021.² Prospective cooperation in the field of nuclear energy can provide a strong impetus to bilateral political economic relations.

Nuclear energy cooperation

Delivering a speech at the Czech-French Nuclear Forum on March 5, Emmanuel Macron welcomed the Czech plan to expand the domestic nuclear energy sector and lobbied for the EDF company, which participates in the strategic tender on the construction of new atomic reactors in the Czech Republic. The French leader declared that the Czech-French partnership can become a driving force of the European nuclear renaissance and the backbone of Europe's strategic autonomy in nuclear energy, which would be based on exclusively European technologies and subjects. France is interested in establishing a complete European industry chain in the field in order to provide the EU with energy stability amid the green transition and volatile international situation.³ Both sides have experience with nuclear cooperation as French company Orano has supplied nuclear fuel for the power plant in Temelín for many years while Framatome is about to supply the fuel for the Dukovany power station together with Westinghouse. Nevertheless, the most important project is the expansion of at least one of these two Czech nuclear power plants. Decision is to be made this year. The French EDF and Korean KHNP are the only tenderers after the American Westinghouse failed to comply with the requirements in January.

It seems that the EDF is the favourite, and French representatives made their best to strengthen this impression in Prague. The presence of President Macron demonstrated the importance of the Czech energy project for the French side and the latter's high interest in it. Macron emphasised the need for sovereignty in energy and technology, using the mistrust of China among the Czech ruling circles when referring to solar panels whose production is concentrated in the Asian country, whereas the EU is lagging far behind with a share of 0.6 per

² Nádoba, J. (2024, March 27). *Jak se změnila PPF s Kellnerovou v čele: Míří na západ, méně riskuje a bohatne*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ekonomika-firmy-ppf-tri-roky-s-kellnerovou-miri-na-zapad-mene-riskuje-a-uz-zase-bohatne-248641>. Francie (2023, October 24). BusinessINFO.cz. <https://www.businessinfo.cz/navody/francie-souhrnna-teritorialni-informace/2#0-uvod>

³ Müller, R. (2024, March 5). *Macron: Česká jaderná renesance může nastartovat nový „Airbus“*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ekonomika-finance-chceme-byt-soucasti-ceske-jaderne-budoucnosti-rika-sef-edf-247155>

cent in the 2022 world production compared to China's share amounting to 77.8 per cent.⁴ Both the Czech Republic and France consider the development of nuclear energy priority at the EU level and a precondition for Europe's energy security, prosperity and competitiveness.

Military cooperation

Aside from nuclear energy, the leaders of both countries highlighted security and military issues. There has been an increasing agreement between Prague and Paris in this field in contrast to an initial discord regarding the conflict in Ukraine when France, just as Germany and some other European countries, adopted a moderate stance toward Russia, tending to a policy of appeasement in order to reach a political solution. However, France gradually adopted the hardline position of most CEE countries and recent statements by Emmanuel Macron show that Paris is ready to escalate the war instead of advocating a ceasefire. The French side backed the Czech-led military initiative whose aim is to collect ammunition from third countries and supply it to Ukraine to offset insufficient capacity on both the Ukrainian and Western sides. Not by coincidence, the Czech plan was announced in Paris in February. During his visit to Prague, Macron reiterated the French support for the initiative and emphasised that the assistance to Ukraine had to continue until the victory over Russia.

Emmanuel Macron and his Czech counterpart Petr Pavel agreed that Western countries had to accelerate their support and look for ways to include Western troops in the conflict. The Czech head of state mentioned the possibility of training Ukrainian soldiers on Ukrainian territory by Western allies. So far, the training has been carried out outside Ukraine, including the territory of the Czech Republic. Macron was more explicit on this issue ahead of his trip to Prague, admitting that Western troops could be sent to Ukraine. Even though such a scenario was denied by Germany as well as the United Kingdom and the United States, some CEE countries did not dismiss it, for instance, Estonia and Lithuania.⁵ At the same time, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala remains restrained in this regard. In February, he declared that "the Czech Republic was not going to send troops to Ukraine definitely".⁶ Nonetheless, the evolution of

⁴ Tomeš, M. (2024, March 5). *Macronova jaderná mise: Francouzi v Praze budili dojem, jako by v tendru o Dukovany neměli soupeře*. Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/1370052/macronova-jaderna-mise-francouzi-v-praze-budili-dojem-jako-by-v-tendru-o-dukovany-nemeli-souper/>

⁵ Caulcutt, C. (2024, February 29). *Macron stands by remarks about sending troops to Ukraine*. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/emmanuel-macron-ukraine-western-troops-remarks/>

⁶ Prchal, L., Tvrdoň, J. (2024, March 5). *Pavel s Macronem připustili vyslání vojáků na Ukrajinu. Mohli by cvičit jednotky v napadené zemi*. Deník N. <https://denikn.cz/1369816/pavel-s-macronem-pripustili-vyslani-vojaku-na-ukrajinu-mohli-by-cvicit-jednotky-v-napadene-zemi/>

attitudes towards the war on the part of the European leaders indicates that no scenario is excluded in the future.

The two countries not only share the interwar historical tradition of military cooperation but have also realised several important joint defence projects. The Czech side has purchased Caesar self-propelled howitzers produced by Nexter Systems, a French government-owned company. The replacement of old Czechoslovak DANA howitzers with Caesar is a part of the modernisation of the armed forces and decoupling from Soviet and Russian equipment. Prague is interested in the larger involvement of Czech military companies in French supply chains. At the moment, French partners buy ammunition from Sellier & Bellot, one of the world's oldest companies in the defence industry based in the Czech Republic.⁷ The strategic partnership at the political level and the increasingly close military cooperation between Prague and Paris create favourable conditions for deepening interaction in a wide array of fields. During the March visit to the Czech Republic, President Macron and Prime Minister Fiala concluded the fifth Action Plan of the Czech-French Strategic Partnership (2024–2028) whereby declaring an agreement on the fundamental values and interests as well as an allegiance to the transatlantic bond based on the NATO, EU, and alignment with the US. The document defines four security threats to be countered collectively, that is, “Russian imperialism, China’s assertive efforts to undermine the international order, hybrid threats, and terrorism”. The parties declared that the bilateral dialogue is to produce pragmatic and constructive measures and policies aimed at strengthening “European sovereignty, coherence, competitiveness, and unity” together with deepening cooperation with like-minded actors worldwide. Both sides highlighted the imperative of supporting Ukraine and its postwar reconstruction and integration into transatlantic structures.

At the same time, Prague and Paris expressed their interest in the further development of the European Political Community, which was put forward by Emmanuel Macron in May 2022 and whose first summit was held in the Czech capital in October that year.⁸ This intergovernmental platform gathers 44 countries and provides them with an instrument for discussing strategic issues starting from security and ending with economy and climate. The European Political Community can be interpreted as another tool for expanding “European values” and their imposition on individual participating countries beyond the EU framework.

⁷ *Premiér Fiala jednal s prezidentem Francie Macronem o spolupráci v energetice, obraně a podpoře Ukrajiny* (2024, March 5). Vláda České republiky. <https://vlada.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/premier-fiala-jednal-s-prezidentem-francie-macronem-o-spolupraci-v-energetice--obrane-a-podpore-ukrajiny-212284/>

⁸ *Akční plán Strategického partnerství České republiky a Francouzské republiky na léta 2024-2028* (2024, March 5). Vláda České republiky. <https://uv.gov.cz/assets/media-centrum/aktualne/AP-CZ-FR-Final-Clean.pdf>

The EPC was joined by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Türkiye as well as Ukraine so it largely coincides with the EU and NATO area paired with EU's Eastern Partnership and GUAM. It goes without saying that Russia and Belarus were not invited to the platform. In light of the above facts, it turns out that the Czech-French bilateral partnership is being subject to the idea of decoupling and friend-shoring, and even though the strategy is aimed at deepening cooperation within the EU and allies beyond Europe, it is largely exclusive, protectionist, and restrictive in relation to a majority of countries around the world in contrast to true multilateralism.

Weimer Triangle

The deepening partnership between Prague and Paris is a parallel of Polish foreign policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Donald Tusk. The latter emphasises the cooperation within the Weimar Triangle, that is, with France and Germany, to the detriment of the Visegrad Group, other platforms of CEE cooperation, and partially the US as well. In March, the top representatives of the Weimar Triangle met in Berlin to demonstrate the ambitions of these three countries to lead the EU and be the backbone of European unity and larger autonomy. Donald Tusk called on the EU to become a “military power” during his February visit to Paris.⁹ Similarly, the relations between Berlin and Prague have been improving. President Pavel has considered cooperation with Germany a priority for the country. Not surprisingly, he paid an official visit to the Western neighbour soon after his election in March 2023 when he met his counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier as well as Chancellor Olaf Scholz. On the occasion of the 85th anniversary of the establishment of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia and the destruction of the Czechoslovak state on March 15 this year, Petr Pavel, in turn, visited Dresden and held a meeting with Minister-President of Saxony Michael Kretschmer.¹⁰

All these steps on both Czech and Polish sides demonstrate that this couple is moving toward the West with the other two countries of the Visegrad Group, that is, Hungary and Slovakia, adopting a different strategy. Mutual differences emerge especially from disagreements in foreign policy for Budapest and Bratislava stick to a balanced position on the

⁹ Tilles, D. (2024, February 13). *Tusk calls for EU to become “military power” on Paris and Berlin visits*. Notes from Poland. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2024/02/13/tusk-calls-for-eu-to-become-military-power-on-paris-and-berlin-visits/>

¹⁰ *Pavel dal Němcům v Berlíně úkol: Převzít odpovědnost za Evropu* (2023, March 21). Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zahranicni-stredni-evropa-nemecky-prezident-podekoval-pavlovi-za-nasazeni-ceskych-vojaku-na-slovensku-228115>. Český prezident se vydal v den výročí okupace do Německa (2024, March 15). Echo24.cz. <https://echo24.cz/a/HSCGe/zpravy-domov-prezident-pavel-vyroci-okupace-nemecko>

conflict in Ukraine, and prefer a peaceful, political settlement of the war while promoting omnidirectional pragmatic external policies without ideological and political bias. The disunity among Visegrad countries manifested itself in the meetings of prime ministers and foreign ministers in the Czech capital in February and March. These reaffirmed that the Visegrad Group splits into two halves. Despite that, the leaders came to the conclusion that the platform had to be preserved.

V4 torn apart

On February 27, Robert Fico, Viktor Orbán, and Donald Tusk came to Prague to discuss four issues: war in Ukraine, agriculture, energy, and migration. Notwithstanding the differences in the perspectives on the war, the Visegrad prime ministers agreed that Russia had violated international law and that Ukraine had to be supported. However, both Hungary and Slovakia rejected military assistance and interpreted both causes and possible solutions of the conflict in a different way. At a press conference, Donald Tusk interpreted V4 as a grouping aimed at the elimination of Russian influence in the region, highlighting the role of the four countries in the destruction of the Soviet bloc. The Slovak prime minister declared that his country rejected European militarism, called the plan to send western troops to Ukraine “extremely dangerous”, and insisted on peace talks that were to bring a political settlement of the war as well as security guarantees for both Ukraine and Russia. Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico largely focused on consensual topics and stressed the importance of V4. And there was a wide consensus among the prime ministers regarding the other topics. The leaders spoke out in favour of a revision of EU’s agricultural policy as well as the Green Deal, reduction of regulation and bureaucracy, and strengthening international competitiveness. Similarly, all four countries support the development of nuclear energy in the EU. As for migration, the Visegrad countries advocate a moderate approach based on the idea of protection of EU’s external borders, countering illegal migration, and aversion to any form of central relocation of migrants.¹¹

The summit of the prime ministers was followed by a meeting of foreign ministers on March 21 when Juraj Blanár, Radosław Sikorski, and Péter Szijjártó arrived in Prague. The related press conference again demonstrated that the V4 found itself in a troubled and uneasy

¹¹ *Premiéři zemí V4 se shodli na tom, že ruská agrese na Ukrajině je hrubým porušením mezinárodního práva* (2024, February 27). Vláda České republiky. <https://uv.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/premieri-zemi-v4-se-shodli-na-tom--ze-ruska-agrese-na-ukrajine-je-hrubym-porusenim-mezinarodniho-prava-212149/>. *Tisková konference po jednání V4 v Praze* (2024, February 27). Vláda České republiky. <https://uv.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/tiskove-konference/tiskova-konference-po-jednani-v4-v-praze--27--unora-2024-212200/>

situation. Despite attempts to show consensus, mutual differences became even more obvious. The Hungarian foreign minister spoke in favour of cooperation with Russia in areas which were not restricted by sanctions, while the Slovak representative advocated his March meeting with the Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov and emphasised the need for political dialogue. Jan Lipavský and Radosław Sikorski paid attention to the Czech military initiative and support for Kiev instead.¹² Interestingly, both summits were preceded by bilateral talks between Czech and Polish representatives.¹³ Petr Fiala and Donald Tusk demonstrated a high degree of political consensus on a wide array of fields, which is somewhat paradoxical given the fact that the Polish leader comes from the liberal Civic Platform whereas Fiala's ODS is a partner of Law and Justice in the group of the European Conservatives and Reformists. The Chairman of the Senate Miloš Vystrčil from the same ODS welcomed the defeat of their allies in the Polish parliamentary election last October, which reaffirms that the current Atlantist liberal leadership of the ODS is far from the national conservatism of its founder Václav Klaus, or the prominent Member of the European Parliament Jan Zahradil.¹⁴

In contrast, the Czech government led by the ODS is deepening cooperation with the liberal Polish cabinet and appeals to the EU and NATO countries for an assertive countering of "Russian imperialism". Both Prague and Warsaw exert pressure on Berlin and France to accelerate military assistance to Ukraine. In March, Radosław Sikorski criticised the Germans for insufficient military support and called on the chancellor to supply Taurus cruise missiles to the Ukrainians who would thus be given an instrument to hit targets in Russia's inland and bring military operations to the Russian soil. At the same time, the Czech and Polish leaders seem to be interested in gaining the position of EU defence commissioner for the Polish foreign minister, if the post is set up. President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen spoke in favour of the establishment of the new position at the Munich Security Conference in

¹² Harzer, F., Klapal, O. (2024, March 21). *Když mluvil maďarský ministr, Lipavský kroutil hlavou. V4 zůstává rozdělená*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zahranicni-stredni-evropa-kdyz-mluvil-madarsky-ministr-lipavsky-kroutil-hlavou-v4-zustava-rozdelena-248263>

¹³ *Premiéři Česka a Polska jednali v Praze o posílení obranné spolupráce, energetice i situaci na Ukrajině* (2024, February 27). Vláda České republiky. <https://uv.gov.cz/cz/media-centrum/aktualne/premieri-ceska-a-polska-jednali-v-praze-o-posileni-obranné-spoluprace--energetice-i-situaci-na-ukrajine--212131/>. *Polský ministr zahraničí Sikorski na první návštěvě Česka po zvolení nové polské vlády* (2024, March 20). Ministerstvo zahraničních věcí České republiky. https://mzv.gov.cz/jnp/cz/udalosti_a_media/tiskove_zpravy/polsky_ministr_zahranici_sikorski_na.html

¹⁴ „Jako špičkový politik ODS jsi tohle fakt přehnal!“ kritizuje Topolánek Vystrčila (2023, October 17). Echo24.cz. <https://echo24.cz/a/HezGS/zpravy-domov-vystrcil-ocenil-vysledky-volby-polsko-jako-spickovy-politik-ods-prehnal-kritizuje-topolank>

February.¹⁵ In light of these developments, the role of the Visegrad Group will further deteriorate until a new government assumes power in the Czech Republic.

Conclusion

The rapprochement between the Czech Republic on one hand, and Poland and France on the other is accompanied by a decline of the Visegrad Group as a whole. Moreover, the Czech side resorted to the suspension of intergovernmental sessions between the Czech Republic and Slovakia, whereby damaging the extraordinary bilateral relationship.¹⁶ Prague is apparently willing to destroy the pillars of regional cooperation in favour of the campaign against Russia. This case shows once and again that the liberal forces largely ignore the central role of political dialogue and diplomacy, and give preference to confrontation and repression both internally and externally.

¹⁵ Harzer, F. (2024, March 20). *Sikorski v Praze. Visegrád má i přes neshody dál smysl, shodl se s Lipavským*. Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/zahranicni-stredni-evropa-sikorski-v-praze-visegrad-ma-i-pres-neshody-dal-smysl-shodl-se-s-lipavskym-248220>

¹⁶ Zachová, A. (2024, March 6). *Česko kvůli proruskému postoji Slovenska ruší společná mezivládní jednání*. Euractiv. <https://euractiv.cz/section/aktualne-v-eu/news/cesko-kvuli-proruskemu-postoji-slovenska-rusi-spolecna-mezivladni-jednani/>