
Chapter 2

The Visegrad Co-operation, Poland, Slovakia and Austria in the Czech Foreign Policy

COPING WITH IRRITANTS?

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Executive Summary: Since the developments in Central Europe were very dynamic in 2017, the importance of the Visegrad co-operation, Poland, Austria and Slovakia in the Czech foreign policy has grown. The general elections in Austria, the judicial reform in Poland and the subsequent triggering of Article 7 of the Treaty of the EU against Poland, the Polish and Hungarian EU Presidencies and various EU dossiers, such as the dossier on the reform of the EU's asylum system, would all suggest that the Czech Republic should have paid more attention to the region. However, the Czech Republic chose rather a free-riding and adaptational approach toward it, and in some cases, it has shown disinterest in its policy vis-à-vis the region. There were fewer political contacts with and initiatives related to the other V4 states than in the previous years, and the Czech foreign policy was not able to address major dilemmas of the Central European policy. Interestingly, at the same time, the importance of the region was reflected in a higher politicisation and polarisation of the issues related to the Visegrad Group, Poland and Hungary.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The importance of Central Europe for the Czech foreign policy has been growing since 2014, and the year 2017 did not constitute an exception to this trend. Bohuslav Sobotka's cabinet promised a new opening in the relations with Austria already in 2014. This decision led to the inception of the Slavkov co-operation format in 2015. Although there were signals from Prague questioning the position of the Visegrad Group (V4) in the Czech foreign policy toolkit in 2014, they were soon superseded by

an embracing of the V4 as an important political vehicle in the European Union's (EU) debates because of the outbreak of the so-called refugee crisis and also thanks to the Czech V4 Presidency (2015–2016).¹ The victory of the Law and Justice party in Poland in 2015 and the subsequent U-turn in the Polish European policy provided new impulses for a thorough debate on the role of Central Europe in the Czech foreign policy. Last, but not least, the domestic political situation in Poland and Hungary drew even more attention to the dynamics in Central Europe.

The year 2017 did not bring any appeasement into Central Europe. The V4 Presidencies for that year were held by Poland (until the end of June) and Hungary (in the second half of the year), i.e. by two countries sharing a critical stance on the EU's current course. Moreover, populist and far-right political forces scored in the elections in Austria and in the Czech Republic. The approval of the Polish judiciary reform package resulted in the launching of the Article 7 procedure by the European Commission against Warsaw. Hungary also faced international criticism and the European Commission's charge following its approval of a new higher education law (targeting, *inter alia*, Central European University). Furthermore, a number of EU dossiers relevant to the V4 were negotiated on the EU level – such as those related to the reform of the Common European Asylum System and the revision of the Posting of Workers Directive. 2017 was also marked by the first visit of US President Donald Trump in the region as he attended the Three Seas Initiative (which the Czech Republic also participated in) summit in Warsaw.

Despite these unprecedentedly dynamic and polarising trends in the region, Central Europe was almost invisible in the Czech domestic political context. Neither the V4 nor Austria were debated in the Parliament, nor did they become a part of the pre-election discussions on the Czech foreign policy. However, the Visegrad Group was unprecedentedly referenced in the parties' manifestos. Seven out of the nine parties in the Chamber of Deputies praised the V4 as a useful and important co-operation format for the Czech Republic. Moreover, the Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) stressed the value of the V4 on many occasions. Only the Czech Pirate Party (*Česká pirátská strana – ČPS*) sent out mixed signals regarding the V4.² Also, the problems of the Visegrad Group, namely those of its image and of the internal developments in Poland and Hungary, were on several occasions addressed by the Czech members of the European Parliament (Pavel Svoboda, Luděk Niedermayer, Pavel Telička and Jan Zahradil), but rather as a part of the media and public debate, as these voices were far from the domestic decision making.

AGENDA AND EVENTS

The Visegrad Group in the Czech Foreign Policy

The Visegrad Group has remained the focal point of the Czech Central European policy and the key regional co-operation format. Nevertheless, this stability also meant that problems with the Czech participation in the Visegrad Group were not addressed in 2017. As the previous editions of the yearbook described it, the Visegrad Group

offers a comfortable tool for voicing the Czech opposition to any relocation quota scheme on the European level.³ In other words, the government could present a hard position in regard to this issue to the Czech public, which allegedly desired it, while hiding behind the more outspoken Poland and Hungary during diplomatic talks. Thus, the Czech Republic tried to present itself as a more constructive member of the V4 in front of Western European countries and European institutions. This status was further enhanced by the deterioration of the rule of law in Hungary and Poland.

Such an approach could have resulted in three scenarios: the Czech Republic's absolute embracing of the position it presented to both the public and the V4 partners, which would lead to it standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Warsaw and Budapest in terms of their perspective on the EU; a constructive diplomatic effort in which the Czech Republic would try to appease other actors regarding various aspects of the so-called *East-West divide*; and the Czech Republic's de-activation, inertia and free-riding within the V4. The Czech Republic chose the latter option in 2017. It was not able to capitalise on its position as the most constructive V4 member and present itself as a driving force behind a gradual improvement of the V4's position in the EU, which, after all, has not taken place yet. Its lack of political activity towards its Central European counterparts, as well as its concentration on domestic issues and focus on a hard stance towards the relocation scheme effectively paralysed its pro-active efforts in regard to the V4. In sum, in 2017, the Czech policy towards the Visegrad Group remained a hostage of the populist drift which took place during the so-called migration crisis in 2015–2016.

Asylum and migration policy also constituted the most important part of the V4 Prime Ministers' summits' agenda in 2017. The issue was raised at nearly all the Prime Ministers' meetings and constituted a large part of the agenda of the interior ministers' meetings. The V4 addressed the Common European Asylum System reform and underlined its opposition towards the mandatory quota system for refugees and asylum seekers, and also stressed the necessity of border control. In July, the V4 Prime Ministers offered Italy help with countering the migration pressure. The V4 contribution of ca. EUR 36 million to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa was then agreed in December after the meeting of the V4 Prime Ministers with their Italian counterpart (the Czech Republic contributed $\frac{1}{4}$ of the sum).⁴

The Visegrad Group also issued a joint declaration on the future of the EU before the informal EU-27 anniversary summit in Rome in March. The V4's declaration singled out the unity of all member states, and a fair relationship between the Eurozone and non-Eurozone countries, and it underlined the need for a stronger role of national parliaments.⁵ Thus, the main concern of the V4 was the so-called two-speed Europe that would worsen the position of the V4 members in the EU. The V4 followed up on this in its contributions to the debate on the future of the EU in October at the Prime Ministers' meetings with the President of the European Council Donald Tusk and the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker. The V4 stressed unity and the EU's convergence as the key elements of any future EU reform.

Among the other EU-related issues debated on the Prime Minister-level was the dual quality of food products, which was addressed during the February and July sum-

mits when the V4 appealed to the European Commission to effectively address this issue.⁶ The amendment of the Posting of Workers Directive was also debated in several V4 formats, including the Prime Minister level. The Prime Ministers objected to the protectionist practices and the infringement of the internal market which the directive could bring according to them.⁷ Moreover, the future of the Cohesion Policy and the Common Agriculture Policy were discussed on the ministerial level in the V4+ format, signalling the debate on the next Multi-annual Financial Framework. Last, but not least, the Prime Ministers also signed a Joint Declaration on Mutual Co-operation in Innovation and Digital Affairs which deepens the V4 co-operation in that field.⁸

Defence and security is one of the traditional areas of the V4 co-operation, although more robust projects in this area are still hampered by divergent threat perceptions, as well as differences in capabilities and military industries. Thus, the co-operation usually concentrates mainly on political discussions and military trainings. This trend continued in 2017. The V4 countries undertook a rotational training mission in the Baltic countries (Czech soldiers exercised in Lithuania in the first quarter of the year). Moreover, the V4 defence ministers also re-confirmed the intention to form again a V4 EU Battlegroup in 2019.⁹ Furthermore, the V4's political discussions centred on the acknowledgment of the NATO Enhanced Forward Presence as an important step in the Alliance adaption, and also on the European defence co-operation. The activities of the V4 members signalled a much needed convergence of their positions. Poland, despite some initial doubts, decided to join PESCO, and the Czech Republic and Slovakia declared their greater commitment to the Enhanced Forward Presence.

The V4 remained committed to the Eastern Partnership (EaP) agenda in 2017. Two meetings of the V4 and EaP foreign ministers in the V4+ format and one meeting of the deputy ministers took place in the run-up to the Brussels EaP Summit. The declarations from the meetings stressed – *inter alia* – the need for better connectivity between the EaP countries and the EU.¹⁰ Thus, despite the complicated bilateral relations of Poland and Hungary with Ukraine, the V4 was able to present some positive agenda *vis-à-vis* the region of Eastern Europe.

The V4 activity towards the Western Balkans was limited in 2017. The traditional meeting of the V4 foreign ministers with their Western Balkan partners focussed mainly on assessment and acknowledgment of the integration progresses.¹¹ Also, after a couple of years of preparations, the Western Balkans Fund was created according to the model of the International Visegrad Fund, and with its support, it started to operate in 2017. However, the lack of new ideas in regard to the Western Balkans could be regarded as a lost opportunity for the V4, since the European institutions and some EU Member States promised to pay more attention to the region in 2018.

The V4+ meetings were held in various traditional formats in 2017. The V4+Benelux Prime Ministers' meeting and the V4+Nordic-Baltic 8 foreign ministers' meeting tackled issues such as European security, European defence co-operation, migration, the future of the EU and the EU's internal market. There were also two V4+ meetings with extra-European partners – the President of Egypt Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the Prime Minister of Israel Benjamin Netanyahu. Nevertheless, the benefit of both of these protocolary high-level meetings remains questionable.

Poland

The latest Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy considers Poland a strategic partner.¹² However, after the victory of the Law and Justice party in the autumn 2015 elections and the consequent U-turn in Polish European policy, the Czech Republic has to deal with Poland's unpredictability and bad reputation on the European level. Nevertheless, Poland remains a key bilateral partner for the Czech Republic because of a diverse and widening sectoral agenda and the growing bilateral trade between the two countries. In fact, in 2017, Poland became the second most important trading partner of the Czech Republic for the first time.

The dispute regarding the quality of the rule of law in Poland between Warsaw and the European institutions intensified in 2017. In September, the European Commission launched a procedure in regard to this matter in accordance with Article 7 of the Treaty of the EU against Poland. The Minister of Justice Robert Pelikán expressed his concerns regarding the planned judiciary reform in a letter to his Polish counterpart Zbigniew Ziobro.¹³ Similarly, the appeal titled "*We Cannot Stay Silent*", which criticised the planned Polish judiciary reform, was prepared and signed by the five most important Czech judiciary authorities.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the Czech Republic refrained from any direct criticism of the steps of the Polish government and limited its declarations about them to affirming its belief that the dispute would be eventually concluded. Such a stance was also taken up by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš.¹⁵

As the Polish government continued with its confrontational approach *vis-à-vis* the European institution, the partnership with it on several European policy issues eroded. Poland asked for a fundamental EU reform which would include a change of the Treaty, whereas Prague opposed it. Poland also objected to the re-election of Donald Tusk as the President of the European Council, but the Czech Republic supported it.

The Czech Republic also voiced its informal skepticism¹⁶ towards the Three Seas Initiative – a project of twelve Central and Eastern European countries aiming for better interconnectedness in the region led by Poland and Croatia. Interestingly, the summit of the Initiative was held in Warsaw in July and it was highlighted by the participation of US President Donald Trump. Yet, the Czech President Miloš Zeman did not attend the event and the Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Jan Hamáček acted as his replacement there. The Czech-Polish defence and security co-operation intensified in 2017. The Czech Minister of Defence Martin Stropnický met his Polish counterpart Antoni Macierewicz in March. The Czech Republic offered its engagement in NATO's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, which will be led by Poland in 2020, and its participation in the newly formed NATO Multinational Division North-East Headquarters in Elbląg.¹⁷ Moreover, the Czech Republic participated in the meeting of NATO's Eastern Flank countries within the so-called *Bucharest Format* in Warsaw.

Though the bilateral meetings of Czech and Polish governmental delegations have already become an annual tradition, the 2017 meeting did not take place, as it was called off because of the political crisis in the Czech Republic at the time. After the quite intense frequency of high level bilateral meetings between the two countries in 2016, there were no bilateral visits of their Prime Ministers or Presidents in the following year. The only high level bilateral visit of a similar sort occurred when the

Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek bilaterally met the Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski in Warsaw in August.

However, the sectoral bilateral agenda between the two states intensified in 2017. Their Ministers of Transport Dan Ťok and Cezary Grabarczyk met two times in a bilateral format. They discussed the second Czech-Polish motorway connection between Hradec Králové and Wrocław and the reconstruction of the railway between Bohumín and Katowice. Thus, both parties are actively trying to address infrastructural bottlenecks.¹⁸ Moreover, a Czech-Polish-Slovak trilateral meeting that was attended also by the Slovak Minister of Transport focussed on inland waterways, including the Danube-Oder-Elbe canal.¹⁹ There was also a meeting of the Czech and Polish Ministers of Environment that was devoted to the air pollution in the Czech-Polish borderland region and the expansion of the Turów brown coal lignite mine, which may negatively influence water sources in parts of the Liberec region.²⁰ Last, but not least, the two countries' Ministers of Culture signed a new program of Czech-Polish cultural co-operation for the years 2017–2021.²¹ The list of meetings shows that the Czech Republic and Poland are able to deal with critical issues such as environmental protection and transport. However, the long-term non-resolved agenda like the so-called *territorial debt* (the Czech Republic should give Poland some 368 hectares of its territory) and the so-called *Warsaw properties issue* (the Czech Republic demands the possession of its diplomatic buildings in Warsaw) did not move forward in 2017.

Austria

The Czech foreign policy has focussed on the relatively underdeveloped relations with Austria since 2014. This effort led to an intensification of bilateral relations on several layers, stretching from the contacts of regions to the heads of governments level. New formats for their interactions such as the 2+6 meetings of regional representatives from both countries and their foreign ministers or the Czech-Austrian Discussion Forum were established. Austria has also been a part of the Slavkov trilateral format, which was formed, *inter alia*, with the aim to involve Vienna more in Central European affairs. The Czech Republic also became more interested in the Austria-driven Central European Defence Co-operation, as its focus has adjusted to the current security issues such as irregular migration.

The year 2017 could be regarded as a test of a *new opening* with Austria in the Czech foreign policy. Alexander Van der Bellen, who had been affronted by the Czech President Miloš Zeman during the preceding Austrian presidential elections, as he openly supported Van der Bellen's opponent Norbert Hofer, assumed the presidential office in Austria.²² However, it is mainly the general elections in both countries (the Austrian elections having brought the Freedom Party of Austria into the government) which may influence the future of Czech-Austrian relations since the social-democratic link, which contributed to the intensification of their mutual relations in the past, has significantly diminished.

President Van der Bellen visited Prague already in June 2017. Apart from a meeting with his Czech counterpart, he also participated in the second Czech-Austrian

Business Forum. Furthermore, the Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka met the Austrian Chancellor Christian Kern twice in the Slavkov Format and also held bilateral talks with him which centred on the current European agenda. Also, Foreign Minister Zaorálek visited Vienna in July to establish a co-operation with Vienna's prestigious Institute for Human Sciences. Moreover, the Czech-Austrian Discussion Forum took place in November and focussed on the issues of Industry 4.0, Labor 4.0 and Society 4.0. Also, traditionally active were the bilateral contacts of the Ministries of Transport and Culture. Meanwhile, the co-operation between the Ministries of Interior and Defence continued not only in a bilateral format, but also within the frameworks of the Salzburg Forum and the Central European Defence Co-operation. The Czech Republic and Austria share the stance that border control should be the key element of the EU's migration policy. Contrastingly, however, the Austrian Chancellor's declaration that the EU countries not accepting refugees through relocation schemes should be cut off from the European funds and the follow-up reaction of the Czech Minister of Interior have shown that the interests of the two countries do not overlap in all aspects.²³

Nevertheless, some projects commenced within the "new opening" with Austria did not continue in 2017. Also, the meeting of the neighbouring regions' representatives and the foreign ministers (the 2+6 meeting) did not take place. Nevertheless, the Czech-Austrian relations went through a new stage of intensification in 2017 as some new initiatives were launched, and the election campaigns in both countries had little negative influence on the mutual relations.

Slovakia

The Czech-Slovak relations have been close, cordial and intensive in 2017, as has been traditionally the case. Their bilateral contacts have always been multi-layered, and the year 2017 was not an exception. President Zeman paid a farewell visit to Bratislava at the end of his first mandate; there was also a meeting of the Czech and Slovak governments in Lednice – the only Czech government-to-government meeting in 2017 – as well as meetings of the countries' foreign and sectoral ministers. Last, but not least, there were several bilateral visits of the Parliaments' representatives. The agenda of the bilateral talks usually focussed on current European issues, as the Czech-Slovak relations are nearly problem-free and work smoothly on an informal level as well. Both countries also focussed on the joint celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the declaration of Czechoslovakia's independence in 2017.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia also pose themselves as a counterbalance to the more Brussels-criticising Poland and Hungary in Central Europe. However, this role has been so far limited to intra-Visegrad diplomacy and focussed on the water-downing of some proposals of the Polish and Hungarian V4 Presidencies. The most visible expression of the two countries' distance from Warsaw and Budapest was the joint visit of the Czech and Slovak Prime Ministers to Berlin on the 25th anniversary of the Czechoslovak-German Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, which took place in the beginning of April.

The Slavkov Format

The co-operation in the Czech-Slovak-Austrian *Slavkov Co-operation Format*, which was established in 2014, continued on the sectoral level of working groups in 2017. There were also two Prime Ministers' meetings in 2017. The first one, in Brno, discussed the Format's traditional issues such as dual education and infrastructure, and also the European agenda.²⁴ The second meeting, in Salzburg, hosted also the French President Emmanuel Macron and was devoted mainly to the revision of the Posting of Workers Directive.²⁵ In this case, the Slavkov Co-operation Format was effectively utilised for bargaining on a sensitive EU issue for the first time.

IDENTIFICATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF KEY ACTORS

The neighbourly relations in Central Europe are specific in the fact that the geographical proximity there facilitates mutual contacts. Therefore, many actors are active in their relations with the V4 partners and Austria. The absence of a limited number of gatekeepers is indeed a desired situation for the policy *vis-à-vis* Central Europe.

Of course, the Prime Ministers' meetings are the most important in the relations of the Central European states. In 2017, there were many V4 meetings, yet the bilateral contacts between the members were limited – e.g. the traditional meeting of the Czech governmental delegation with its Polish counterpart did not take place in that year. The Ministries of Environment, Transport and Regional Development were also active in the bilateral contacts, as their agendas often include cross-border contacts. Interestingly, one of the most active actors in the bilateral contacts was the Ministry of Defence. This was the case not only in the relations with the V4 partners – mainly Poland – but also in the gradually intensifying relations with Austria. Nearly all political actors perceive the co-operation in the Central European region positively and support it.

MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPACE

In 2017, the Czech media and public space focussed on the main political events which took place in the Central European region – the election in Austria, the judicial reform and the protests against it in Poland, and the political situation in Hungary. The perception of Central Europe as a polarising and polarised region has further sharpened in the public debate during the year. The Czech Members of the European Parliament ran the debate on the position of the Visegrad Group in the EU and the developments in Poland and Hungary, since these issues were discussed in its committees and in the plenary sessions. Pavel Telička,²⁶ Pavel Svoboda²⁷ and Luděk Niedermayer²⁸ pointed out the developments in Poland and Hungary and the negative effects which the Czech membership in the V4 could have, whereas Petr Mach²⁹ and Jan Zahradil³⁰ criticised the EU institutions for their stance *vis-à-vis* Warsaw and Budapest. Interest-

ingly, a few demonstrations took place in Prague to draw public awareness to the steps taken by the Polish and Hungarian governments, which was a novel development in the Czech public debate on Central Europe.³¹

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Central European region remains regarded as of a high political importance for the Czech Republic. However, the dilemma outlined in the introduction – i.e. between welcoming, embracing and joining the course set for the V4 by Hungary and Poland on the one hand and distancing oneself from it on the other hand – was not addressed by the Czech Republic in 2017. Moreover, the elections in Austria and the entrance of the Freedom Party of Austria into Austria's federal government have contributed to the future political unpredictability of the region's direction.

In the current set up, pro-active actions like imposing one's own policy, mediation or contribution to the creation of a common policy would have been desired on the part of Prague. However, these activities were limited, and the only reason for the Czech Republic's European relevance was the Czech contribution to the compromise in the negotiations on the revision of the Posting of Workers Directive. The Czech Republic chose a rather reactive approach, free riding in the V4 context and inertia in its bilateral contacts with Poland. In the Czech case, there was a mix of new policy initiatives, as well as less activity in some areas in the relations with Austria.

The ideal policy towards the region would be proactive mediation. Using that strategy, the Czech Republic would utilise its political and diplomatic tools to diminish the gaps between the V4 and Western Europe, Berlin and Brussels in particular. The materialisation of such a scenario would have a positive effect not only on Central Europe, but also on the Czech relations with Germany and on the EU as such, as it would contribute to the diminishing of the so-called *East-West divide* in the EU. Nevertheless, the Czech Republic has not the capacity to act in that way under the current political circumstances. A clear EU policy, a readiness for trade-offs and compromises in sensitive issues like migration, and a solid credibility in the eyes of Czech partners would be needed for Prague to play a positive role in this respect. Since none of these factors could be expected to occur, the Czech Republic will not invest much political effort in trying to get rid of the negative label of the European irritants, which the V4 got in the last few years. Rather the opposite: the domestic development in the Czech Republic contributes to the perception of Central Europe as an area of low predictability, a hardly definable protest and democratic decline.

Endnotes

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