



Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2023/2024

“V4 Citizens”

I. Introduction

Czechia assumes its seventh Visegrad Group (V4) Presidency on 1 July 2023 in the dramatic geopolitical context of Russia's continued unprovoked, unjustified and brutal war of aggression against Ukraine. Putin's Russia, aided by Lukashenko's illegitimate regime in Belarus, is not just a direct security threat to Ukraine and our Eastern neighbourhood. It jeopardizes security in the Euro-Atlantic space and, in the longer run, global security at large, as it challenges the rules-based international order and stability worldwide.

The Czech Presidency is convinced that the V4 countries must stand by the principles on which they have constituted their modern democratic statehood, the principles they have built into the foundations of the Visegrad cooperation. They must support Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders and its inherent right of self-defence against the Russian aggression – and do so in clear, firm and concrete terms in order to reaffirm the strategic unity of the EU and NATO.

The Czech Presidency will continue along the path taken by the Slovak Presidency to return to the roots of the Visegrad cooperation on the basis of the shared principles of human rights, freedom, democracy, rule of law, good neighbourly relations, and commitment to European integration and transatlantic alliance. In this context, the Czech Presidency recalls that during its term all V4 countries will celebrate the 20th anniversary of their entry into the EU and the 25th – in the case of Czechia, Hungary and Poland – and the 20th – in the case of Slovakia – anniversary of their NATO membership.

Czechia continues to regard the Visegrad format as a traditional, Central European platform for cultivating good neighbourly relations through dialogue and practical human-centred cooperation, to bring specific benefits for the citizens of the V4 countries. As appropriate, the Czech Presidency will also continue V4 cooperation with external partners. It will keep support for an ambitious EU enlargement policy high on its agenda as a long-standing priority for the V4, including through accelerated integration of partners into EU's actions and policies. The V4 and the International Visegrad Fund will continue to treat both the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries as priority partner regions, including through political support, technical assistance and sharing of experience and knowledge, while maintaining an overall balanced and credible approach.

The programme of the Czech Presidency is based on the above principles and structured into three pillars:

Pillar 1 "Safe and advanced society" will promote human-centred policies, particularly people-to-people and civil society contacts in areas of culture, education, science and research or sports. The International Visegrad Fund will play an important role. The first pillar will also include established V4 cooperation in internal and external security, civil protection, public administration and health care.

Pillar 2 "Innovative and interconnected economy" will involve specific sectoral projects and initiatives bringing practical benefits for the citizens of the V4 countries, related in particular to improving connectivity in the transport and energy sectors, supporting resilience by upgrading the energy and raw materials security and diversification, and to pushing forward the transition to innovative, digital and green economy and clean technologies in industry and trade.

Pillar 3 will respond to Russia's aggression against Ukraine and its impacts on the country, neighbouring Moldova and the wider region. It will focus on political as well as practical "Support to Ukraine" and its citizens on different levels and in different sectors. The programmes of the International Visegrad Fund specifically designed for Ukraine and for other Eastern Partnership states and societies will be very important. The Czech Presidency will pay special attention to the discussion on the future of the Eastern Partnership, and look for ways in which this policy can help Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia fulfil their EU integration ambitions in the context of the EU enlargement policy, and to better support and engage the Belarusian civil society. Assisting the accession process of the Western Balkan countries with political and technical means will also remain a priority.

II. Priorities of the Czech V4 Presidency

1. Safe and advanced society

Support of people-to-people and civil society contacts, together with practical cooperation for the security and well-being of people in the V4 countries have been the cornerstones of the V4 since its beginning. The Czech Presidency will put citizens at the centre of its attention. It will continue with the existing successful projects that bring specific added value for the V4 citizens and facilitate cohabitation in our region and in Europe. The areas of interest cover culture, education, science and research, tourism and sports (in many instances drawing on strong support of the International Visegrad Fund), but also fields of internal and external security, including migration, defence and civil protection, modernization of public administration and health care.

Culture

In the area of culture, the Czech Presidency will promote the sharing of expertise, creation of platforms for common topics, and coordination towards other foreign partners. The focus will be on libraries, cultural heritage, audio-visual, music and performing arts. The Czech Presidency will seek to maintain the dynamics of current cultural relations within the V4 and support the continuation of ongoing joint projects to the greatest extent possible.

Education, science, research and innovation

In the area of education, the Czech Presidency will continue to support and promoting the mobility programmes of the International Visegrad Fund. Special attention will be paid to new programmes such as V4 Gen Mini-Grants (short-term mobility of young people and promotion of democratic values, civic participation and cross-border dialogue among

young people) and the Visegrad Fellowship Program (short-term mobility of V4 teachers/researchers and PhD students); as well as to long-running programmes promoting mobility of students, academics, researchers and artists.

The Czech Presidency will focus on the development of cooperation in the area of research, development and innovation, with the support of the International Visegrad Fund and its programmes. Partnership with Japan, within the selected joint research projects set to run until 2024, will continue. The Czech Presidency will follow up on the Slovak Presidency and International Visegrad Fund joint activities with the Republic of Korea, and prepare the launch of a new call for proposals for joint projects in 2023.

Tourism and sport

In the area of tourism, the priorities of the Czech Presidency will be to work on the common V4 marketing plan for the upcoming period, to cooperate within the European Travel Commission and in other pan-European platforms, to cooperate between national tourism authorities, to evaluate the most important source markets and to develop the midterm strategy.

In the area of sports, the Czech Presidency will continue with the traditional young Olympic hopes competitions. It will also seek to deepen the V4 cooperation and understanding of new challenges in sports in the Central European context.

Family policy

The Czech Presidency will build on the achievements of the previous presidencies and continue to exchange experience and good practice

on family policy and support to families, as well as information on the impact of these policies on demographic trends in the V4 countries.

Migration

The Czech Presidency will promote further strengthening of regional co-operation in the external dimension of migration, in order to prevent illegal migration and address its root causes, especially through partnership with countries in the Western Balkans, the key transit region for illegal migration to the EU, and finding ways to provide aid to relevant partners, including through civil and other organizations. Moreover, the emphasis will be put on streamlining EU external border protection including counteracting attempts to abuse the EU asylum system and instrumentalisation of migration, the crucial element in contribution to a well-functioning EU migration and asylum policy. In this context, attention will be also paid to continued support for the functioning of the Schengen area as an area of free movement, as well as for its enlargement to include Bulgaria and Romania. Furthermore, the Czech Presidency will focus on strengthening the return policy, as a prerequisite for creating a robust and abuse-resilient system at the EU level.

Civil Protection and Natural Disaster Prevention and Response

The Czech Presidency will encourage exchange of information and experience in the area of forest fires prevention and the building of forest fire response capacities using the Union Civil Protection Mechanism and RescEU. The Czech Presidency will also promote strengthening of the cross-border cooperation in natural disaster prevention and response at bilateral and regional levels of border regions. It must include analysis of risks with possible cross-border impact in border regions, setting-up of a system for quickly requesting cross-border assistance and building joint cross-border capacities. Increased use of the European INTERREG funding programme would contribute to this end.

Defence

In the area of defence, the Czech Presidency will proceed in accordance with the Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Their Defence Cooperation and the regularly updated Action Plan of the Visegrad Group Defence Cooperation. The Czech Presidency will seek to deepen practical military and expert cooperation. The main priorities will be further strengthening the interoperability of the V4 armed forces, with the emphasis on joint exercises (the annual V4 Czech Lion exercise), discussing possible cooperation in the context of setting and meeting NATO Capability Targets, and the military health care. Attention will also be dedicated to the future of existing flagship projects of the V4 cooperation: the EU Visegrad Battle Group and the V4 Joint Logistics Support Group Headquarters. Furthermore, the V4 will be used as a platform to discuss options of cooperation in assistance to Ukraine. It will also serve as a framework to identify opportunities for cooperation in the modernisation of the armed forces of the V4 countries, including within NATO and EU initiatives aimed at joint research, capability development and procurement. Another important aim will be to cooperate in countering the hybrid threats (including Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) from Russia and other actors with a focus on the Central European region and the Western Balkans.

Public administration and eGovernment

The Czech Presidency will encourage exchange of experience and good practice in the areas of support to innovations in public sector and public administration management (with emphasis on experience from multi-level coordination in times of emergencies).

Building on the cooperation in sharing examples of good practice of the digital transformation in public administration, the Czech Presidency will support better use of existing opportunities for cross-border digital

projects, as well as further development of the community of experts, public administration representatives, citizens and other stakeholders to increase their engagement in a meaningful digital transformation, including in the area of the single digital gateway on the way to its full operability.

Health care

In the area of health care, the Czech Presidency will follow up on the expert activities that had been planned for the previous Czech Presidency in 2019–2020, in the context of the building of resilient health systems, but were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them have not lost their relevance. In the context of global challenges, the Czech Presidency also intends to address the issue of health and the environment, especially as a follow-up to the Budapest Conference on this topic to be held in July 2023.

Justice

In the area of justice, the Czech Presidency will address cross-border judicial cooperation in criminal and civil matters and of the international protection of vulnerable persons. The Czech Presidency will also continue the established working meetings and training of representatives of the V4 prison and probation services on ways to reducing recidivism and on treatment of prisoners (probation and mediation).

2. Innovative and interconnected economy

All V4 countries, like the EU as whole, strive to develop modern, innovative, resilient and globally competitive economies, fully exploiting the four freedoms of the EU's Single Market. The V4 countries share a wide range of tasks and priorities in the regional, EU, as well as global contexts, which opens up opportunities for closer cooperation. In this pillar, the priority of the Czech Presidency will be to promote joint activities and initiatives in current European economic affairs, transport connectivity (high-speed railways), energy security and diversification, raw material security, development of digital and data economy, support of clean technologies, cohesion policy and regional development, environmental protection and adaptation to climate change.

Transport, space and digital agenda

The Czech Presidency will continue with the established cooperation in the preparation and construction of high-speed rails in the V4 region. The high-speed rail project is essential to ensure the mobility of the citizens of the V4 both nationally and across the region. The Czech Presidency will work towards further progress in project preparation and better coordination between the V4 countries. It will also explore the potential involvement of partners in the high-speed rail project. The Czech Presidency will look for common priorities in space activities and intelligent transport systems. These two areas help develop modern transport options for our citizens and drive economic growth in high-tech sectors in the V4 countries. The Czech Presidency will encourage discussion on goals and the sharing of strategies in connection with clean mobility.

The Czech Presidency will promote strengthening of the cooperation in the area of communication-connected Europe on cross-border transport corridors, especially regarding broadband connectivity and increasing the safety and flow of traffic. The main areas of interest will be covering

the main cross-border transport corridors of the TEN-T with a 5G mobile signal using European subsidy programs (CEF Digital) and creating an environment for innovation in the field of connected and automated mobility.

The Czech Presidency will focus on the development of a digital and data economy and the deepening of the Digital Single Market. To this end, the Czech Presidency will aim to facilitate the creation of a future-proof and innovation-friendly legislative framework for the benefit of citizens and businesses through an exchange of views on relevant legislative proposals. The Czech Presidency will encourage the sharing of the lessons learnt and best practices in the V4 countries regarding the projects within the Digital Europe Programme (European Digital Innovation Hubs, Testing and Experimentation Facilities in Artificial Intelligence), and best practices relating to national Artificial Intelligence policies.

Energy and raw material security

In the area of energy, the Czech Presidency will reflect on Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine, which has massively undermined the energy security of Central Europe and resulted in high energy prices. Therefore, the Czech Presidency will facilitate exchange of views on the implementation of the REPowerEU Plan. At the same time, the Czech Presidency will also focus on the discussion on the electricity market reform and its implementation. Furthermore, it will pursue the issue of energy market integration with Ukraine and Moldova. In light of achieving climate neutrality in the V4 region, the Czech Presidency will promote the development of nuclear energy following the recent inclusion of activities in the field of nuclear energy in the EU taxonomy of environmentally sustainable economic activities. Accordingly, the Czech Presidency will facilitate exchanging V4 information and experience with the authorization processes for large, small and medi-

um-sized modular reactors, the preparedness of the nuclear industry and with regards to the development of knowledge and human capital. The Czech Presidency will also facilitate discussion on the role of nuclear power in the existing and currently elaborated EU policies.

In the area of hydrogen technologies, the Czech Presidency will follow up on the coordinated activities relating to the implementation of the national hydrogen strategies of the V4 countries. The priority areas will include the use of hydrogen in transport, construction of hydrogen refuelling stations, and the possibility to put low-carbon hydrogen on an equal footing with renewable hydrogen. A project of special importance to V4 countries is the Corridor E of the European Hydrogen Backbone Initiative, especially the Central European Hydrogen Corridor, which should bring renewable hydrogen produced in Ukraine to Central Europe and Germany by repurposing existing natural gas pipelines into hydrogen and construction of new pipelines dedicated for hydrogen.

The Czech Presidency will address the impact of the long-term increase in prices of the energy supply on the V4 countries, including on the competitiveness of their industries and on their citizens, as a direct consequence of the Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and will encourage exchange of best practices and measures in the social and economic fields.

In the context of resilience-building and energy transformation in accordance with the Net-Zero Industry policy, the Czech Presidency will support the strengthening of the EU raw material security, with the aim of protecting the continent from the risk of extortion by some suppliers of strategic and especially critical minerals. This will involve cooperation with close neighbours and discussion of the region's potential in line with clean energy transition principles, identifying avenues for resources di-

versification, strengthening of regional partnerships, and in the medium term, focus on geological analysis, including local and environmental impacts on social and human risks. The Czech Presidency will also engage the Western Balkan partners in these discussions.

Trade policy

In the area of trade, the Czech Presidency will focus on exchanging information on possibilities of strengthening the resilience of the European economy in the face of current challenges. Supporting the WTO-led multilateral trading system, the WTO reform process and deepening of the EU's relations with partners (the United States, the United Kingdom and others) through a network of free trade agreements and other joint initiatives remains a priority.

Economic cooperation

The Czech Presidency will encourage an exchange of views on the current issues of European economic policy coordination. It plans a debate on the consequences of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the state of play of the Economic Governance Review, and mitigating the impact of the US Inflation Reduction Act. Furthermore, the Czech Presidency will intensively address the issue of financial innovations and discuss forms of specific support for the development of financial innovations in financial services. Financial innovation is the key factor for the development and digital transformation of financial markets, as well as for job creation and economic growth. The Czech Presidency will engage in the topics of harmonization and reduction of the administrative burden in the fiscal area. The Czech Presidency will also support the continuation of the established cooperation amongst the V4 countries' customs administrations on the basis of their Cooperation Plan (post-release controls, undervaluation of goods, VAT refunds to non-EU residents, fight against customs and tax fraud). The emphasis will be on V4 coordination and ex-

change of information including joint operations to detect infringements of customs legislation in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Cohesion policy, regional development and spatial dimension

In the area of cohesion policy, the Czech Presidency will focus on its future direction. Early experience with the implementation of new rules, especially those related to green transition, will be an important factor in the debate. Attention will be paid to access to EU funds evaluation, promotion of EU funds in regions, and new trends in online communication. In the area of regional development and spatial dimension, the priority will be to explore options for supporting structurally disadvantaged and economically and socially weak regions with a focus on territorially targeted tools and their harmonization with local regional policies. Other priorities include spatial planning at the national level, standardization and digitalization of spatial planning, architectural policy and the sharing of good practices in housing policy. In the area of public procurements, priorities will involve exploring strategic approaches to public procurements, the presentation of national legislation with a focus on the digitalization of public procurements, and sharing of experience. Public procurement is a key driver for the economy and the market, the Czech Presidency will encourage the exchange of experience on how to link public procurement to the strategic objectives of sustainability and efficiency, and to ensure that national and European resources are spent efficiently to meet the challenges of economic, social and digital transformation in a changing economy, along with measures to combat climate change (Green Deal / Fit for 55).

Environmental protection and adaptation to climate change

In the area of the environment, the Czech Presidency will focus on the issue of chemical pollution in Central Europe and its interlinks with health. It also intends to follow up on the topic of light pollution and promote measures to protect the environment against its negative impacts. In the area of climate change, following the Prague Appeal, the outcome of the “Designing Climate Resilient Landscapes” international conference in September 2022, the Czech Presidency will address adaptation measures and the possibilities of coordination within the Central European region and the intensification of cooperation in this area. The Czech Presidency will also encourage discussion on practical aspects of the implementation of the Fit for 55 package in each country. An important topic will be the implementation of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora), especially the issue of ensuring the care of seized illegally traded specimens. Under the auspices of the Czech Presidency, a meeting of the Carpathian Convention Biodiversity Working Group will take place with the participation of Ukraine.

In the area of circular economy, the Czech Presidency will focus on ways to boost the market for recyclates and secondary raw materials, promote efficient use of resources in order to prevent waste generation at all levels, increase waste recycling and reuse, radically reduce landfilling, increase the substitution of secondary for primary materials, promote eco-design of products on the basis of the new Union legal framework, promote technologies for effective use of primary raw materials and for extraction, processing and use of secondary raw materials in accordance with the EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy.

Agriculture and forestry

The Czech Presidency will actively search for solutions regarding the current situation in EU agricultural markets. In this context, the V4 may come up with recommendations, practical experience, and possible joint proposals for solutions or harmonization of positions ahead of further negotiations within the EU.

The Czech Presidency will encourage the exchange of information concerning the negative impacts of increasing fragmentation of forest-related policies at the EU level and the need for strengthening policy coherence and synergies in this regard. The V4 may come up with recommendations and practical experience from the national implementation of requirements originating from the Union's policies, legislative acts and other commitments.

In the context of the BIOEAST Initiative, the Czech Presidency will further enforce the cooperation among the 11 Central and Eastern European member countries and establish strong relation with Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries.

3. Support to Ukraine

In the context of the Russia's continued military aggression against Ukraine, one of the fundamental priorities of the Czech Presidency will be support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders and its inherent right of self-defence against the Russian aggression. It will also address the overall impacts of Russia's aggression on the country, the wider region and European security as a whole. This pillar will focus particularly on facilitating the V4 dialogue and cooperation in providing the fullest possible support to Ukraine and its citizens, on different levels and in different sectors, including admission of Ukrainians fleeing the war and related education or health care, help to

particularly vulnerable persons, judicial assistance, imminent relief and post-war reconstruction of Ukraine. The Czech Presidency will pay special attention to the discussion on the future of the Eastern Partnership policy, and look for ways in which this policy can help Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia fulfil their EU integration ambitions in the context of the EU enlargement policy, and to better support and engage the Belarusian civil society. In this joint endeavour, the International Visegrad Fund programmes for Ukraine and for other Eastern Partnership countries and societies will be very important. Global impacts of Russia's aggression and further support and assistance to Ukraine and its post-war reconstruction will not only be a relevant topic for discussion within the V4, but also one of important subjects for dialogue with EU and democratic non-EU partners, such as from the Indo-Pacific.

Admission of Ukrainians fleeing the war

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has set off an arrival of several million Ukrainians fleeing the war, mostly women and children, most of whom have found shelter in the V4 countries. Thanks to their unique position, the V4 countries can share experiences as regards the provision of basic needs, health care, and employment to these persons, their adaptation into society and paying attention to the needs of particularly vulnerable persons. The Czech Presidency will support the integration of Ukrainians into the educational systems of the V4 countries through sharing best practices and experience. Besides the integration itself, it will focus on comparative approaches to education, parametric changes in school systems, preservation of Ukrainian identity, as well as ways in which these persons may contribute to the V4-Ukraine relationship.

Imminent relief and post-war reconstruction of Ukraine

Ukraine will feature as a partner country at the International Engineering Fair in Brno (10–13 October 2023). There will be a number of side events relevant to Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, some of them involving V4 partners.

Accountability for international crimes committed in the context of Russia's aggression against Ukraine

A Czech Presidency priority will be to support Ukraine in the area of international criminal justice, particularly in terms of preventing impunity for perpetrators of the crimes under international law committed in connection with Russia's illegal aggression. The Czech Presidency will continue to support the investigation into the situation in Ukraine by the International Criminal Court. With respect to the crime of aggression, the Czech Presidency will support the establishment of a special tribunal for the crime of aggression. At the highest level, the Czech Presidency will place an emphasis on the need for cross-border judicial cooperation in criminal and civil matters among the V4 countries also in relation to Ukraine.

Home affairs, culture and science

The Czech Presidency will pay attention to addressing the impacts of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in the area of Home Affairs. The focus will be on V4 coordination and exchange of information.

The Czech Presidency will support continued cooperation with Ukraine in areas such as culture and science, including through projects of the International Visegrad Fund.