



Weekly Briefing

Czech Republic external relations briefing:
Emerging Central Europe: In Quest of Democracy, Identity, and
Sovereignty
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Emerging Central Europe: In Quest of Democracy, Identity, and Sovereignty

Summary

Central Europe is searching for identity and its place in the emerging multipolar order. The region is experiencing a rise in national conservative and sovereigntist movements, which aspire to topple liberal progressivism and launch autonomous development within a broader regional framework. The briefing inquires into the present trends and existing regional formats of cooperation with a focus on the Visegrád Group, the Bucharest Nine, the Slavkov format, and the Three Seas Initiative. It also analyses new or prospective partnerships with Austria, Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia at the core, and relevant discussions at the level of civil society.

Introduction

Central European societies are looking for autonomous ways of development 35 years after the fall of the communist regimes in this part of the world. The current instability and a growing number of challenges have numerous effects on the EU in general and the CEE countries in particular. The EU authorities as well as some member states tend to criticise Hungary or Slovakia for their policies, but neither of them challenges the membership in the EU fundamentally. On the contrary, they try to implement the concept of strategic autonomy in practice. Doing so, new forms of regional cooperation emerge and are discussed at different levels to promote the interests of Central Europe in a rapidly changing world.

Various forms of Central European cooperation

The definitions of Central Europe have varied. Nevertheless, there cannot be any doubt that the core of Central Europe lies on the territory of former Austria-Hungary and its successor states. Just as there are many concepts of Central Europe, there are also many regional cooperation formats including but not limited to the Visegrád Group, the Three Seas Initiative, the Bucharest Nine, the Slavkov (Austerlitz) format, the Central European Defence Cooperation, and the Central European Initiative. Similarly, their agenda and areas of

cooperation are different. At the same time, the operation of individual platforms is affected by the current political situation in participating countries.

The Visegrád Group is a leading cooperation format in the region. It was established to help the four countries to create more favourable conditions for integration into the EU. When this goal was reached, the V4 continued to develop cooperation and joint projects among the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. Even though political unity is not necessary in terms of the operation of the platform, it is an important factor. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine in 2022 created deep division between the four. After the government headed by Robert Fico assumed power last year, the V4 split into V2+V2. While Poland had often been criticised by Brussels for alleged violations of the rule of law along with Hungary, the Polish parliamentary elections enabled the liberal opposition to replace the national conservatives in the executive, changing the political constellation within the V4.

Now it is particularly Hungary and Slovakia that advocate autonomous positions within the EU in line with their national interests. It is in stark contrast to the relations between Bratislava and Prague, which have traditionally been among one of the closest globally. However, the incumbent government of the Czech Republic does not respect Slovakia's sovereign foreign policy, which is based on peace diplomacy and pragmatic cooperation beyond the borders of the Western community. In response to Slovakia's balanced position on the Ukrainian conflict and diplomatic communication with Russian representatives, Petr Fiala's cabinet decided to suspend the highest bilateral platform of cooperation, that is, the intergovernmental consultations, in March 2024. In October, Foreign Minister Jan Lipavský reiterated that the Czech side would not restore the consultations due to the ongoing disagreements on foreign policy issues, particularly on the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East. The March decision provoked strong negative reactions among the political opposition, as well as the population as a whole.¹ Be it as it may, the ruling liberal cabinet does damage the bilateral relations, which might have deeper negative effects in case it lasts for a long period.

Since the political relations between Prague on the one hand and Bratislava and Budapest on the other hand have cooled off, the Czech government prefers other forms of regional cooperation such as the Slavkov format. In late August, a summit of the parliamentary representatives of Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia as the members along with Croatia,

¹ *Opoziční strany kritizují přerušení konzultací se slovenskou vládou* (2024, March 7). ČTK. <https://www.ceskenoviny.cz/zpravy/2489382>. Lipavský: *Konzultace se slovenskou vládou neobnovíme* (2024, October 27). Seznam Zprávy. <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/domaci-politika-lipavsky-konzultace-se-slovenskou-vladou-neobnovime-263295>

Italy and Slovenia as guests was summoned in Salzburg. The format was set up in 2015, and it has recently focused mainly on the enlargement of the EU to the Balkans, political coordination, and security threats. The Czech Republic is currently the presiding country. As such, it emphasises the alleged risk of “Russian imperialism” and “Russian state terrorism” entailing kinetic and cyber attacks against the member states of the EU and NATO.²

The security agenda predominates in the Bucharest Nine. The group was established in 2015 to strengthen the security and military ties between nine post-communist NATO countries stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, boost NATO’s military presence along its eastern flank, and promote the integration of other countries, especially Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, into the alliance. The organisation has enjoyed US support, and President Joe Biden took part in the B9 presidential summits in 2021 and 2023.³ The summits are usually held at the level of the heads of state, ministers of foreign affairs, and defence ministers. The last meeting of defence ministers took place in Bucharest in September. Not surprisingly, the representatives declared that Russia (together with terrorism) posed the main threat to the security of NATO states, and hybrid threats were on the rise.⁴

The Bucharest Nine as well as the Three Seas Initiative emphasise the transatlantic bond. The Three Seas Initiative was launched in 2016, and after the accession of Greece last year, it largely coincides with the China-CEEC Cooperation mechanism in territorial terms. The Initiative follows the interwar idea of the Trimarium in its bid for the integration of the space delimited by the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas. It could be a useful tool for the development of infrastructure and multifaceted regional interaction, but such positive content is overshadowed by geopolitical concerns. In 2020, the US House of Representatives adopted a resolution that linked the Three Seas Initiative to Washington’s national security and promised financial support to the project to increase “energy independence and infrastructure connectivity” of the region and counter the then Russo-European energy cooperation, and the Belt and Road Initiative including the China-CEEC Cooperation.⁵

At the Vilnius summit in April 2024, the CEE leaders reaffirmed their allegiance to the fundamental goal of strengthening regional cooperation for a resilient Europe and a stronger

² *Předsedkyně PS jednala na setkání Slavkovské skupiny o spolupráci v kybernetické bezpečnosti* (2024, August 27). TOP 09. <https://www.top09.cz/co-delame/tiskove-zpravy/predsedyne-ps-jednala-na-setkani-slavkovske-skupiny-o-spolupraci-v-kyberneticke-bezpecnosti-31779.html>

³ Zemánek, L. (2023, March 23). *Paradoxes of Poland’s Rise: Regional Integration & War*. Valdai Discussion Club. <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/paradoxes-of-poland-s-rise/>

⁴ *Bucharest 9 in the Defence Ministers Format* (2024, September 19). Ministry of National Defence. https://english.mapn.ro/cpresa/6334_Bucharest-9-in-the-Defence-Ministers-Format

⁵ *H. RES. 672* (2020, November 16). U.S. House of Representatives. <https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20201116/BILLS-116hres672-SUS.pdf>

transatlantic partnership. With a rising interest of European countries in Asia-Pacific, Japan was accepted as the fourth strategic partner along with the US, Germany and the European Commission. This decision is connected with the increasing efforts to build partnerships with like-minded countries globally and respective “value-based” supply chains. The Three Seas Initiative can play an important coordinating role in building resilient infrastructure and enhancing connectivity, especially on the North-South axis, which remains very underdeveloped. The ambition to link the Initiative’s project to external infrastructure such as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the IMEC (India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor) should be welcomed, but it is obvious that the decisive stakeholders behind the Three Seas Initiative are not interested in developing pragmatic and mutually beneficial partnerships across the globe and follow the security-first perspective on economic issues.⁶

New partnerships on the Danube

It contrasts with the strategy of Hungary and Slovakia considerably. Therefore, it is far from coincidental that the relations between the two countries are quickly deepening. Viktor Orbán and Robert Fico do not limit themselves to bilateral cooperation but are establishing new partnerships beyond the Visegrád Group. In March 2024, the Hungarian prime minister suggested that another platform for cooperation between sovereign Central European countries alongside the V4 should be discussed. Whereas the Prague summit of the heads of governments of the V4 countries in February reaffirmed mutual disagreements and demonstrated certain political paralysis of the organisation, leaders of Austria, Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia have much in common. And it creates favourable conditions for considering a new regional format. Moreover, Belgrade, Budapest and Vienna have experience of trilateral cooperation in the security area, which is one of shared priorities. In 2022, the three countries launched a joint border protection force to counter illegal migration. The latter is resolutely opposed by all of them.⁷

In addition, the four countries share the same stance on the Russo-Ukrainian war. While supporting humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, they refuse to provide Kiev with military

⁶ Joint Declaration of the Ninth Summit of the Three Seas Initiative (2024, April 11). Three Seas Summit. <https://3seas.eu/media/news/joint-declaration-of-the-ninth-summit-of-the-three-seas-initiative>

⁷ Scheffer, J. (2024, March 7). *Hungary Calls for the ‘Cooperation of Sovereign States’ — Could It Work?* Hungarian Conservative. https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/politics/hungary_austria_serbia_slovakia_cooperation_v4_illegal-migration_war-in-ukraine/

deliveries since these do not contribute to a ceasefire and a political settlement of the conflict in any way. From their point of view, Western military support, including the Czech-led ammunition initiative, only prolongs the war and causes further losses. The peace diplomacy of these countries is in stark contrast to the pro-war stance held by the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Baltic states. In connection with assuming the Presidency of the Council of the European Union by Hungary in early July, Viktor Orbán carried out an ambitious peace mission, which demonstrated the political will, strategic thinking, and diplomatic abilities of the seasoned Hungarian prime minister. In a couple of days, he visited Vladimir Zelenskii in Kiev, Vladimir Putin in Moscow, Xi Jinping in Beijing, and Donald Trump in Palm Beach in a bid to find a starting point for negotiations.⁸ It is telling that the EU authorities, the European Parliament, as well as some member states, including the Czech Republic, lambasted the peace initiative and even called for retaliatory measures against Hungary.⁹ Nevertheless, one can expect that the pro-peace position of the four Central European countries will be adopted by an increasing number of member states, especially if the new US administration exerts pressure on Ukraine and its allies to find a political solution as soon as possible.

Sovereignism on the rise

Aside from Hungary or Slovakia with the ruling Fidesz and Smer parties, there are other relevant political actors in the region, who share the most important features—cultural conservatism, democratism, and pragmatism with them. These include the strongest political movement in the Czech Republic, that is, ANO, together with minor subjects such as Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) and Stačilo! (Enough!), an opposition coalition led by the Communist Party. The same can be said about the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), or the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) in Germany. The political affinity materialised in the establishment of the Patriots for Europe, a new political faction in the European Parliament, which was initiated by ANO, Fidesz, and FPÖ. Their leaders announced the establishment of the group in Vienna in late June, emphasising the need to change European politics. The manifesto highlights national sovereignty, cooperation among nation-states in the subcontinent, protection of identity, traditions as well as fundamental rights,

⁸ Report of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to Charles Michel, President of the European Council (2024, July 18). Viktor Orbán. <https://miniszerelnok.hu/en/report-of-prime-minister-viktor-orban-to-charles-michel-president-of-the-european-council/>

⁹ Pro podporu Ukrajiny hlasovala většina europoslanců. Odsoudili také Orbánovu ‚mírovou misi‘ (2024, July 17). iROZHLAS. https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-svet/pro-podporu-ukrajiny-je-vetsina-nove-zvolenych-europoslancu-postoj-odhlasovali-v-2407171310_aur

and promotion of peace in international affairs.¹⁰ Even though Slovak Smer or German AfD did not join the group, their goals largely coincide.

These subjects show the growing irrelevance of the left-right division and the rise of other factors to be decisive in terms of power dynamics in liberal democracies. They also represent a conservative reaction to what is usually called “progressivism”, which has become a dominant form of current Western liberalism. The latter undermines traditional socio-cultural patterns such as family, and focuses on promoting the interests of minorities to the detriment of a social majority. It is combined with the weakening of democracy as a rule of majority since the execution of political power and an efficient representation of the interests of the people is restricted by legal obstacles both at national and supranational levels. From the point of view of the national conservative and sovereigntist parties, liberal democracies have evolved into an oligarchy and a rule of a minority for minorities.¹¹ Therefore, these parties can be perceived as populist since they advocate the interests of the people against the dictate of alienated elites. This democratism combined with an aversion to progressivism expands the social base of illiberal movements, undermining the liberal hegemony and creating favourable conditions for them to assume power. Hungary and Slovakia are the prominent examples of this trend.

Another shared goal is sovereigntism, an emphasis on the protection of national interests, and pragmatism in foreign policy, which has realist rather than liberal features. The pragmatic perspective opens the door to cooperation with partners irrespective of differences in their political systems and cultural patterns. Importantly, the stress on national interests goes hand in hand with support for regional integration and connectivity. Therefore, these sovereigntist movements largely do not perceive China as a security threat, but as an important partner to cooperate in a wide array of areas. The visit of Prime Minister Robert Fico to China at the turn of October and November, which became Slovakia’s largest delegation to the Asian country in history, demonstrates this strategy.¹² Similarly, the Hungarian leadership is aware of a “global system change” and the emergence of a new international order and wants Hungary to be a “keystone state”, that is, a small state capable of influencing international affairs and external

¹⁰ ‘Patriots for Europe’: Orbán, Kickl, and Babiš Present Manifesto (2024, June 30). The European Conservative. <https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/patriots-for-europe-orban-kickl-and-babis-present-manifesto/>

¹¹ Lecture of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán at the 33rd Bálványos Summer Free University and Student Camp (2024, July 27). Viktor Orbán. <https://miniszterelnok.hu/en/speech-by-prime-minister-viktor-orban-at-the-33rd-balvanyos-summer-free-university-and-student-camp/>

¹² Robert Fico: Návšteva Číny je cestou roka 2024 (2024, November 6). Úrad vlády Slovenskej republiky. <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/tlacove-spravy/robert-fico-navsteva-ciny-je-cestou-roka-2024-1/>

political processes.¹³ It should be noted that China plays an important role in strengthening the sovereignty and modernisation of these CEE countries. At the same time, it does not mean that Central European sovereigntists would like China to be a new hegemon or a dominant power in the region.

Central European regionalism and civil society

Aside from the deepening cooperation between sovereign states and sovereigntist political parties in Central Europe, the issues related to regional cooperation and integration, as well as countering liberal hegemony, are discussed by various organisations and public figures. In late October, Patrimonium Sancti Adalberti, a Czech association founded in 2020 to promote the idea of closer Central European cooperation, held its third annual conference, titled “Central Europe at the Crossroads”, in Prague. The event was co-organised by over ten foreign partners from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia. The participants have referred to the heritage of Saint Adalbert of Prague, the joint patron saint of the Czech Republic, Poland, and the Hungarian Archdiocese of Esztergom (and the Duchy of Prussia in the early modern age), who was martyred during his Christianisation mission in Prussia.

Over the last three years, the Prague conference was attended by influential political, academic, and business figures from Central Europe. It should be stressed that participants represented different political views and streams, being connected by shared aspirations for building an autonomous Central Europe based on centuries-long identity, traditional values, national sovereignty and democracy. This year, the event hosted high-level politicians from ANO, FPÖ, Fidesz, Polish Law and Justice (PiS), or Slovak National Party, retired NATO officials, diplomats or heads of intelligence services. Participants agreed that Europe was in crisis and its global relevance had sharply declined. Although accepting membership in the EU, they rejected the current hegemony of the liberal elites and the excessive dependence on actors beyond Europe.¹⁴ Former Deputy Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic Petr Drulák argued in favour of building a sustainable format of Central European cooperation independent of

¹³ Losonczy, M. (2024, February 15). *Balázs Orbán's Hussar Cut: The Hungarian Strategy for Connectivity Launched at Ludovika Event*. Hungarian Conservative. https://www.hungarianconservative.com/articles/current/balazs_orban_hussar_cut_the_hungarian_strategy_of_connectivity_book_launch/

¹⁴ Panenka, R. (2024, October 29). *Impérium je slepá ulička. Třeba uhájit budoucnost národů, znělo na konferenci s Dukou a Drulákem*. Parlamentní listy.cz <https://www.parlamentnilisty.cz/arena/monitor/Imperium-je-slepa-ulicka-Treba-uhajit-budoucnost-narodu-znelo-na-konferenci-s-Dukou-a-Drulakem-763964>

major powers such as the US, China, or Russia. Although there were some disagreements regarding the interpretation of the war in Ukraine, most participants shared the balanced attitude of the Hungarian and Slovak governments, which was presented by Deputy Minister at the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister Balázs Hidvéghi and a deputy of the Slovak Parliament Roman Michelko. The latter also warned against the semiperipheral position of the region in both political and economic terms, which was to be overcome through closer regional cooperation and regional emancipation.¹⁵

Last but not least, Slovak participants addressed the need to reduce foreign influence on internal political processes as one of the basic conditions for restoring sovereignty, democracy and conservative values. These objectives were set by the constitutive document of the incumbent cabinet, that is, the Programme Declaration adopted in November 2023.¹⁶ Since then, the ruling coalition has adopted several measures while others are pending. Robert Fico and his team are well aware of the fact that foreign interference is often carried out through nongovernment organisations, which pretend to act independently, presenting themselves as a direct and authentic expression of the people's voice. However, networks of foreign-funded NGOs exert pressure on democratic representatives, shape public opinion, and set agendas in the areas of interest in a very efficient way to the detriment of the national interests of individual countries.

In other words, foreign-funded/foreign-controlled nongovernment organisations can pose a serious security threat. That is the reason why the Slovak authorities began to reduce malign foreign influence. The package of measures includes the following: (1) legal obligation to declare sponsors on the part of NGOs; (2) suspension of funding of and cooperation with foreign-funded NGOs on the part of state authorities; (3) dismissal of state employees working in favour of NGOs; (4) monitoring and investigation of influence of such organisations and their agents on political processes and decision-making; (5) promotion of a positive image of the country both inwards and outwards; (6) revision of the strategy on countering hybrid threats; and (7) suspension of state-related advertisement in excessively biased media. Undoubtedly, these measures constitute essential measures for reducing foreign interference and might be applied in other countries in line with their local conditions.

¹⁵ Fuchsová, D. (2024, October 26). *Musíme více a lépe spolupracovat, znělo na pražské konferenci o budoucnosti střední Evropy*. CNN Prima News. <https://cnn.iprima.cz/potrebujeme-lepsi-spolupraci-znelo-na-prazske-konferenci-o-budoucnosti-stredni-evropy-451732>

¹⁶ *Programové vyhlásenie Vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023-2027* (2023). Národná rada Slovenskej republiky. <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376>

Conclusion

Central European countries are emancipating from the overdependence on the transatlantic structures, seeking new forms of regional cooperation and integration, new forms of democratic rule, and an autonomous position in the emerging multipolar world. Despite the existence of various perspectives, sovereigntist and forward-looking actors in the region agree on the need to control migration, revise security strategies, reduce foreign interference, restore democratism and majoritarianism, adopt a pragmatic approach to foreign policy, improve regional integration, rebalance the media environment, build defence capabilities, and strengthen sovereignty in key areas. If other countries follow Hungary and Slovakia, Central Europe can emerge as a relevant and constructive actor in the new world order.