

What to expect from Czech Foreign policy in 2022-2025?

The biggest story in November 2021 for Czech foreign-policy watchers was the emerging first contours of the new Czech foreign policy. Since the current government (coalition of five subjects: ODS, TOP 09, KDU-CSL, Pirati and Starostove) has been active for more than 3 months, we can competently access government's short as well as medium term objectives. Hence, this policy dialogue will shed light on what can be expected from new Czech foreign policy in connection with a new government, which has been in place since the parliamentary elections in October 2021. It was clear from the election campaign that Czech foreign policy would undergo fundamental changes as the winning coalition's campaign focused on the return of the so-called Havel concept of foreign policy.

The principal motto is returning to the so-called Havel concept of foreign politics, accentuating human rights and civil society, and active membership in the EU and NATO. However, the Czech government also aims to focus on other vital priorities, such as cooperation within Visegrad group, as discussed below.

The presidential elections in 2023 will undoubtedly impact Czech foreign policy. Although it is the government having full responsibility for the execution of foreign policy, the president still represents the country and can significantly shape the foreign policy objectives. If the future president did not come from like-minded candidates to the current government, possible disparities might emerge. However, this assumption is hypothetical, as the presidential campaign has not begun yet.

Based on the Government Programme Statement, the key foreign policy priorities can be accessed in the following areas below:

Human rights

Building on Vaclav Havel's ideas, the Czech government wants to posit human rights as the cornerstone of foreign policy initiatives. One of the ways to firmly include human rights in foreign policy is the legislative implementation of the 'Magnitsky Act', which allows sanctioning specific individuals violating human rights.

Western Balkans

Another key priority for the Czech government is the relations with the Western Balkans: the Czech government wants to support them in the EU accession process as the Czech government sees the benefit of comparative advantage over the Western Balkans. Moreover, the Western Balkans has been one of the main pillars of Czech foreign policy since the dissolution of former Yugoslavia.

International context

The Czech government traditionally reaffirmed its strategic relations with Israel, with whom the Czech Republic could work on technological information exchange. Similarly, transatlantic bonds with the United States are considered to be crucial. If we zoom in on Asia, the Czech government seeks to deepen its ties with democratic countries in this region, namely with Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. Regarding Taiwan, in the past years, Taiwanese authorities have been visited by Czech officials such as the head of Czech Senate Miloš Vystrčil, who conducted a visit in 2020, aiming to enhance business cooperation. Vystrčil's visit was followed by Chinese criticism, arguing that the One China policy was not respected.

Russia and China

The Czech government does not devote much attention to Russia and China in terms of foreign policy priorities. Russia is mentioned only three times, mainly as a security issue. China is not mentioned at all, although China presents global political, economic, and security challenges. However, the discussion on Russia and China is concluded by saying that the Czech government will seek to revise its diplomatic ties with both countries in the near future. So far, the Czech government has not provided any concrete steps on how such revision should be accomplished.

Due to the Russian invasion into Ukraine which started on the 24th of February 2022, as well as the GRU attack on Vrbovec, a Czech arms depot, in 2014, any potential revisions on the Russian-Ukrainian relationship have likely been postponed indefinitely. The Czech government firmly stands with Ukraine and has strongly condemned the invasion and called for heavy sanctions on Russia. It is expected that the Czech government will cooperate closely with the EU and NATO since it believes that only a common reaction can succeed in reducing tensions.

Action taken by Czech government in dealing with the Ukrainian crisis indicate that the Czech Republic wants to play a more active role in the eastern flank of NATO. On one hand, Czech Minister of Defence, Jana Černochová (ODS), has expressed at the beginning of March 2022 that Czech soldiers could be sent to Slovakia to facilitate the management of migration flows. At the same time, the Czech Republic is negotiating with Slovakia to command a military grouping to strengthen the presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in Slovakia. This so-called battlegroup would have

1,500 troops, while the Czech Republic is offering 400 troops. On the other hand, the Czech government has already sent a military aid to the Ukrainian counterparts approximately in the amount of 16,000,000 euros since the increased Ukrainian military deterrence potential also strengthens the eastern flank of NATO.

In terms of China, it is hard to predict the nature of possible diplomatic revision. On the one hand, China is an essential business partner. On the other hand, the Czech government generally condemns the violation of human rights in China, especially in regions mostly populated by Uyghurs such as Xinjiang. Hence, it is expected that further diplomatic developments will be rather complicated. We know so far that the Czech government will seek to narrow its relations with China to escape the Chinese clout.

If we zoom in on the central European settings, Visegrad Four remains to be crucial. Therefore, V4 cooperation will be closely elaborated on below.

Czech policy towards the Visegrad Four

Cooperation among the Visegrad countries has historically been impacted by political developments of the time. For example, during the 1990s cooperation was mainly oriented towards the accession process to NATO and the EU or there has recently been a common approach to refugee quotas.

Two approaches towards the V3(4) dominated in the Czech Republic at that time; one was presented by former president Havel, who perceived Visegrad as an essential regional platform in terms of accession to Euro-Atlantic structures and as a regional player in Central and Eastern Europe. The second approach was presented by former president Václav Klaus, who preferred an individual approach of each country towards EU and NATO. He considered the V4 to be an ad hoc platform for joint steps to address the EU or NATO agenda.

Historically, we can see three milestones of the V4 development. The first phase was about connecting to accession to Euro-

Atlantic structures during the 1990s. At the beginning of the new millennium, the second phase was about the expansion of Visegrad towards the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. In the current (third) phase, we can see the V4 as a „troublemaker“ in the EU. V4 has become a platform that opposes certain European issues (eg. refugee quotas). President Zeman and prime minister Babiš used the V4 platform primarily for these purposes.

With the installation of a new government after the 2021 elections, we can expect a different approach towards the V4. Although the first statements of elected politicians called for a reduction in cooperation within the V4, we are increasingly seeing a more realistic approach. It is implausible that the Czech Republic will significantly reduce its V4 activities, as regional cooperation are critical for stability in Central Europe. The new government is fully aware of this fact and, therefore, will introduce new topics for further cooperation in the V4 format. At present, it is relatively clear that the Czech Republic will emphasize the cooperation in the security field.

As part of the strategy, the Czech Republic will probably direct the V4 security and defence activities towards the NATO Alliance's eastern flank, especially now that Ukraine has been invaded by Russia. In this respect, it will support an active role in Bucharest 9 (*It is an organization founded in Bucharest in 2015 as a reaction to Russia's annexation of Crimea. Its members are Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia*).

The other axis will undoubtedly be the Western Balkans. The Czech Republic is historically and economically very close to this region. The main focus will be on stability and economic development. For this reason, it will seek to steer the V4 activities, both economic and security, in this direction.

Another political platform that could be utilized to generate common policies in the EU is the Slavkov triangle. Andrej Babiš preferred this format of cooperation be-

tween Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria, but this was mostly due to his personal ties to the former Austrian Chancellor Kurz.

From a regional and a historical point of view, this could be an exciting venue for regional cooperation, but there are many obstacles. The problem is mainly in the form of Beneš decrees (*The decrees declared that Germans –, also Austrians, Hungarians, traitors and collaborators living in the Czech lands and Slovakia would have to relinquish their Czechoslovak citizenship and their property without compensation*), or the Temelín nuclear power plant. The Czech government wants to work with France to ensure that the European Union recognizes nuclear energy as a so-called clean resource to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This could be unacceptable for Austria, which strongly supports clean resources.

Final remarks

In conclusion, the current government has declared this orientation through its prime minister but has also warned that such foreign policy will cost something. The question is to what extent this intention will be supported by other players on the domestic political scene and the Czech population.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine will undoubtedly affect the direction of Czech foreign and security policy. The Czech Republic has already sent military aid to Ukraine and will probably do more to strengthen NATO's eastern flank. The European security architecture has been tremendously reshaped and the Czech government has to adopt adequate security and foreign policy measures to react it.

The Czech Republic will endeavor to eliminate the designation of V4 as a trouble maker platform and develop a more pro-Brussels platform. This focus will depend on the domestic political situation in each country, especially in Hungary and the Ukraine conflict situation.

Last but not least, it is also going to be interesting how the Czech government

will access the armed conflict in Mali since it was not mentioned in the Government Programme Statement. The current deployment of the Czech Army can be seen in Mali within the EUTM mission to support the fight against terrorism via pieces of training of the local forces. The Czech Army, while being in the EUTM command in Mali between June 2020 and January 2021, also demonstrated that even a small state can have the ability to have a command in such multifaceted engagement like the EUTM and be recognised as a stakeholder. Given the fact that the Malian security environment has worsened recently, a higher risk of terrorism can occur. And as former EU representative to the Sahel, Angel Losada, mentioned that 'stable Sahel means stability to the EU', the Czech government shall also shed light on the security threats far beyond the EU border.

The Czech government probably imagined a different beginning of 2022 in terms of foreign policy objectives. Given the Ukrainian crisis, there is a great risk that the vast majority of foreign policy priorities for 2021-2025 might be overshadowed. The priorities of the incoming Czech presidency in the Council of the EU, starting in July 2022, might also be reshaped in light of the recent events. However, the Czech government shall take this situation as a challenge and shall strive to be the principal actor in EU and NATO, who understands conflict resolution and can provide adequate know-how. If the Ukrainian crisis was resolved, the Czech Republic could also use its *know-how* and *best practices* gained in the post-conflict environment in the Balkans, Iraq or Afghanistan missions. Where one opportunity is overshadowed, a new one can blossom.

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