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Czech-Slovak Relations in Light of the Debate on the Future of European Integration

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The prospect of deepening European integration by further institutionalisation of the eurozone has so far not weakened the relationship between Slovakia, which has already adopted the euro, and the Czech Republic, which is not planning to do so in the near future. Moreover, Czech and Slovakian willingness to distance themselves from Poland and Hungary, both in conflict with EU institutions, has increased cooperation between Prague and Bratislava and their partners from outside the region, for example within the framework of till recently passive Slavkov Triangle (S3). The development of Czech-Slovak activities in the field of European policy thus evidences an increasingly pronounced division within the Visegrad Group.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia have closer relations with each other than they do with any other country. These relations are conditioned by cultural proximity, the experience of co-creating Czechoslovakia (1918–1938 and 1945–1992) and its peaceful division 25 years ago, and membership of the Visegrad Group. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are also the others' second-largest economic partners (in both cases after Germany). Close cooperation between the two states is reflected in the Airspace Protection Agreement, signed this year. According to opinion polls, the Slovaks have the most sympathy with the Czechs and vice versa. As a result, mutual relations are defined in the government documents of both countries as extraordinary. This state of bilateral relations is confirmed by, among other things, annual joint government meetings. This year's meeting of the Czech and Slovakian cabinets took place in September, and was an occasion to deepen sectoral cooperation, plan joint anniversary celebrations, and declare mutual support for hopes of hosting two EU agencies (the European Medicines Agency and the European Banking Authority), which must be moved from the UK as a result of Brexit.

Closer Czech-Slovak Cooperation. Close political cooperation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia is currently accompanied by two additional factors. The first is the similar profile of each state's largest government parties. Both the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) of prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka and the SMER-Social Democracy of prime minister Robert Fico belong to the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament. The Czech Republic and Slovakia not only support the construction of the Single Digital Market and the Energy Union (as do Poland and Hungary), but they are also among 20 EU countries supporting the creation of the European Public Prosecutor's Office—an element of deepening European integration which is not supported by other V4 countries. In addition, Poland and Hungary are in conflict with some EU institutions that have, for example, accused the countries of not respecting the rule of law. Both countries argued in their defence that the EU institutions lacked the competence to regulate in this respect. A willingness to distance itself from the Polish and Hungarian politics is the second factor that is currently driving the Czech Republic and Slovakia to closer European policy coordination, which may happen without their Visegrad partners.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia are in favour of deepening European integration but highlight different elements as important for this process. While Fico approves further institutionalisation of the eurozone, most Czech political parties (including the largest, ČSSD and ANO) oppose the adoption of the single currency, which is justified by low public support (29%) for such a move. The rise of Slovakia's position in the EU, thanks to its presence in the eurozone, motivated the Czech government to seek observer status at Eurogroup meetings. On the other hand, the unlikelihood of the Czech Republic joining the eurozone has prompted Prague to suggest other opportunities for closer integration within the EU, such as enhanced security and defence cooperation.

The Czech and Slovak Position towards EU Partners. From the perspective of the EU Member States, the EU institutions, the V4 countries and Bratislava decision-makers, Slovakia is beginning to be perceived as a link between the V4 and the EU institutions. Apart from belonging to the eurozone and showing a willingness to engage fully at the heart of EU, Slovakia is the only V4 country against which European Commission (EC) has not launched infringement procedures for non-compliance with their obligations on the relocation of asylum seekers. Slovakia's position was highlighted when EC President Jean-Claude Juncker requested the Slovakian prime minister to organise the first V4-EC summit. Similarly, other V4 leaders seem to be of a similarly high opinion of Bratislava, asking Fico to submit to raise with the EC the issue of different quality standards for the same food products in different EU countries. This is despite Hungary currently holding the V4 presidency. Moreover, German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel spoke during the August signing of a memorandum on systematic inter-state cooperation, which extends structural cooperation between Slovakia and Germany to all ministries, of Bratislava's role as a "bridge" between the "heart of EU" and the other EU states in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Czech Republic and Slovakia are working together to strengthen relations with EU partners, primarily with Germany. This year's 25th anniversary of the German-Czechoslovak Treaty on Good Neighbourliness was used by the Czech and Slovak prime ministers to soften their stance on resolving the migrant crisis. The few meetings between the Czech and Slovak prime ministers and the Austrian chancellor in the framework of the S3 have served a means to coordinate positions to be presented to the European Council. The S3 has also become a platform for the Czech Republic and Slovakia to build relationships with countries outside the region. This is confirmed by the August meeting of the heads of government of these countries with French President Emmanuel Macron, convened to discuss, for example, the amendment of the EU directive on posted workers. S3 leaders have expressed their willingness to intensify cooperation in this format. Fico and Sobotka, at a meeting of their governments, confirmed the S3 as the basis for the "implementation of positive agenda in the EU." This should also be read as a willingness to intensify efforts to deepen European integration.

Conclusions. Extraordinary relations between the Czech Republic and Slovakia result from the skilful conversion of historical experiences by both political elites into comprehensive cooperation. This is despite the fact that Slovakia is in favour of deepening European integration around the eurozone. The Czech Republic has declared no willingness to adopt the single currency, but is seeking observer status at the Eurogroup meetings and supports closer integration in other areas. Furthermore, during its EU Council Presidency (July to December 2016), Slovakia avoided confrontation with the EU institutions and has remained consistent on this point. A recent example of this approach was the conciliatory Slovak reaction (unlike the Hungarian response) when the Court of Justice of the European Union dismissed Slovakia and Hungary's complaint on the migrant relocation mechanism.[1] In view of the growing importance of Slovakia, the Czech government demonstrates a willingness to strengthen coordination with the government in Bratislava on European policy.

The differing attitude of V4 states towards European integration and the EU institutions' actions towards some of these countries influence the deepening of divisions within the group. Increased cooperation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia confirms that these countries stand on one side of a divide, with Poland and Hungary on the other. In addition, Fico and Sobotka have declared that the Czech Republic and Slovakia wish to influence the V4 as a whole, confirming the divisions within the Visegrad Group itself.

Although the Visegrad Group is viewed in Prague and Bratislava as the most important regional platform in sectoral cooperation, the meeting of Slavkov Triangle countries with the French President has shown that it is possible for Poland's southern neighbours to implement European policy using other tools. S3 also complements cooperation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Clearer divisions within the V4 pose a risk to regional cohesion in terms of fostering common positions within the EU, as seen by positions taken regarding compulsory refugee quotas. This could lead to the Visegrad Group's diminished importance in the eyes of Prague and Bratislava as a tool for coordinating European Community policies. This, in turn, would undermine the Visegrad Group in the EU forum, and limit its effectiveness as an instrument of European policy in Poland.

[1] J. Szymańska, "CJEU Dismisses Complaints by Slovakia and Hungary on Refugee Relocation," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 50/2017, 7 September 2017, www.pism.pl.