

The Czech President's visit to Berlin: a call for German leadership

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The President of the Czech Republic, Petr Pavel, visited Berlin on 20 and 21 March. He met his counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier and the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, as well as former President Joachim Gauck and Angela Merkel's long-time adviser on foreign and security policy Christoph Heusgen. He also talked to international relations experts at the DGAP think tank, as well as media representatives and Czechs living in Germany. After his meeting with Steinmeier, he stressed that Prague and Berlin should "start writing a new chapter in their relations", and appealed to Germany to "take the initiative in geopolitical issues and bear responsibility for Europe in the new era of international relations." Pavel admitted that he was aware that "German leadership" was a sensitive issue in many countries, and suggested that "German responsibility" could be a better term. He added that "the Czech Republic is ready" to support Germany in this task. At the same time, he pointed out that it would be "unfortunate" if the growing role of Central and Eastern Europe translated into intracontinental competition between the region and "traditional Western Europe". In Pavel's vision, the "democratic world" should be as united as possible in its response to the actions being taken by Russia, and ultimately also China.

Both presidents declared their readiness to continue supporting Kyiv. Steinmeier thanked the Czech Republic for leading the NATO battlegroup in Slovakia, in which German soldiers play a major role. Germany was the third country Pavel had visited since taking office, after Slovakia (which new Czech presidents always visit first) and Poland, which he had promised to visit during his election campaign. Germany is by far the Czech Republic's largest economic partner, accounting for 32.8% of Czech exports (data for 2022): this is more than the total share of the next six largest export destinations.

Commentary

- Pavel's main message in Berlin was that the West should speak in one voice and that Germany should assume more responsibility for European policy. This is in line with his repeatedly declared, more reserved approach to cooperation within the Visegrad Group, and especially to treating the V4 as a kind of counterweight to Germany and France. This also fits in with one of the main tendencies in Prague's foreign policy for some years now which focuses on developing contacts with its Western neighbour. The Czech Republic and Germany already have close ties in the areas of energy and transport infrastructure, as well as investments and trade, especially as part of the automotive industry's supply chains. In the past, the Social Democratic prime minister Bohuslav Sobotka made efforts

to build stronger relations with Germany. On the German side, the Czech-German strategic dialogue was initiated in 2015 by Steinmeier, who at that time was the German foreign minister. Now Pavel, in consultation with Prime Minister Petr Fiala, has suggested bringing the talks in this format to a higher level, and replacing the talks at the foreign ministry level with regular intergovernmental consultations. The way the visit unfolded may herald a revival of relations between the two countries, especially at the presidential level. The Czech leader expressed his willingness to hold such meetings annually in order to monitor the progress of bilateral cooperation (only two have been held in the last five years, while two more presidential meetings may take place this year alone).

- At home, Pavel's narrative puts clear water between him and the main force of the government coalition: the right-wing Civic Democratic Party (ODS) and its leader Petr Fiala. The prime minister is sticking to the vision of the EU as a union of nation states, and has repeatedly criticised Germany's attempts to dominate at the expense of the smaller states. For example Fiala has distanced himself from the proposal (presented by Scholz in Prague last August) to apply the rule of unanimity in the EU less and use qualified majorities instead. In recent weeks, Fiala has also been consulting more frequently with the prime ministers of Poland and Italy, who belong to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group. For his part, Pavel had already declared his openness to deepening European integration during his election campaign. For example, he expressed his support for adopting the euro, which is an unpopular idea in the country; according to a recent survey by the CVVM agency, 24% of Czechs are in favour of this step while 69% oppose it. The visit is also another opportunity for Pavel to distance himself from his predecessor Miloš Zeman. Zeman favoured German investors (for example, he spoke positively about VW's investment and supported the expansion of its Czech branch Škoda Auto in China) and maintained correct relations with his German counterparts. However, he did not hesitate to capitalise on the issue of resettled Germans in domestic debates, repeatedly criticised Merkel's migration policy, and emphasised that he was oriented towards the V4 in opposition to Western Europe.
- The Czech president has limited competence as regards the country's foreign policy. However, Pavel's popularity in the Western European media and his clearly pro-Atlantic and pro-European views may help Prague obtain favourable decisions from Berlin and their support in Brussels. Pavel has said that Germany is "ready to listen to us", and the Czech Republic's growing importance – thanks to its successful presidency of the EU Council and the assistance it has offered to Kyiv – will facilitate it. The topic of Czech shares in planned LNG terminals (including floating storage regasification units, FSRUs) is being discussed with Germany as well as Poland. Scholz reportedly promised Pavel support for the Czech Republic in the event of problems with 'energy supplies' during their bilateral meeting. At the same time, Germany's U-turn regarding the EU's decision to ban the production of combustion engine cars after 2035 has given hope in Prague that this decision will be postponed, so as to reduce the risk for the Czech automotive industry, where German capital plays a key role. The issue of Czech involvement in the nearshoring process has also been raised in the Czech Republic; in particular, the transfer of part of German production to Europe out of China, which is an increasingly problematic country, is being discussed. Pavel's call for Germany to take more responsibility can also be interpreted as an attempt to encourage Berlin to intensify its

efforts in this field as well, as both he and the Fiala government have made it repeatedly clear that it is necessary to give consistent military support to Kyiv. Although Germany is the fourth biggest contributor in terms of absolute value of military aid offered to Ukraine, it ranks only 19th in terms of commitments as a percentage of GDP (the Czech Republic is ranked 8th and Poland 4th; IfW Kiel data).