



INTEGRATION OF THE EUROPEAN CAPABILITY PROCESS IN MEMBER STATES' ADMINISTRATION The Czech Case

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ABSTRACT

This paper assesses how Czechia has integrated the European Union's capability-development instruments into its national defence policy. It finds high substantive alignment but weaker internalisation. Czech plans overlap extensively with the Capability Development Plan because the armed forces are replacing Soviet-era equipment, replenishing stocks donated to Ukraine and remedying broad capability gaps. This overlap does not establish that EU priorities determine the order of acquisition: sequencing remains anchored in national requirements, inherited force structure, domestic interests and NATO targets. PESCO has generated access, interoperability progress, and one clear Czech leadership role, yet it has not consistently converted participation into procurement or industrial leadership. Integration is strongest where EU instruments provide tangible finance: the European Defence Fund, ASAP and SAFE have begun to alter incentives and administrative practice. Even there, very limited staffing, late consortium entry and a risk-averse industrial structure constrain outcomes. Czechia integration into the European capability process is therefore selective and predominantly downstream.

Keywords: Czechia, capability development | European Defence Fund | PESCO, defence industry

The European Union's capability development mechanisms - the Capability Development Plan (CDP), the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD), Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF) - were built to align national planning and to connect common priority-setting to cooperation, research, development, industrialisation and procurement. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP), Security Action for Europe (SAFE) and the European Defence Industry Programme (EDIP) have extended the process towards production capacity and joint procurement. These instruments remain coordinating and incentive mechanisms rather than a supranationally controlled acquisition system: Member States retain primary responsibility for defence planning and procurement (Clapp, 2026).

Whether this EU capability development architecture produces more than nominal convergence depends on national internalisation, i.e. referring to EU priorities when setting requirements, long-term defence planning, connecting armed forces with industry and research, and committing national resources. Formal participation and documentary overlap are insufficient and a frequent woe of double membership in the EU and NATO. The relevant test is whether EU instruments can change the timing or content of a national choices, create a cooperative capability, or improve national position in European supply chains.

Czechia is a demanding case for this test due to its seeming euroscepticism and NATO preference. Its 2023 Defence Strategy places collective defence in NATO at the centre of national security and identifies Russia as the most serious long-term threat. The Czech Armed Forces Development Concept 2035 (KVAČR 2035) consequently prioritises readiness for high-intensity conflict, modernisation and the remediation of gaps accumulated during prolonged underinvestment (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2023a, 2023b). In 2026, however, the Ministry began preparing a new Long-Term Defence Outlook 2040 and KVAČR 2040, placing national capability planning in another transition (Chamber of Deputies of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, 2026). These pressures favour rapid, nationally validated acquisitions. Officials and industrial stakeholders describe a culture in which NATO targets and immediate armed-forces requirements carry more operational authority than EU priorities, while senior management provides direction on capabilities over a fifteen-year horizon (Interview MoD, 2025; Interview MoD, 2026a).

The national industrial base in Czechia is substantial, growing rapidly, but uneven – with around 25000 employees and a turnover of 6bn EUR (Chamber of Commerce, 2024; Defence and Security Industry Association of the Czech Republic, 2026). Czech firms retain strengths in ammunition, land systems, small arms, radars, sensors, aerospace and specialised

engineering. Post-2022 demand rewards existing products and their upgrades more quickly than uncertain long-horizon research. Scholarship identifies persistent post-socialist structures, fragmented supply relationships and adaptation problems despite strong manufacturing capabilities (Chovančík, 2021; Chovančík & Krpec, 2023; Krpec & Kříž, 2025; Rod, 2026). Interviews likewise portray many firms as commercially successful but conservative, preferring production, assembly or subcontracting to high-risk development of future European niches (Interview MoD, 2026b).

This paper asks to what degree industrial, or procurement outcomes have been influenced by EU capability development instruments and argues that integration is selective and mainly downstream. While Czech capability plans broadly converge with EU priorities, they do not consistently determine programme sequencing; PESCO conversion is irregular; and finance has the strongest practical effect. Persisting gaps are best explained by NATO-centred planning, inherited force structure, domestic interests, limited administrative capacity, late coalition-building and short-term industrial incentives.

PLANNING WITHOUT INTERNALISATION: CDP AND CARD

The CDP and CARD form the upstream section of the EU capability process. The 2023 CDP established 22 priorities across five operational domains and eight strategic enablers; CARD complementarily reviews national implementation and identifies cooperative opportunities (European Defence Agency, 2023, 2024). The analytical problem is not whether Czech plans resemble these expansive catalogues, but whether EU priorities can be shown to have impacted or reordered national choices or initiated cooperation.

Czech capability planning begins with national strategic documents, military requirements and NATO force-planning commitments. On substance, KVAČR 2035 maps closely onto most non-maritime CDP priorities including the 2018 CDP. Its programmes cover ground combat and land-based precision engagement through CV90 vehicles, tanks, CAESAR artillery and mortars; air combat and integrated air and missile defence through F-35s, ground-based air defence, counter-rocket, artillery and mortar systems and mobile radars; and enablers including C4ISR, cyber defence, electromagnetic-spectrum operations, satellite services, logistics, medical support, CBRN defence, training and military mobility (European Defence Agency, 2023; Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2023b).

This convergence should not be mistaken for causal prioritisation. A small landlocked armed force replacing Soviet-era equipment, replenishing systems donated to Ukraine and repairing

decades of underinvestment is missing capabilities across much of the spectrum that almost any major recapitalisation programme will broadly fit a CDP priority or a NATO target (namely the long-promised heavy brigade for NATO). Moreover, KVAČR 2030, adopted in 2019, already contained most of the later programme lines: a heavy brigade, artillery, short-range air defence and counter-UAS, tactical aviation, radars, C4ISTAR, cyber, electronic warfare, logistics and 30-day stocks (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2019a). The 2023 CDP may validate and connect these needs to cooperation, but temporal overlap cannot show that it generated them. The order of acquisition is instead shaped by national threat assessment, inherited force structure, operational urgency, available suppliers, domestic industrial and political interests, and NATO force-planning commitments (Krpec & Kříž, 2025). European cooperation is therefore often considered only after a national need has matured and specifications are harder to harmonise - as the procurement of CV90s shows – joint acquisition between Czechia and Slovakia was not incentivised even by EU instruments, despite the procurement happening at the same time and to fill the same needs (Andersson, 2023). The hierarchy is visible in parliamentary oversight: a December 2024 Defence Committee discussion of unmanned systems framed all choices through NATO Capability Targets, NSPA procurement, domestic capacity and immediate military requirements rather than CDP or CARD priorities (Zilvar, 2024). The accurate diagnosis is thus high substantive alignment but limited evidence that the CDP guides Czech sequencing.

CARD should compensate for isolated national planning by comparing plans and highlighting collaborative opportunities. The 2024 cycle focused on territorial defence, increasing expenditure, research and technology, and actionable projects selected for urgency, industrial relevance, EU–NATO relevance and maturity (European Defence Agency, 2024). Czech officials engage in the bilateral dialogue and receive the resulting feedback. Interview evidence nevertheless indicates that CARD recommendations do not systematically enter acquisition or force-development decisions, and that armed-forces requirements and NATO targets remain much more prominent in internal calculations (Interview MoD, 2026c). There is no regular Czech mechanism that assigns each CARD opportunity to a national capability owner, tests it against the investment plan, and records a decision to lead, join or decline. Consequently, CARD can improve situational awareness without creating follow-through. This distinction matters because multinational projects are shaped before their formal launch. Without an early decision, Czechia tends to approach partners once a consortium or project is already developing and influential roles have been distributed (Interview MoD, 2026a).

PRODEF, the research support program for EDF co-financing, approved by Czechia in 2024, may partially assist by supporting both national applied research and the national share of

successful EDF projects. Its official rationale acknowledges the prior absence of a national instrument for financing Czech participation in EDF and aims to expand defence R&D to new entities and international consortia (Technology Agency of the Czech Republic, 2024). Yet PRODEF enters after years in which European research priorities were not matched by a stable national co-financing instrument. Its effect belongs primarily to the funding stage and is examined below.

The upstream assessment is therefore an implementation without internalisation, but not implementation without alignment. Czechia contributes to EU processes, and its national plan covers most relevant CDP areas, but the CDP is not a guiding imperative. Several national planning problems may be associated with this result. A strategic melange of documents - inconsistent capability taxonomies, uneven institutional authority, non-aligned revision cycles and weak formal feedback between Czech strategy and implementation (Štalmach, 2026). Capacity reinforces the pattern. Only four ministry officials were reported to cover collaborative tools across the EU, EDA and NATO - up from one in 2018, but still in numbers insufficient for sustained partner mapping and long-term project preparation alongside daily deadlines (Interview MoD, 2026d).

COOPERATION WITHOUT CONSISTENT CONVERSION: PESCO

PESCO is a potent test of whether Czech engagement advances from planning to capability cooperation. Czechia has been a member of twelve projects since 2018 and was listed in eight ongoing projects in the consolidated Council decision of May 2025 (Council of the European Union, 2025). Its portfolio spans medical support (EMC, member, closed), military mobility (MM, member, ongoing), training (EU TMCC, member, closed), unmanned systems (iUGS, iUGS2, C-UAS; member, ongoing), Eurodrone (MALE RPAS, member, ongoing), electronic warfare (JISR, lead, ongoing), co-basing (member, closed), cyber coordination (CIDCC, observer, ongoing), strategic air transport (SATOC, member, ongoing), and lead-free ammunition (SLIA, member, ongoing).

The European Medical Command reached operational status through integration with the Multinational Medical Coordination Centre, creating a framework for medical coordination and evacuation (PESCO Secretariat, 2022). Military Mobility has harmonised procedures and attracted EU financing for dual-use infrastructure. Czechia participated in the state-level Integrated Unmanned Ground System framework, while the associated industrial consortium developed and demonstrated a common modular architecture (European Commission, 2022).

These are interoperability and learning gains but without Czech initiation or industrial leadership. Czechia's clearest state-level leadership case is the PESCO project on electronic warfare capability and interoperability for future joint intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance. The Ministry of Defence assumed the coordinator role, drawing on the University of Defence and the Czech Army's expertise (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2019b). The project produced a multinational feasibility study of capabilities, gaps and interoperability requirements; Czech industrial representatives also attended project work as observers. Czechia can therefore lead where cooperation matches a recognised niche, but the documented output remained a planning and knowledge product rather than a joint development or a jointly procured system. Unfortunately, no comparable sequence of Czech-led projects followed.

State-to-industry conversion is clearest in unmanned ground systems. Czechia joined the original PESCO iUGS project, but no Czech entity participated in the associated €32.6 million EDIDP consortium. In the next cycle, Czechia joined iUGS2 and the Czech Technical University in Prague became a non-WP-leading partner in the EDF-funded iMUGS2 project. The 36-month project received almost €50 million from the EU. Czech contribution concerns architecture and testing, while Milrem Robotics coordinates (European Commission, 2022, 2025). This is credible conversion. Other memberships show weaker verifiable conversion. Eurodrone, strategic air transport and counter-UAS connect to substantial European programmes, yet do not establish that Czech PESCO membership produced a Czech order, consortium lead or major funded work package. This is not evidence of no benefit to Czechia - classified military learning, supplier contracts or future options may still follow. It does however reaffirm that PESCO project membership counts should not be presented as capability outcomes.

Interviews identify a recurring process problem. Czech actors often join after another country or prime contractor has framed the project, leaving less leverage over requirements and work shares. Czech officials do not consistently coordinate ex ante with countries known to have similar needs, while firms have often approached the ministry first to ask which funding is available and only then which foreign partners, they could work with (Interview MoD, 2026b). In effect, the small ministry team is expected to act as both public authority and consortium consultancy. Furthermore, until February 2026, no Czech defence company maintained a permanent representative in Brussels, limiting early intelligence about emerging coalitions (Interview CSG, 2026).

PESCO has therefore been integrated more deeply than CDP or CARD, but unevenly. It provides access, interoperability, experience and one clear Czech leadership success. It has not yet generated a repeatable national pipeline from project membership to funded development and procurement.

FUNDING WITHOUT FULL INTEGRATION: EDF, PRODEF AND POST-2022 INSTRUMENTS

The EDF changes national incentives by attaching EU money to multinational research and development. It is consequently the pre-2022 instrument with the greatest practical effect in Czechia. Ministry data record Czech participants in 31 projects selected in the 2021–2024 calls, associated with €21.96 million in EU contributions. The portfolio is technologically broad. The 2024 selections included AERO Vodochody and PBS Velká Bíteš in GARUDA, ČVUT in iMUGS2, CyberSecurity Hub in CITADEL Range and specialist companies in LIDAR and satellite-data analysis (Buchar, 2025). Relative performance is more modest. A consolidated assessment assigns Czech actors 1.2 per cent of all EDF participations over the first four calls: 1.6 per cent in 2021, 0.6 per cent in 2022, and 1.2 per cent in both 2023 and 2024. No Czech organisation coordinated a selected project in this entire period (Masson, 2025). Czechia is therefore present but remains a minor participant and a partner inside most consortia.

The contrast with civilian research is revealing, though not a like-for-like programme comparison. By August 2024, Czech organisations had 1,361 funded participations and €479 million under Horizon Europe, including 215 coordinated projects (Vojtěch, 2024). Horizon is larger, older and supported by a mature contact-point system. Still, it shows that Czech organisations are exceptionally adept and can coordinate complex multinational proposals when the ecosystem and incentives are established.

Interviews point instead to defence-specific barriers. Much of the industry is profitable from current orders and sees limited reason to invest in proposals whose route to market may take a decade. Many firms pursue lower-risk production or subcontracting; smaller innovative firms and research organisations are more receptive but have less financial weight (Interview MoD, 2026a). Formal support structures do exist: since 2021, AOBP (the Czech National Defence Industry Association) has hosted the Czech EDF National Focal Point and coordinated an expert group involving ministries, the Office of the Government and Czech representation to the EU (Hynek, 2021). Interviews, and results, nevertheless indicate that firms seek partners late and still expect proposal assistance beyond the capacity and mandate of the small

ministry team (Interview MoD, 2026c). The result is numerous participations but small funding shares and no coordination roles.

PRODEF is the most significant national attempt to change these incentives. Approved in May 2024 and administered by the Technology Agency with the Ministry of Defence, it has two sub-programmes: national co-financing for Czech entities selected in EDF and national applied defence research, including emerging and disruptive technologies. It plans CZK 6.12 billion in total expenditure through 2031 (CZK 3.6 billion from the state budget and CZK 2.52 billion from other sources). Sub-programme 1 accounts for CZK 4.32 billion, divided equally between state and other sources (Technology Agency of the Czech Republic, 2024).

Its significance should neither be understated nor claimed prematurely. The official programme explicitly diagnoses the absence of national EDF co-financing as a competitive disadvantage and sets targets to increase both the number of supported Czech entities and their average share of EDF activity by 20 per cent relative to 2021 (Technology Agency of the Czech Republic, 2024). Reliable co-financing can make a Czech partner more credible, reduce firms' financial risk and encourage ministries and research organisations to prepare proposals. It can also connect national applied research to later European calls. However, PRODEF co-finances projects; it does not itself create coalitions, early knowledge of calls or national demand. Approved only in 2024, it came after most projects in the available EDF dataset had been prepared, so the data cannot yet demonstrate a PRODEF-induced surge. There are signs of complementary action: in February 2026, AOBP and the Ministry linked a national information day with an international Czech-industry presentation and targeted matchmaking for future consortia (Stefanyšyn, 2026). This emerging support structure was, however, placed under extreme strain in April 2026, when the Babiš government abolished the Ministry of Defence's Industrial Cooperation Section and planned a transfer of the industry-support agenda to the Ministry of Industry and Trade. By September, all of the section's key officials had moved to private industry (Zenkner & Ehl, 2026). Although a new department was created at the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the dispersal of the established team implies a loss of organisational memory, contacts, and EU programme expertise. The reorganisation therefore illustrates that Czech integration is not only thinly resourced but especially in EU defence programming, institutionally fragile.

Post-2022 financing instruments (SAFE, ASAP) show an even more direct form of integration. Under ASAP, Explosia received €10 million to expand propellant and energetic-material capacity, while STV Group received €4.986 million for 155 mm ammunition production (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2024). These awards build on existing Czech

industrial strengths and respond to an urgent European shortage. Compared with EDF, the path from EU instrument to physical production is shorter and the commercial incentive clearer.

SAFE has also entered concrete Czech investment planning, but the size and timing of the request expose the same preparation problem seen elsewhere. The Council approved a maximum €2.06 billion loan for Czechia, including €309 million in pre-financing (Council of the European Union, 2026). The government subsequently allocated €939 million to a section of the D11 motorway, €802 million to Leopard 2A8 tanks and €319 million to Tatra T-815 vehicles (Ministry of Defence of the Czech Republic, 2026). This is substantial uptake and connects military mobility, armoured capability and domestic production to an EU financing instrument.

Yet Czechia requested less than every other Visegrád state. Former defence minister Jana Černochová attributed the low ceiling to a shortage of projects that met SAFE rules and insufficient personnel to process smaller projects given the administrative burden. Independent experts also criticised the cautious interpretation of eligibility and the decision not to request a higher ceiling (Svozil, 2026). These explanations closely match the interview evidence: the administration is careful about compliance, short of staff and more able to process a few mature acquisitions than to aggregate a broad pipeline of cooperative projects (Interview MoD, 2026d). SAFE thus confirms both sides of the Czech pattern. When a qualifying project is ready, EU finance is used. When the instrument requires rapid project generation and partner coordination, limited preparation narrows options.

Funding has therefore moved Czechia further into the European capability process than planning alone. EDF has created a diversified participation base; PRODEF addresses a genuine co-financing gap; ASAP supports industrial capacity; and SAFE has generated concrete financing decisions tied to infrastructure and procurement. Full integration remains elusive because participation is weakly connected to national priority-setting, consortium leadership and follow-on acquisition.

LEARNING LESSONS FROM SELECTIVE AND DOWNSTREAM INTEGRATION

Across the instruments, Czech integration follows a clear gradient. Czech national plans align extensively with CDP priorities, but CDP and CARD exert limited independently traceable influence over the order of programmes or coalition formation. PESCO is more operational: it supplies access, learning and selected leadership, but only irregularly converts state

membership into Czech-funded development. PRODEF is a major correction to the co-financing problem and to the narrow institutional structure of earlier defence-research support, while the 2026 matchmaking initiatives suggest a more active ecosystem is emerging. ASAP and SAFE show that concrete finance can change behaviour, while the relatively small SAFE request demonstrates that money cannot compensate for a shortage of prepared projects and staff.

This pattern can be described as selective downstream integration. Czechia does not reject EU defence cooperation; it engages when an instrument overlaps with a validated national requirement, an existing technological strength or a mature project carrying external finance. Because Member States remain responsible for planning and acquisition, some national filtering is inherent in the EU model (Clapp, 2026). What is weak in Czechia is the reverse transmission belt: EU-level priorities rarely generate or reorder a Czech programme early enough for Czechia to shape requirements, assemble a coalition and secure a leading industrial role.

Three interacting causes explain the gap. First, NATO's primacy gives planners a clear operational hierarchy but can reduce EU instruments to supplementary funding. NATO defines demanding targets but provides little acquisition or research finance, whereas the EU increasingly funds research, production and joint procurement; Czech structures have not fully adapted to combine the two. Second, administrative scarcity turns strategic engagement into deadline management. A small team cannot continuously map CARD opportunities, PESCO projects, EDF calls, major financing opportunities, and foreign partners while managing applications and compliance. Third, the industrial boom favours current sales over uncertain research. Profitable producers and subcontractors may rationally avoid coordination risk, weakening their future position in European supply chains. This concern has entered parliamentary debate: Defence Committee chair Josef Flek argued that purchasing, reselling and installing equipment is not healthy participation if insufficient value in Czech firms is oriented toward research and innovation (Zilvar, 2025).

The process is consequently fragmented rather than wholly ineffective. Czechia possesses relevant military expertise, competitive firms and strong civilian research institutions. Individual successes appear where these assets meet an instrument: electronic-warfare leadership in PESCO, university participation in iMUGS2, a broad EDF portfolio, and ASAP-funded ammunition expansion. The policy challenge is to make such conversion systematic.

Three changes would deepen integration would be:

1. Linking the relevant longer-term CDP priority and CARD opportunity with identifying partners, relevant PESCO and EDF routes.
2. Establishing pre-consortium support to PRODEF's financial offer. Co-financing should be complemented by small preparation grants, partner-search support and targeted help for coordination bids.
3. Resourcing and measuring the national interface. The collaborative-tools personnel need enough permanent staff to cover planning, industrial outreach, partner intelligence and implementation rather than overwhelming deadlines and task lists to be able to perform a strategic function.

Its performance indicators should follow outcomes across instruments. These measures would preserve NATO as the foundation of Czech collective defence while using EU instruments for what NATO generally does not provide: financed multinational research, industrial scale-up and supported joint procurement.

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