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Regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe and its implications for the EU

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Abstract Regional cooperation is mutually beneficial collaboration between neighbouring countries. This holds regardless of whether it is a matter of cooperation between the Benelux countries, the Nordic–Baltic states, France and Germany, or the Visegrád countries. The last-mentioned countries' dismissive attitude to tackling the migration crisis has thrust them into the limelight. The most recent cooperative forums in the Central Eastern Europe region, such as the Slavkov Triangle and the Three Seas Initiative, evidence a new dynamic and a regrouping of forces on the basis of national interests and EU themes. Western and Eastern Europe have different approaches to the most pressing challenges, such as migration. These differences have caused deep divisions between their respective leaders. However, the disagreements on the migration issue and the future of the EU notwithstanding, regional cooperation among the Central and Eastern European countries remains valuable in areas that include the integration process, security and defence.

Keywords Regional cooperation | Visegrád group | Three Seas Initiative | Slavkov Triangle | 'Hard core' of the EU

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Introduction

Regional cooperation is mutually beneficial collaboration between neighbouring countries. This holds regardless of whether it is a matter of cooperation between the Benelux countries; the Nordic–Baltic states; Poland, Germany and France as members of the Weimar Triangle; France and Germany as such; or the Visegrád countries. The most recent cooperative forums in Central and Eastern European (CEE), such as the Slavkov Triangle (S3) or the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), evidence a regrouping of forces on the basis of national interests and European themes. All these new initiatives may signal a shift in the distribution of forces in the region.

Consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, the Visegrád Group (V4) has been in existence for 25 years. Having fulfilled its main goal, the integration of its countries in the EU and NATO, the V4 countries have recently been thrust into the limelight on the European level. The refusal to accept asylum seekers has severely damaged the image of the V4 countries, which have been accused of a lack of solidarity.

The already tarnished image of the V4 has suffered even more due to the steps taken by the Hungarian and Polish governments in defiance of the Brussels institutions. Viktor Orbán quite openly declares that he wants to make Hungary a secure place for European Christians. Jarosław Kaczyński, with his populist national–conservative Law and Justice party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS), could change the direction of Poland through his pursuit of conservative patriotism. Both leaders have recently stepped up their rhetoric against the EU institutions. They are trying to frame the current conflict as a wider battle for the soul of Europe. It is a battle that pits a younger, poorer, more conservative and more dynamic East against an older, richer, more liberal and more stagnant Western Europe, and especially against its elites.

The atmosphere is somewhat better in Slovakia and in the Czech Republic. Slovakia has mitigated its stance on migration since the EU Court of Justice rejected the quota challenge at the beginning of September 2017. The migration theme has been superseded by other issues: the future of the EU and the place of Slovakia in its ‘hard core’—with Poland and Hungary rejecting any consideration of a multi-speed Union. On account of this new agenda, the headlines have spoken of a crisis within the V4 or even its demise. Relations within the V4 have been further complicated by the intensifying cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria in the S3. Poland, until recently a regional leader and currently an anti-Brussels rebel, has been endeavouring to consolidate its foreign policy position through the TSI with the support of the US.

What’s going on in the V4?

With its rejection of refugee quotas, the V4 became a focus of public attention. Having earlier tended to accept the general EU agenda in a rather passive manner, the V4 countries suddenly adopted a very active position (Center for European Policy Analysis

2016). The intensifying debate over the future of the EU has started to reveal differences of opinion within the V4 itself. The emerging forms of regional cooperation, such as the S3 and the TSI, may signal a shift in the distribution of power in the region. An even greater concern has been raised over Hungary's and Poland's attacks on independent democratic institutions.

For the last two years, power in Poland has been de facto held by Jarosław Kaczyński, who has made the tragic death of his brother a decisive element of his political identity (Onderčanin 2017). In 2010 former Polish President Lech Kaczyński died in an air crash, and the tragedy became part of a political struggle that divided the country into two camps. In May 2017 the stifling atmosphere in the country found its reflection on the European level when Poland was the only country that did not support the candidacy of Donald Tusk to the office of the president of the European Council. PiS holds that, as Polish prime minister at the time of the crash, Tusk failed to have the tragedy investigated in a proper manner. By adopting controversial laws and gaining control over the constitutional court, large parts of the judiciary and the media, Kaczyński has dragged Poland into a dispute with the Union. As if this friction with Brussels was not enough, Poland has also engaged in disputes with its neighbours. Most recently, it has reopened with Germany the issue of war reparations. The country is deeply polarised, and the only hope of reversing the situation may lie with President Andrzej Duda. Until recently considered a puppet of Kaczyński, Duda stood up to him by refusing to sign certain reform laws concerning the judiciary.

Hungary is another country in CEE that has become a source of concern. Orbán has been in power since 2010 and, in all probability, will continue to lead the country after the 2018 parliamentary elections. A controversial figure at the European level, Orbán has also polarised the political debate within Hungary. In 2014 Hungary followed Bulgaria in erecting fences along the border with Turkey to stem the flow of refugees coming along the Balkan route. Towards the end of last August, Orbán asked European Commission President Juncker for a 'solidarity' payment of around 440 million euros to partly reimburse the construction costs. He argues that Hungary has saved Europe from further migratory pressures (*WebNoviny* 2017).

The Czech Republic held parliamentary elections in October 2017. Before they took place, some commentators had claimed that the outcome would be decisive for the character of the country: for whether the Czech Republic would continue to be a liberal representative democracy. As expected, the winner was Andrej Babiš, a Slovak-born oligarch who controls the media and the agricultural sector, and is presently the second-wealthiest person in the Czech Republic. His campaign was directed against the traditional political parties, which he accuses of being responsible for corruption. Before the election Babiš had been stripped of parliamentary immunity to allow investigation into an alleged fraudulent use of EU funds. Moreover, he is suspected of having collaborated with the former Communist secret police. His Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (Akce nespokojených občanů, ANO 2011) movement has no ideological anchoring, and thus hardly anybody can tell what course the Czech Republic will take now that Babiš has

become prime minister. What is known is that deeper European integration and adoption of the euro are not among his priorities.

Compared to the other V4 countries, Slovakia may seem an oasis of stability. But appearances can be deceptive. Fico's campaign in 2016 was based on his migration scaremongering. In recent months migration has been replaced by the new theme of Slovakia's future in the core of the EU. 'The fundamentals of my policy are being close to the (EU) core, close to France, to Germany' (Jancarikova 2017). Fico made this statement at a press conference with Juncker at the end of July, when he was mandated by the V4 to lobby for better-quality food in the CEE region. By insisting that Slovakia belongs among the core countries of the EU, Fico is primarily distancing himself from the strongest opposition party, Freedom and Solidarity (*Sloboda a Solidarita*), which is Eurosceptic. The truth of the matter is that Slovakia does not need to fight its way into the inner core as it is the only V4 member in the eurozone. The bigger challenge will be whether Slovakia has the determination to tackle the most serious European problems, such as migration. While Poland and Hungary make no secret of their contentious attitude towards the Brussels institutions, Slovakia is determined to stay in the hard core of the EU. It is thus obvious that the current situation in the V4 is not ideal for adopting a common approach to the present-day European themes. Divisions within the EU will also continue over sanctions against the Russian government and the war in Eastern Ukraine. Poland, traditionally a strong critic of Russian policies, views the geopolitical aspirations of the Russian president as a threat to its very existence. Slovakia and Hungary, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic stance, and the Czech President is openly pro-Russia. It needs to be recognised, however, that the V4 countries continue to adhere to the EU line on sanctions against Russia (Nič and Dostál 2016). That Slovakia is pursuing deeper eurozone integration means that the V4 group is not a political monolith. The V4 alliance remains a forum for consultation and coordination, and it will continue to serve as the first platform for identifying areas where the members' individual agendas may overlap. Another reason that the V4 group has continued to function within the EU is that the alliance is not and never has been a straitjacket preventing individual member states from formulating and asserting their own positions where they consider it vital (Korčok 2017).

The weight of the V4 will be demonstrated again in the 2020–6 financial framework and cohesion policy negotiations since all four countries are net beneficiaries and share the same interests (Center for European Policy Analysis 2016). At any rate, the V4 can make a positive contribution to the transformation of the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, as the enlargement process continues to be one of the priorities of the V4. After all, it should be in the interest of the V4 not to stand aside when the future functioning of the EU is redefined. To be able to participate in the process, the countries must be ready to actively help address common problems. Having been in existence for a quarter of a century, the alliance could return to its roots and renew some of its founding principles, such as the principle of solidarity.

Three Seas Initiative

The TSI is an informal alliance of CEE countries situated between the Baltic, Adriatic and Black Seas: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. The main objective of the initiative is to connect the northern and southern regions since, after the fall of Communism, all efforts and funds were concentrated on connecting Western and Eastern Europe. The initiative aims at modernising the infrastructure connecting north and south in the areas of energy, transport and telecommunications. Cooperation in the energy field is aimed at reducing dependence on Russia. The initiative was promoted by Polish President Duda, who had signalled such a cooperative alliance in his 2015 inaugural speech (Presidency of the Republic of Poland [2015](#)).

The idea itself is not new. A similar arrangement had been envisaged in the 1920s under the name 'Intermarium'. Aimed at promoting cooperation among CEE countries, it built on the legacy of the Polish–Lithuanian union. This geopolitically vulnerable area was to become a buffer zone between USSR expansionism and the rise of nationalism in Germany. However, the plan was never implemented. One reason for this was that the countries invited to join were concerned about Poland having too much influence. Some perceive the failure of the Intermarium project as the key reason for the adverse fate of CEE countries after the Second World War, when most of them fell to the Soviet Union (Chodakiewicz [2013](#)).

The visibility of the initiative received a significant boost in June 2017 when US President Donald Trump participated in the second TSI summit in Warsaw. Several of the countries involved were concerned about the Intermarium's links to neo-imperialism and thus were apprehensive about holding the summit (Lewicki [2017](#)). Moreover, these countries found that Poland's push for war reparations from Germany and Hungary's troubled relationship with the EU were creating an East–West gap that they did not want to be associated with. At the summit Trump confirmed the delivery of liquefied natural gas, which even now is being shipped on a trial basis to the Polish port of Swinoujście. This is clearly a disturbing situation for some of Germany's large energy companies. It is equally disturbing for Germany's Social Democrats, whose Nord Stream 2 project to bring gas supplies directly from Russia would make Europe even more dependent on Russian gas (*The Economist* [2017](#)).

Time will tell whether the Poles seriously pursue this project or whether it is only a short-term manoeuvre to increase their visibility and strengthen their position in the CEE region. It is worth noting that it is Poland that has been responsible for several years' delay in the construction of the north–south motorway connection with Slovakia that was one of the V4 goals. It is thus too soon to talk about the viability of the TSI. The member countries' highly divergent national interests should also be mentioned. Whether the TSI will replace more natural and more manoeuvrable forms of regional cooperation, such as the V4, will depend on how successful it is.

Slavkov Triangle

Since January 2015 a new forum for cooperation has emerged on the CEE scene, this time involving the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria. This is the S3, which aims to strengthen the region and pull Austria into the CEE sphere. The S3 has historical significance as Slavkov is the site of the well-known battle in 1805 where Napoleon secured what is considered his greatest victory. Whether this region will allow French President Emmanuel Macron, too, to score a victory by preventing the influx of cheap labour in the form of posted workers from CEE countries—a practice he labels as ‘social dumping’—will be seen in the future. To discuss this topic, Macron chose the S3 over the V4, even though most posted workers come from Poland. Poland and Hungary stand out as the countries with which France has strained relations because of their lack of solidarity in the migration crisis and their rule-of-law violations. Macron preferred to discuss the reform of the European directive on posted workers with the more compliant Czech Republic and Slovakia, both of which have the ambition to be in the hard core of the EU. For now, Macron has emerged victorious from the meeting because the leaders of these two countries, pursuing the ambition just mentioned, did not ask Macron to do what he is asking of the CEE countries: they did not ask French companies in Slovakia to pay French minimum wages to their Slovak employees.

The meeting between the French president and the Czech and Slovak prime ministers (but without Poland and Hungary) could forebode a gradual decline in the significance of the V4. Unsurprisingly, the S3 initiative has raised concerns among the other V4 members. In particular, Poland has asked for assurances that the S3 is not meant to be a substitute for the V4.

Conclusion

Regional cooperation will continue, but its forms will vary depending on the issues prevailing on the European scene and on their importance to the countries involved. The regional forms of cooperation that have been discussed all have a common denominator: economic cooperation aimed at strengthening and developing the region. This dimension promises extensive cooperation between individual countries in the region, which would strengthen the economy of the EU as a whole. The irreplaceable role of the CEE region remains that of assisting the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries in their transformation process.

However, there are different views on how to tackle the most pressing issues, including migration, asylum policy and the further functioning of the EU. These differences necessitate greater emphasis on communication: a forum for discussion is needed, as is better understanding of individual positions. For example, the regular meetings of the V4 prime ministers that are held before each European Council should be extended to include the participation of the French president and of other European leaders as well. This would send a positive signal about the readiness of both sides to discuss

controversial issues and to come to a better understanding of the positions held by others. In his recent State of the Union speech, Juncker said, ‘Europe must breathe with both lungs. Otherwise our continent will struggle for air’ (Juncker 2017). He was referring to the gap between the East and the West and seemed to be seeking greater involvement from the CEE region.

The importance and the dynamics of regional cooperation offer two lessons. First, the EU is a highly diverse grouping of states. And these states—including the large ones, such as Germany and France—should realise that they have a future only if everyone sits at the same table. European institutions should understand that excessive centralisation can be counterproductive and may provoke resistance from individual countries or regional groupings. Secondly, it seems as if after its integration into the EU and NATO, the V4 group lost its main vision. But the same goes for the EU as a whole: if it finds new inspiration, it may forge closer links with the V4 again.

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