

CENS 2017 PAPER SERIES

The Role and Status of the Visegrad Countries after Brexit: the Czech Republic

Zuzana STUHLÍKOVÁ
EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

November, 2017

This paper was delivered in the context of the international conference entitled: Old and new EU engines: *Shifting Power and Strategic Alternatives for EU and V4 after Brexit?*, organized on October 9th, 2017 by the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS), at the Central European University, with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) – Budapest Office.

This policy brief aims to analyse how are intra-European traditional partnerships changing and evolving after the British Brexit referendum in 2016. In the first part, I examine the status quo before the referendum, while changes and new initiatives are a main topic of the second part. In conclusion, I argue that the Czech Republic is facing a decisive moment in its relations with European partners – in order to live up to its strategic goal of becoming a full-fledged member of the EU; it must firstly clearly define its long-term goals and strategies in partial questions. Furthermore, the Czech Republic cannot insist on keeping the traditional ties at any cost and look for ad hoc partners outside its traditional framework, based on common approach.

1. Czech Republic's main partners in the EU

The Czech Republic's main partners in the European Union are primarily determined by its geographical position and historical ties, only secondarily by common interests. Traditionally, the states of Central Europe are seen as its most important partners – Slovakia, Poland and Hungary (states of the Visegrad Group), Germany and Austria. The Concept of the Czech Republic's Foreign Policy, approved by the government in 2015, mentions two other European states as important partners – France and the United Kingdom.

The closest partner of the Czech Republic is Slovakia. The heritage of 75 years as one country, as well as the lack of language, cultural or other barriers result in exceptionally close ties. This can be best demonstrated by the annual joint governmental meetings or the presidential tradition of the first foreign trip of the newly elected head of state leading to the respective other country. Even a short falling out following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, between the governments of Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar did not prevent the two countries from close cooperation during the EU accession process. Both countries aim to coordinate their positions in the EU and to continue to strengthen cooperation in the fields of energy or infrastructure.

The bilateral relations with Poland are strengthened by the Strategic Partnership that includes inter-governmental consultations. In the civil society sphere, the Czech – Polish Forum aims to foster dialogue between both countries and builds on historical contacts of dissidents during the communist period. However, Czech-Polish relations have recently been influenced by the controversial steps of the PiS government run by Jarosław Kaczyński, which alienated Poland from most European partners, including the Czech Republic.

The lack of a common border meant that beyond the Visegrad format, bilateral relations with Hungary were never standing out as exceptional – and, as in the case of Poland, the steps and rhetoric of Victor Orbán’s government make Hungary a difficult regional partner, both for bilateral and multilateral cooperation at the EU level.

The Visegrad group, the regional cooperation platform of the Czech Republic with these above mentioned three Central European countries, plays an important role in the foreign policy thinking of Czech diplomats since its establishment in 1991. However, this cooperation has never been without problems. It gained importance during EU accession negotiations, but struggled to find common priorities once all four countries joined the European club in 2004. While at the low level of practical cooperation it regularly succeeded, such as with the International Visegrad Fund or V4 battlegroups, the only topic to unify the group on the EU level has been its opposition to the refugee resettlement scheme. As the group’s representatives failed to provide any viable alternative, the image as the EU’s troublemakers marks the cooperation ever since.

Germany is the Czech Republic’s key ally - a strong advocate for Eastern enlargement during 1990s, the main economic partner and a key player on the EU level. The Strategic dialogue, introduced in 2015, aims to provide a wide platform for consultations and presents a key interest of the Czech state. Its introduction was, however, overshadowed by the migration debate that found German and Czech governments on the opposing sides and the political divide on the highest level still presents an obstacle.

The importance of Czech-Austrian relations has been comparatively low for the two neighbouring states, mainly as a legacy of the 1990’s dispute over the Temelín nuclear power plant. However, the Slavkov cooperation between the two countries and Slovakia, established in 2015, aims to provide a new communication platform to coordinate policies at the EU level.

France, as the second largest and founding EU member is considered a key partner, especially in the fields of economy, energy, defense and security as well as education and culture (the Czech Republic is member of the Francophonie). However, relations between the current government and President Macron are complicated by his advocacy for multispeed Europe, viewed by Czech representatives as a threat to the Czech Republic’s position in the EU.

Last but not least, the United Kingdom has played an important role in the Czech European policy. As the largest EU member outside of the Eurozone, the UK often acted as an advocate for the shrinking group and, as such, it proved to be a natural partner to counterbalance the Franco-German tandem. Furthermore, traditional British Euroscepticism was appealing for right-wing governments led by the Civic Democratic Party. Prime Minister and later President Václav Klaus was known for his admiration of Margaret Thatcher’s policies. British opposition to deeper integration was seen a guarantee for the Eurosceptic Czechs that there will be no significant attempts towards deeper integration.

2. Emerging realignments after the British referendum

After the results of the British referendum, Europe was standing on a crossroads. Two main questions arose – where to go next and with whom? Early on, in the Bratislava declaration, later followed by the Roma declaration, the leaders of the 27 remaining member states proclaimed their intention to continue on the path of ever closer cooperation. However, the understanding of what this means differed substantially. For some, such as the newly elected French President Macron, it meant multispeed Europe, while for others, such as the Czech Republic and other actors in Central Europe, it seemed like wishful thinking that taking the initiative in one policy field (in the Czech case the Common Defense and Security Policy) would be enough to stay in the core of the European integration. Since the second major area of proposed EU reforms is Eurozone governance, benefiting from the departure of the UK, Czech fears might not be unreasonable. With the lack of will on the side of both politicians and the general public, it seems unlikely that the country will adopt the Euro any time soon – and a sole observer status, for which the Czech government applied in the fall of 2017, cannot be sufficient to provide full access to the real core of the Eurozone. Certainly, Czechs would no longer have to depend on information from the Slovaks on what is being negotiated at Eurogroup meetings, however, observer status can hardly replace full-fledged membership.

The second major post-Brexit question deals with the re-distribution of powers in the European Council. Especially for smaller and medium sized states, such as the Czech Republic, it will be more difficult to find a coalition strong enough to out-weigh the Franco-German axis. The Visegrad countries' combined population might be approximately as large as that of France, but to block a majority formed by France and Germany, a much broader coalition would be needed. The first who understood the situation was Dutch Prime Minister Rutte, who initiated the first meeting of Benelux and Visegrad leaders in the spring of 2017. Despite receiving praise, the meeting demonstrated that the two regional groupings share few common interests. The next meeting is planned before the end of this year, but the most likely scenario will be ad hoc cooperation in case of common interests and not the creation of a new joint power.

The Visegrad group, a proclaimed priority of Czech foreign policy, recently also proves to be challenging, however for reasons unrelated to Brexit. The post-2019 negotiations are running in parallel with rather turbulent developments in Hungary and Poland, where Prime Ministers Szydło and Orbán systematically try to pursue their understanding of democracy. This means centralisation of power and strict conservatism, alienating the rest of the EU in the process. On the political level, the Czech government has chosen not to comment on these developments (I am ignoring here any comments by Czech President Zeman on purpose). However, cooperation on sectoral policies continues. For example, on the day the European Commission issued a warning to Poland over judicial reform, the four Visegrad Prime Ministers were meeting to discuss migration and double standards of food products. The Czech Republic so far always claimed that it aims to be a bridge between Poland and

Hungary and the rest of Europe, but lately seems to be failing. First, Slovakia as a Eurozone member is in a better position to do just that, and second, it is difficult to be a mediator for a party, that finds itself breaching EU law, and still keep a positive image.

As for other key relations, ties to Germany and France are influenced by the 2017 elections. The newly elected French president evokes mixed feelings in Prague, as he is a strong advocate for multispeed Europe. While Macron attempted to reach out to Central Europe, the Czech Republic and Slovakia in particular, it seems that so far their positions are too far apart to create common ground for successful cooperation – it was therefore rather resembling negotiations with an enemy than a courtesy to a potential ally.

As for Germany, mutual relations with the Czech Republic are still affected by the aftermath of the migration debate and no major convergence has been seen recently, regardless of the growing need for cooperation vis-a-vis the upcoming Brexit.

3. How should the Czech Republic pursue its future role and partnership within the EU

Brexit will push countries outside the Eurozone, such as the Czech Republic, to fight for their place in Europe and seek new strategic allies to do so. The debate about post-Brexit alliances and partnerships in Europe, however, is a debate about the future of European integration and the place of member states in it. And this is where the Czech Republic needs to do its homework first, before going out to search for the most suitable partnerships.

Prague (i.e. the new government, that will emerge after the October 2017 elections), needs to present a coherent and long-term strategy for its European policy. A distinct vision is painfully missing even after 13 years in the EU, as seen on several occasions – perhaps the most obvious example was the debate about the MFF for 2014 – 2020, negotiated in the midst of the financial crisis. The Czech Republic claimed to support both the stances of the “better spending” and “friends of cohesion” groups, which effectively proved to be confusing and pointless. Also, regarding the Eurozone reform, the Czech Republic is in a somehow schizophrenic situation – the government claims that Czech strategic interests lie in the membership in the EU, which includes its commitment to accept the Euro. However, at a political level there is very little that would support it. Politicians are mostly Eurosceptic, the debate about the Euro non-existent and, consequently, the general public is uninformed and sceptical. The new government should therefore set a clear date for accepting the Euro and start a coherent campaign, in order to secure a place in the core of the European Union.

Secondly, the so-far blind orientation on cooperation with close neighbours for the sole sake of cooperation appears to be obsolete in the current situation. The Czech Republic needs to maintain good relations with its neighbours and Germany needs to remain being the key ally, though a clearer strategy from the Czech side is required. With regards to the Visegrad format, it should be maintained for areas where it proves a useful platform (such as cross-border cooperation, cultural and educational projects, security cooperation), but it should not

constitute a political alliance in cases that do not suit the interests of the country. The Czech Republic should actively look for ad hoc partners also further away from its borders, if they share the same objectives.

To conclude and summarize, the key recommendations for post-Brexit Czech EU policy are the following. First, the Czech Republic needs clear long-term European policy goals before it can successfully address the challenges presented by Brexit. Second, the Visegrad group is a useful platform for regional cooperation, but less so for the coordination of EU policies. Third, the Czech Republic should switch its attention from the V4 to ad hoc coalitions, based on clearly defined interests. And, finally, fourth, the Czech Republic should actively seek to build a partnership with both Germany and France.

About the author

Zuzana STUHLÍKOVÁ joined the EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in 2013 and is the Head of its Brussels Office. Europeum opened its Brussels branch in January 2016 with the view to strengthen the voice of the Czech Republic and other central and east European countries in the heart of the EU. Designing and implementing the Office's strategy, Zuzana focuses on four key activities: organizing events, connecting with partners, research and advocacy. Zuzana received her bachelor diploma in Media studies and International Area Studies at Charles University in Prague and master degree in the European Studies MA program, during which she also studied at Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs in 2014. She worked as a research assistant at the Department of European Studies at Charles University in Prague and also as an intern at Trans European Policy Studies Association in Brussels in 2015.

Impressum

© 2017

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung

Büro Budapest

H-1056 Budapest, Fővám tér 2-3 Hungary

Tel.: +36-1-461-60-11

Fax: +36-1-461-60-18

E-Mail: fesbp@fesbp.hu

www.fesbp.hu

Central European University

Center for European Neighborhood Studies

H- 1051 Budapest, Nádor u. 9, Hungary

Tel.: +36-1-327-30-00

Fax: +36-1- 328-34-44

E-mail: cens@ceu.edu

<https://cens.ceu.edu/contact-us>

The views expressed in this paper are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS).

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES and the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS).