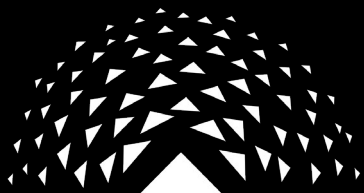


KKI

4:1



What to expect
from the Czech Presidency
of the Visegrad Group
2019/2020?



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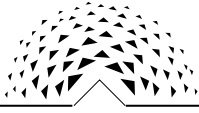
In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same question concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in and beyond Hungary and to promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: "What to expect from the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2019/2020?"

ALICA KIZEKOVA

Major strategic documents related to the Czech foreign policy, such as [the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Czech Republic](#), highlight the intensive collaboration on all levels of state and society among the states of the Visegrad Group (viewed as neighbours with close cultural connections) and suggest that the Czech Republic will continue deepening the mutual ties in the future. Seven out of nine Czech political parties spoke about the V4 in their election programs in Autumn 2017. They counted on the established brand of the V4 in Europe, viewing it as a platform where the government could voice their opposition regarding topics such as the refugee quotas or searching for a common European asylum and migration policy. However, many wished to distance themselves from the disagreements over alternative forms of the EU since they complicated the Czech desire to build closer ties with Germany. Thus, the Czechs consider the V4 cooperation and building ties with Germany and Austria, the Czech Republic's neighbouring countries, equally important. The leadership, however, is unable to act more proactively in suggesting the country's priorities and opts for more compliance or passive acceptance of the status quo.

[The proposed program](#) for the Czech Presidency of the V4 has chosen the motto "V4 Reasonable Europe" and positions the V4 cooperation towards a more conciliatory path in order to reach more positive outcomes during these challenging times when the EU is entering a new institutional cycle after the European Parliament elections, the Brexit talks, and the Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations, as well as the heightened threats coming from mismanaged migration flows. The Czechs want to utilise the presidency to strengthen various V4+ formats, especially those with Germany, France, Austria, the Benelux, Nordic and Baltic states. They wish to bring more positive and constructive topics to the agenda to overcome the negative image that has been cast over the Visegrad Group in the last few years. The goal is to keep the collaboration as flexible and informal as possible in order to maintain the group's inclusive nature, by expanding the projects to other states which could serve as viable allies within the Union discussions and negotiations.

Having several major commemorations taking place during the presidency provides the Czech Republic with good opportunities to voice a more constructive agenda and find ways to connect with people across the V4, and possibly the wider neighbourhood and Union, to demonstrate the benefits of an



active regional cooperation. These processes might be hindered if the countries consistently oppose proposals from Brussels while not providing workable solutions to the relevant problems. A major challenge is going to be delivering a vision for the future of the post-Brexit Europe, including the definitions of its strategic perspectives on the EU enlargement process for the Western Balkans and closer ties with the Eastern Partnership partners. These challenges can be overcome by constructive use of time during the planned sectoral meetings and activities. Ultimately, in order to move forward effectively, it is vital to reduce the gaps between the V4 and Western Europe, especially by finding some compromises concerning more sensitive agendas, while committing more political capital to expanding the V4 coalition potential through joint projects in spheres that are of common interest.

DÁNIEL VARGA

Taking over from Slovakia in July 2019, the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group is going to operate in a very busy European environment with regard to the new institutional cycle and the Multiannual Financial Framework negotiations, which means that finding a healthy balance between the V4's and other member states' interests will be of utmost importance throughout the year.

After the three Ss of the Slovak Presidency, the Czech Republic took on the three Rs in its programme, with the title '*V4 Reasonable Europe*': reasonable solutions, revolutionary technologies, and reconciling approaches. In terms of 'revolutionary technologies', research, development, and innovation, along with digital dimensions is a high priority shared by the Visegrad countries as a tool to decrease the still-existing gaps in innovation capabilities; therefore, it is expected that the current Presidency will take steps in this direction.

The V4 prime ministerial meeting was one of the earliest activities on the calendar, having already taken place on 12 September. The heads of governments also convened and met with their counterparts from the Western Balkan countries in the framework of the V4 – WB Summit in Prague, an event which Czech PM Andrej Babis was proud of. This signals that support for the possible enlargement of the neighbouring region is high on the Czech Presidency's priority list. This coincides with the Hungarian interests in this respect, especially having in mind the prospects Hungary has had with the enlargement and neighbourhood portfolio in the European Commission.

Still within the 'reasonable solutions' point of the programme, the Czech approach to defence cooperation has been and is likely to remain high on the agenda, as there is strong willingness from their side towards this field, and they have always been the driving force behind joint V4 defence efforts. Learning from the experience of the difficulties and challenges connected to common public procurements, the focus might shift towards operational deployment,

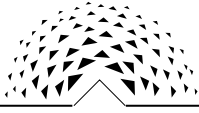
along with the V4 Battle Group, which is already on standby in the second half of 2019. What is more, there are common motivations for possibly prolonging this Battle Group until 2023; therefore, defence is a field of policy that is expected by all countries, Hungary included, to be in the centre of not only the current but also the upcoming presidency programmes.

When it comes to Hungarian priorities within the Czech Presidency programme, reconciling approaches is the point that bears the most importance, as the issues of the MFF negotiations, cohesion, migration, infrastructure, and energy are all listed here. No additional in-depth explanation is necessary to underline the significance of migration and asylum policy for the V4, and especially for the Hungarian government, as the Visegrad stance is quite clear towards quotas and mandatory actions. Regional infrastructural cooperation is also high on the agenda, and further steps are expected to be made towards connectivity with other regional formats until June 2020.

If there are possible divisions to be seen inside the V4, they are along the lines of their vision regarding the future of the EU, and these might emerge during the MFF negotiations or the transition period between the institutional cycles. For instance, Slovakia being a Eurozone member and possibly pulling towards the EU core, or Czechia having closer ties with Western Europe might bring about tensions; however, the V4+ format has always been effective in finetuning differing views between the V4 and other EU member states. As the V4 countries face the largest cuts according to the new funding scheme, agriculture cohesion and the budget is a top priority for Hungary, as well as the proposed rule of law conditionalities. In the Hungarian government's point of view, the [already existing spending control mechanisms](#) should be enforced instead of creating new ones. The commonalities concerning the budget discussions suggest that the Czech Presidency [is to continue](#) the Slovak one in terms of the strengthening of the Central European negotiating and advocating abilities, hence serving as a bridge between differing Western and Central and Eastern European considerations.

ŁUKASZ OGRODNIK

The Czech presidency in the Visegrad Group came just after the 15th anniversary of the four Visegrad countries entering the EU, and the 20th anniversary of NATO enlargement to the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. 2019 also marks four years since the outbreak of the migration crisis which put a spotlight on the group. Putting anniversaries aside, the timing of the Czech presidency most importantly covers the shaping of the new European Commission (EC) or, to use the words of Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, the "European game of thrones". Meanwhile, the negotiations of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the period of 2021-2027 have reached their culmination.



EU matters remain the main subject of discussion among V4 decision makers. This has been confirmed, among others, by the coordination meetings on the margin of each European Council summit. The Czech devotion to the European dimension has been reflected in the presidency's motto: "Reasonable Europe," and more importantly in the main priorities, which correspond to Poland's interests. The first priority is the quest of defending the favourable adaptation of the EU budget. The Cohesion Policy and the Common Agricultural Policy are of common interest to the V4 countries. The Visegrad focus on agricultural policy explains why granting Poland this portfolio in the new EC has been viewed positively by the Czech, Slovak, and Hungarian leaders. On the other hand, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki welcomed as a success of the whole V4 the fact that the Czech Republic and Slovakia received two posts of vice presidents in the EC. Secondly, Poland sees the focus on security during the Czech presidency positively. The Visegrad Battle Group is on alert in the second half of this year.

Also, the commitment to influence EU enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy both binds the V4 countries and reflects the Polish interests. However, while the Polish government puts more emphasis on the integration of the Eastern Partnership members, the Czech Republic highlights the need to cooperate more with the Western Balkans. Recently an extraordinary move from the V4 was the [letter of V4 Prime Ministers](#) which expressed regret that the EU has failed to open the accession process with the Republic of North Macedonia and Albania. Additionally, it also encourages the EU to lead a more ambitious policy: "the EU has to act more geopolitically and advance more vigorously its interests on a global scale". The annual meeting of V4 presidents, hosted this time by Miloš Zeman in Láň on 2 October, was organized in the V4+ form. This time the Visegrad heads of states were joined by the presidents of Slovenia and Serbia to discuss "the EU's open-door policy".

The V4 states have not always been on the same page. Attitudes towards the euro, relations with Russia, or stances on EU matters such as the revision of the Posting of Workers Directive have confirmed that national interest usually defeats the fragile Central European unity. The Czech V4 presidency has brought another example: climate neutrality. While Slovakia supports the aspirations aimed at achieving EU climate neutrality by 2050, the three other V4 states do not agree with this goal. For Poland, the divergent views on Nord Stream 2 could be disappointing – an investment which for the government in Warsaw is perceived as a threat to energy security in the EU. A joint reaction on this matter, like the V4 countries did in 2016 when they sent a letter to the EC urging it to intervene, seems highly unlikely today. Another drawback from the Polish point of view is that the [presidency's programme](#) narrows the sphere of energy cooperation to nuclear energy, which is not a part of Poland's energy mix (unlike that of the other V4 countries).

The actions of the V4 under the Czech presidency have shown that Visegrad is on the march again, and that this time it is not about migration. The V4 has proven in the past that it could be effective in blocking EU decisions negatively viewed by the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. But forming a

common front inside the EU was never an easy task – the last declaration on the future of the EU is over a year old ([the “stronger together” V4 joint statement](#)) and shows a rather restrained approach to EU integration. The V4 shall therefore try to come up with positive proposals that can both strengthen its strategic position and improve its image.

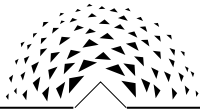
NIKOLETT GARAI

Even though the current governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia show a strong commitment to coordinating positions along their shared interests in the Visegrad Group format, especially when it comes to EU affairs, some domestic and international political events could trigger changes in the current status quo and have the potential of slowing down the dynamics of V4 cooperation. These events are highlighted below.

The V4 countries must navigate several domestic and international challenges. In order to be able to form common positions, a strong coordination of the Czech V4 Presidency is required during its one-year term. Since the Visegrad Group does not have any formal permanent supranational institution that designates the course and direction of the cooperation, the effective functioning of the group depends on each government’s foreign policy priorities and on their willingness to work together. Hence, domestic political changes can have a significant impact on the depth and level of engagement. In Hungary and in the Czech Republic no major domestic political events are anticipated until the end of the Czech Presidency in June 2020; however, in Slovakia parliamentary, while in Poland presidential elections will be held in 2020.

The elections in Slovakia will be interesting to follow, as new political forces could gain momentum following the political trends that unfolded after the murder of Ján Kuciak and his fiancée in February 2018. According to [the recent polls](#), the liberal alliance of Progressive Slovakia and SPOLU (Together) now stands at around 12%, whereas the new centre-right party Za ľudí (For the People) formed by former head of state Andrej Kiska enjoys the support of 9%. Furthermore, some of the opposition parties (PS, SPOLU, Za ľudí, KDH, SaS) have already formed a [political pact](#) not to enter into a coalition with Smer – SD (the senior party of the current government coalition), the national conservative SNS and the right-wing nationalist ĽSNS of Marian Kotleba, should they be in a government-forming position after the ballot. The formation of a new government coalition with a different composition of parties could lead to changes in the approach towards V4 cooperation.

In Poland, [national elections](#) were held on 13 October, 2019. The Law and Justice Party could form a government again under the leadership of Mateusz Morawiecki, as they managed to gain majority in the lower house of the parliament, while losing power in the upper house with a narrow margin against the opposition forces. Nevertheless, no major changes can be expected regard-



ing the new Polish government's approach and policies regarding the Visegrad Group. What could, however, have an impact on the future of the cooperation is the outcome of the presidential election in 2020, if during the campaign of the candidates the V4 cooperation comes up as a topic – just like it happened during the Slovak presidential election. This will be very likely because Poland will take over the rotating V4 presidency from the Czech Republic on 1 July, 2020.

Lastly, there is another event that might have an impact on bilateral relations between the V4 countries, especially between Hungary and Slovakia. At a rhetorical level the V4 leaders get along very well, the V4 prime ministers will even [celebrate](#) the 30th anniversary of the fall of communism together in Prague. However, next year will be politically very sensitive for Central European societies because of the 100th anniversary of the Treaty of Trianon, which could magnify historical grievances and nationalistic sentiments.