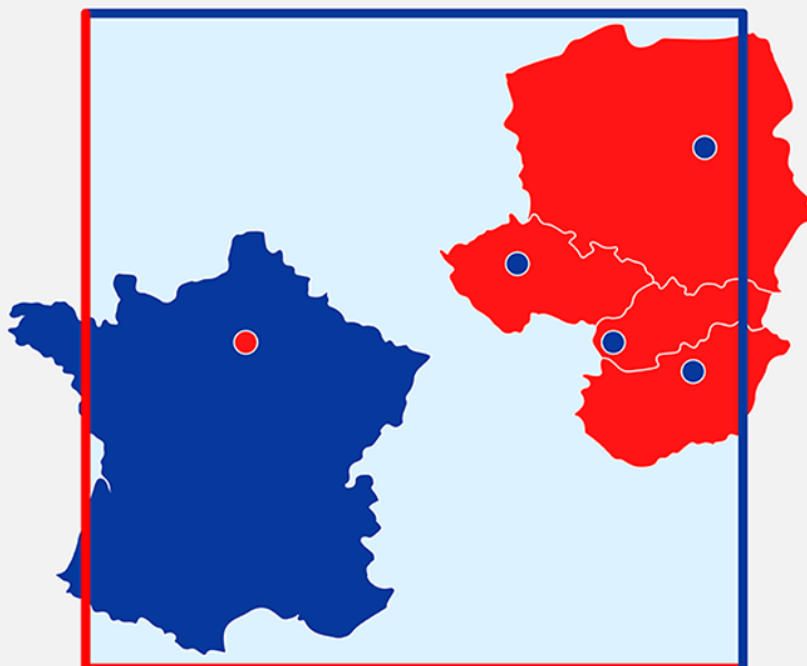


POLICY PAPER

France and the Czech Republic: some certainties, but also some ups and downs

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- **Bilateral relations between the Czech Republic and France have recently celebrated their 100th anniversary: in 1918, France was the first country to recognize the Czechoslovak army that was founded in northeastern France in late 1917, which was followed on 29 June 1918 with French President Raymond Poincaré officially recognizing the right of Czechs and Slovaks to live in an independent and sovereign state, and the day after recognizing the Czechoslovak National Council (led by Edvard Beneš) as the supreme organ of the Czechoslovak government.**
- **In October 2018, President Emmanuel Macron visited Prague (and Bratislava), just a few months after the visit of Czech Prime minister Andrej Babiš (and his Slovak counterpart) to Paris and the Vosges region where the Czechoslovak legion was founded in 1917.**



to focus on issues where national industries can benefit the most. This is true notably for the research and innovation sector, which would be a part of the necessary economic transition of V4 countries away from models as their added value in global supply chains is very low. Another demand of the V4 will be to loosen the ability of funds to be moved from one category to the other, in order to increase the extent to which states have decision-making powers over where and how funds are spent; this is connected to the fact that V4 countries still greatly struggle to absorb all the available funds¹, which some politicians blame on the strict flexibility rules. A shockwave was felt in the region when Nathalie Loiseau, who was then the head of list for En Marche at the European elections, declared "I no longer want European money to be used to finance highways in Slovakia", a statement that was not followed up by any concrete proposals, but that nonetheless created legitimate concern

Finally, the current mood in the V4 makes it clear that any proposal to condition the delivery of structural funds to respect of the rule of law will be rejected, and it is possible that Babiš himself will be more cautious about this issue, given the current pressure he is under on the domestic front. Given that this is a priority for the French government, strong disagreements are expected at this level in the framework of the MFF discussions, but Babiš has no interest in making this a personal battle, since other member states will oppose themselves to the proposal.

Regarding defense, which is discussed extensively in another paper of the series, cooperation is well-documented, especially the important participation of Czech officers in the EUTM Mali mission, or the desire of Prague to be included in the discussions of the European Intervention Initiative, or even considerations of participating in the Barkhane operation in the Sahel-Sahara strip if a role is found for the Czech army. In CFSP, the proposed reform of decision-making, which France has so far only paid lip service to, to

move towards QMV in certain CFSP areas such as human rights and sanctions is also a non-starter for the Czech Republic. There is a concern that rather than making EU foreign policy more effective and nimble, the reform would instead increase the divide between groups of member states regarding the issues that the proposed reforms intends to act upon and limit the political messaging that underpins unanimous decisions. Both on human rights and sanctions dossier, countries that are "on the fence" could be subjected to pressure campaigns (political, media, societal) in order to swing their vote, which would only further lead to the polarization of political discourse that we witness across Europe. Some countries might also feel tempted to free ride and develop preferential relations with the sanctioned country while the rest of the EU maintains restricted relations. This is to be put in the greater framework of small states being concerned by losing their influence in situations where unanimity was required.

While, in the next few years, V4 interests will be aligned on a certain amount of key EU agendas, the political unity between leaders, and especially the growing divide between Poland and Hungary on one side and the Czech Republic and Slovakia on the other, will limit the extent to which these positions of unity may provide a decisive weight in the European negotiations. For the latter two countries, the relationship with Germany, France, Austria and to a lesser extent the Benelux and Nordic countries is just as important as with the V4, which continues to pay the price of its negative external perception and constitutes a real public relations issue for Prague and Bratislava. The position of PM Babiš in this group will continue to be analyzed, as his 'rational' approach to defend Czech interests relies on a case-by-case basis, and could inch close to France and Germany and swing back to the V4 depending on the dossier.

Is there therefore a strategy that should be adopted in order to limit the influence of the V4? The loose unity of

¹ As of early July, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have spent a mere 40% of available European structural and Investment Funds, Hungary and Poland 45%: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>

