

The New Geopolitics and Its Impact on Regional Cooperation Formats in Central Europe

The security and geopolitical vacuum that arose in Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union was used meaningfully by the countries in the region, as they managed to accede the most important integrationist structures of the West, namely NATO and the EU. From a geopolitical point of view, the countries of Central Europe are now in a much more comfortable situation than in the 1990s, but this does not mean that there is no risk of them slipping into geopolitical experiments.

The article has two main goals. Firstly, it analyses five Central European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), with the aim of identifying risk factors that could lead to questioning of their foreign policy orientation. Two criteria that might serve as identification for the geopolitical orientation of a particular government are the support for Ukraine and position towards a broadly defined 'Brussels.' The support for Ukraine is understood in political terms as the support for the aims and objectives of the president Zelensky and his administration, as well as in practical terms, as all types of assistance provided to Ukraine, including military aid. Another criterion is the compliance with the EU policies and procedures (with particular attention paid to the attitude towards the maintenance of veto in decision making on the EU level) and constructive attitude towards the EU and its leadership.

Secondly, the article examines the impact of the changing geopolitical reality on three different formats of regional cooperation in Central Europe. Besides the Visegrad Four (V4), which is a format with the longest track record, the Slavkov Triangle (S3) as an example of a minilateral initiative among comparable size countries is examined. Last but not least, the focus is also on Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which declares itself as a regional grouping oriented predominantly on sectoral cooperation. The hypothesis is that all examined regional cooperation have been influenced negatively the changes of the governments in Central European countries, though to a different extent. The governments therefore look for alternatives, which include the creation of new formats, revitalization of the old ones or preference of *ad hoc* coalitions with other countries.

K e y w o r d s: geopolitics, Central Europe, domestic politics, foreign policy, regional cooperation.

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THE NEW GEOPOLITICS AND ITS IMPACT ON REGIONAL COOPERATION FORMATS IN CENTRAL EUROPE

In February 2022, after more than 32 years after the end of the Cold War, the countries of Central Europe became indirect participants in a war conflict that decides the new geopolitical map of Europe. These countries are the members of the European Union and NATO (except for Austria), their belonging to the democratic West should therefore be taken for granted. They are not in immediate danger of a military attack, because they are protected by the NATO security umbrella, while the membership in the European Union also provides them with some security guarantees. The governments of these countries created on the basis of general elections are considered to be the guardians of the geopolitical, meaning pro-Western orientation, of their respective countries. But is it really the case? The results of the parliamentary elections in the Czech Republic from 2021, Hungary from 2022, as well as Slovakia and Poland from 2023 are known, and the same applies to Austria, which had general election in September 2024. The question is whether these elections and consequently formed governments have impacted on the geopolitical position of the countries listed above. Similarly important question is about the influence of changed composition of the governments in individual countries on the most important formats of regional cooperation in Central Europe. The answer to the first question is expected to be positive. Regarding the second one, the hypothesis is that examined traditional formats of regional cooperation experience decline, while the preference of the

Central European countries is given to the revitalization of some existing formats of regional cooperation, establishment of new ones or creation of *ad hoc* coalitions with other countries, not necessarily from Central Europe. In this regard, the 3 Seas Initiative is in a specific position, as it is considered to be a broad, 'work in progress' initiative, oriented towards sectoral cooperation.

Two criteria can serve as indicators for the geopolitical orientation of a particular government. These would be the support for Ukraine and position towards a broadly defined 'Brussels'. The support of Ukraine is understood in political terms, as political support for the aims and objectives of president Zelensky and his administration, as well as in practical terms, as all types of assistance, including military aid. The second criterion is based on the alignment with EU policies and procedures (with particular attention paid to the attitude towards the maintenance of veto in decision making on the EU level), as well as on a constructive approach towards the EU and its leadership.

THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS TO EUROPE

Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine is clearly geopolitical in nature, and so is Russia's support for the separatism of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the self-proclaimed Republic of Transnistria.¹ It is about territory, or more precisely, the control of the territory of a sovereign state, or at least part of it, and its inclusion in the Russian sphere of influence. Current representatives of Russia think similarly to their tsarist and Soviet predecessors. The provision of the living space for the people (*lebensraum* in the Nazi ideology)² is supposed to guarantee its security and prosperity and security. The control over the big territory is also expected to enable Russia maintaining powerful position in world affairs and even strengthen it. Thus, Putin's Russia is not interested in reforming the multilateral system but prefers to create a multipolar system in which the global powers would divide their spheres of influence. From this point of view, the

¹ Ioannis E. Kotoulas and Wolfgang Pusztai, *Geopolitics of the War in Ukraine*, FAINST Report 4, 2022, Foreign Affairs Institute, <https://www.aies.at/download/2022/Geopolitics-of-the-War-in-Ukraine-FINAL.pdf> (access: 10 June 2024).

² Woodruff D. Smith, 'Friedrich Ratzel and the Origins of Lebensraum', *German Studies Review* 3: 1, 1980, pp. 51–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1429483>; C. Abrahamsson, 'On the Genealogy of Lebensraum', *Geographica Helvetica* 68: 1, 2013, pp. 37–44, www.geogr-helv.net/68/37/2013 (access: 10 June 2024), <https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-68-37-2013>.

West should get the short end of the stick, and the US should lose its great power status for good.³ In order to materialize these ideas, Russia has used all the instruments of the hybrid warfare. In relation to the members of the EU and NATO, including the ones from Central Europe, disinformation campaigns are considered to be a useful tool, particularly in the time of parliamentary and/or presidential elections. Direct interference of Russia in the election process also cannot be excluded, as showed on the case of last presidential elections in Romania.⁴

The obsession with territorial expansion is in direct contrast to the principles of international law, as Russia acquires new territories by using force. At a time when the multilateral system is being undermined directly by the country that contributed to its creation, distancing itself from Russia and supporting Ukraine is a precondition for maintaining unity of the collective West. If the members of the EU and NATO do not share common values or goals, the unity is endangered. We can already see that the principle of unanimity slows down or even blocks the decision-making processes on the EU level. There occurred cases when one member state did not agree with the proposals of the others. If there were more such member states, the systemic problem would be even more striking. Efficient EU, able to respond quickly to external challenges, is therefore the precondition for strengthening its position in global affairs.

The security and geopolitical vacuum that arose in Central Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union was used meaningfully by most of the countries in the region, as they managed to accede the most important integrationist structures of the West, namely NATO and the EU. Some other countries of the so-called Soviet bloc, including Ukraine, were not in such a lucky position. Struggles for their civilizational orientation had lasted too long or even have continued to the present day. From a geopolitical point of view, the countries of Central Europe are now in a much more comfortable situation than in the 1990s, but this does not mean that there is no risk of them

³ According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, Russia had three main choices after the fall of the Soviet Union. The first was a closer cooperation with the United States, the second was the orientation towards its close neighbourhood (post-Soviet space) and the third was the building a counter-balancing alliance against the US. See: Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

⁴ Veronica Anghel, 'Why Romania Just Cancelled its Presidential Election?', *Journal of Democracy*, December 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-romania-just-canceled-its-presidential-election/> (access: 21 January 2025).

slipping into geopolitical experiments. This time it is less about an external influence and more about internal political developments, though the influence of external actors cannot be excluded. Let us look briefly at five Central European countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), with the aim of identifying risk factors that could lead to the questioning of their foreign policy orientation. Consequently, the impact on different regional cooperation formats in Central Europe will be analyzed.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY ON POLITICAL PREFERENCES OF INDIVIDUAL CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

AUSTRIA

Despite the fact that two borders separate Austria from the war zone in Ukraine, current internal political developments and structural characteristics (neutrality) place it in a specific situation within the entire region. The Free Party (FPÖ), which does not hide its pro-Russian attitudes, has been leading in public opinion polls for a long time. FPÖ won the parliamentary elections in September 2024, while former chancellor Karl Nehammer's People's Party (ÖVP) was only on the second place, followed by the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ).⁵ Free Democrats also won the elections to the European Parliament.⁶ At the same time, part of the SPÖ deputies obviously do not incline to the positions of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, as evidenced by their leaving the meeting hall during his address to the members of the Austrian parliament in April 2023. Neutrality, which is perceived as an integral part of the Austrian identity, is considered an inviolable issue for the vast majority of parties in the Austrian political spectrum. This also explains why there is no public discussion on this topic. The Austrian Raiffeisen Bank International (RBI) still belongs to the most important international banks operating in Russia. The interest in maintaining this position for it, together with a traditional openness

⁵ Corinne Deloy, *Landslide in Austria as Far-Right Party Leads Federal Elections for the First Time*, Fondation Robert Schuman, 1 October 2024, <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/6331-landslide-in-austria-as-far-right-party-leads-federal-elections-for-the-first-time> (access: 21 January 2025).

⁶ Francois Murphy, *Austrian Far Right Says EU Vote Win Gives It Momentum for National Race*, Reuters, 9 June 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/polling-based-forecast-says-austrias-far-right-wins-eu-vote-2024-06-09/> (access: 10 June 2024).

for cooperation with both parties known from the times of the Cold War, represents a motivation for all relevant political entities to continue with the current policy. When the qualified majority voting is considered, the current Austrian government opposes the idea to spread it to more policy areas.⁷ The results of the last parliamentary elections and the fact that FPÖ will probably create a coalition with ÖVP⁸ imply that the new government will continue positioning itself in the same direction.

CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic belongs to the most committed supporters of Ukraine, both in terms of political support, as well as supplies of weapons and military equipment. The Czech Republic also succeeded in securing the support of other allies in its Ammunition for Ukraine initiative.⁹ Czechia also ranks high among the countries which provided refugees from Ukraine temporary protection. If we take into account the number of inhabitants, the Czech Republic is a country with the highest portion of Ukrainian refugees in the entire EU.¹⁰ There has been a symbiosis regarding the country's foreign policy between the president Peter Pavel and prime minister Peter Fiala, but the government has surprisingly low support in public opinion polls. On the contrary, support for opposition parties, especially for the ANO party of ex-prime minister Andrej Babiš, is continuously high.¹¹ Babiš's ANO also won the elections to the European Parliament.¹² The change in the composition of the government after the 2025

⁷ See, for example, *Austria Rejects German Push for EU Majority Voting*, Euractiv.de, 5 May 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/austria-rejects-german-push-for-eu-majority-voting/> (18 June 2024).

⁸ The attempt of Karl Nehammer to create a governmental coalition with SPÖ and a smaller NEOS party failed after several weeks of negotiations. The president Alexander van der Bellen then asked the leader of FPÖ to form the new government.

⁹ Oliver Jahn, 'The Czech Munitions Initiative for Ukraine is Gaining Attention. WSJ Reports that It Has Located an Additional 700,000 Munitions outside the EU', *CZ Defence—Czech Army and Defence Magazine*, 25 March 2024, <https://www.czdefence.com/article/the-czech-munitions-initiative-for-ukraine-is-gaining-attention-wsj-reports-that-it-has-located-an-additional-700000-munitions-outside-the-eu> (access: 10 June 2024).

¹⁰ *Refugees from Ukraine in the EU*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/> (access: 24 June 2024).

¹¹ According to the survey conducted by the STEM agency the support for the ANO party was 27 percent. See: 'Volební tendence české veřejnosti – březen 2024', *STEM*, 9 April 2024, <https://www.stem.cz/volebni-tendence-ceske-verejnosti-3/> (access: 10 June 2024). Since then the support to ANO has even increased.

¹² 'Eurovolby 2024: Volby vyhrálo ANO, SPOLU je druhé. Účast byla přes 36 procent', *denik.cz*, 10 June 2024, <https://www.denik.cz/cesko-a-eu/eurovolby-vysledky-novi-euro-poslanci-cesko-nedele.html> (access: 24 June 2024).

elections is therefore almost certain. In addition, the Czech Republic is undermining its position as a more important co-shaper of the future of the European project by adopting a more Eurosceptic attitude, which is also related to its long-term rejection of Eurozone membership. Though the current Czech government does not object a discussion on the introduction of a qualified majority voting in some areas of the EU agenda, it is certainly not eager to lift its veto power.¹³ Also in the position towards migration the Czech Republic is close to its Central European neighbours. The new government created after 2025 general elections will probably highlight its sovereigntist position in relation to the EU related agenda, while in terms of its re-orientation from Ukraine to Russia no dramatic changes are expected.

HUNGARY

Since the escalation of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022, Hungary has been able to reject Russia's unprovoked invasion, but at the same time it does not openly support Ukraine. On the contrary, Hungary used its veto power to block the support for Ukraine provided by the EU. In comparison to its Central European partners, Hungary is also the country with the lowest number of Ukrainian refugees which were given temporary protection.¹⁴ By maintaining regular contacts with the representatives of Russia and supporting economic cooperation with Moscow, within the EU it has earned the label of the most pro-Russian EU country. Such positioning of Hungary, in addition to growing isolation, also brought a split with its closest partner, Poland. The significantly decreased intensity of mutual relations with Poland is also reflected in Polish public opinion research.¹⁵ It also contributed to the decrease of political cooperation with other countries in the broader Central European region, with the exception of Slovakia.¹⁶ More intensive support for Ukraine continues

¹³ 'Česká dilema: jednomyseľné hlasovanie v EÚ a cesta k zmene', *Euractiv.sk*, 5 January 2024, <https://euractiv.sk/section/europska-politika/news/ceska-dilema-jednomyseľne-hlasovanie-v-eu-a-cesta-k-zmene/> (access: 10 June 2024).

¹⁴ *Refugees from Ukraine in the EU*.

¹⁵ While before the escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the Hungarians were among the top three most popular nations (they had 57 percent of Poles' support), according to a survey conducted by the renowned agency CBOS, only 36 percent of Poles express sympathy for them, while up to 27 percent of them expressed antipathy. See: *Stosunek do innych narodów rok po wybuchu wojny na Ukrainie*, CBOS—Komunikat z badań, no. 33, 2023, https://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2023/K_033_23.PDF (access: 10 June 2024).

¹⁶ We mean Slovakia under the 4th government of Robert Fico created in the aftermath of the September 2023 snap elections.

to be conditioned by the introduction of changes in the minority and language law by Kyiv. Although Poland and Romania were also critical of its implementation after 2014, they are not trying to block aid to Ukraine, on the contrary both belong to the most intensive supporters of Kyiv.

It is questionable whether the government will be able to replace the shortfall related to the suspension of payments from EU funds with profits associated with investments primarily from China—the answer would be rather negative. The criticism of Brussels and EU institutions has been continuously pursued by the government of Viktor Orbán, though he avoids mentioning the European Union as such in his statements. Also, Hungary belongs to the countries with the toughest position on illegal migration¹⁷ and is strictly against lifting its veto power in any EU policy.

POLAND

Poland's support for Ukraine and its massive nature, as well as its leadership in the areas of security and defense, overshadowed the problems Warsaw had with Brussels during the previous governments led by the Law and Justice party (PiS). The new Tusk government created in the aftermath of October 2023 elections corrected the policy of its predecessor in the area of rule of law and intensified ties with the EU but also showed significant continuity in its support of Ukraine by all means. By attempting to restore the Weimar Triangle, a regional cooperation format which binds Poland with other two 'big' EU member states (France and Germany), the new Polish government sends a message that it aims to play an important role in the EU, also outside the security and defense area. With the greater involvement of Poland as one of the leaders within the EU, its handicap, however, is the absence of membership in the Eurozone, and the current lack of interest in adopting a common currency (partners from the Baltic countries, for instance, consider membership in the Eurozone as another security guarantee). The Tusk government has also pursued tough positions against illegal migration that bring it closer to Hungary and Slovakia. Similarly to its predecessor, the new Polish government

¹⁷ 'Orbán Rejects the European Union's Migration Agreement and Defends Keeping Asylum Seekers out of EU Territory', *El País International*, 22 December 2023, <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-12-21/orban-rejects-the-european-unions-migration-agreement-and-defends-keeping-asylum-seekers-out-of-eu-territory.html#> (access: 10 June 2024).

rejects the extension of qualified majority voting in the EU. It is also skeptical about proposals to reform the EU.¹⁸

SLOVAKIA

In comparison to its neighbours, Hungary and Poland, Slovakia's population has a less supportive attitude towards the membership in the EU and in NATO.¹⁹ The public in Slovakia is more vulnerable to disinformation campaigns, particularly to those orchestrated by Russia. When the support to Ukraine is concerned, the previous governments of prime ministers Heger and Odor provided Kyiv with all kinds of support, including military one. Slovakia was the first country to provide Ukraine with anti-missile Soviet system and one of the first providers of jet fighters. The new government created after September 2023 elections changed the scope of the support, reducing it to humanitarian assistance. This change was also accompanied by the changed rhetoric of some governmental officials on Ukraine. Prime minister Fico himself kept including offensive statements in his speeches. On the other hand, on the EU level Slovakia has continued supporting Ukraine, while joint sessions of the Slovak and Ukrainian governments were also held. The halted provision of military aid to Ukraine, however, concerns only the state stocks, as Slovakia continues delivering ammunition and other types of military equipment on a commercial basis.

When EU related issues are concerned, the fourth government of Robert Fico categorically rejects the new migration pact of the EU and perceives illegal migration as one of the mobilizing issues for its supporters. Also, it strongly opposes any attempts to suspend veto right from the EU member states, arguing with a negative impact on country's sovereignty. Accordingly, the government is not likely to support the extension of qualified majority voting in the EU.

REGIONAL COOPERATION FORMATS IN RESPONSE TO A NEW GEOPOLITICAL REALITY

Changed political preferences of the governments of individual Central European countries have also affected the formats of regional

¹⁸ Piotr Buras, 'The Long Shadow of the Populists: Donald Tusk's First 100 Days', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 March 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-long-shadow-of-the-populists-donald-tusks-first-100-days/> (access: 10 June 2024).

¹⁹ Ol'ga Gyárfášová and Grigorij Mesežnikov, *V4 v čase polykrízy* (Bratislava: Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2024).

cooperation. Besides the Visegrad cooperation, which belongs to regional cooperation formats with the longest track record, the impact of the change of political preferences of the governments in response to a new geopolitical reality is also examined on the example of the Slavkov/Austerlitz Triangle. Particular attention is paid to the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), as it is an initiative with significantly higher number of participating countries.

VISEGRAD COOPERATION (V4)

Thirty years of cooperation in the V4 format resulted in the existence of several ties and contacts at various levels in both governmental and non-governmental spheres. In the past, the Visegrad Group had represented for the V4 countries an important tool for promoting their own interests and agenda in selected areas, not only in the Central European region, but also at the EU level.

The situation became complicated after the escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. The deepening differences between Poland, Czechia, and Slovakia on one side and Hungary on the other meant that the V4 was most affected by the war in Ukraine. Despite more than 30 years long track record and robust sectoral cooperation, the V4 fell victim to divergences in political positions. The slowdown in cooperation was already evident during the Hungarian 2021/22 Presidency, as the number of high-level political meetings was significantly lower when compared to previous presidencies. The Slovak V4 Presidency in 2022/23, as well as the 2023/24 Czech V4 Presidency had continued this tendency and the same applies to the 2024/25 Polish Presidency. In 2023, no official political meeting in the V4 format was held, with the exception of the summit of the presidents of V4 countries hosted by president Petr Pavel.²⁰ The long-time expected summit of the prime ministers in Prague organized in February 2024 reflected the deepening dividing lines among the V4 countries.²¹ Still, the Slovak prime minister called it one of the most important summits in the history of this format of

²⁰ *Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite hláv štátov V4 v Prahe*, www.prezident.sk, 22 November 2023, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-hlav-statov-v4-v-prahe/> (access: 10 June 2024).

²¹ 'Central European Countries Show Deep Rifts on Ukraine at V4 Meeting', *Euronews*, 27 February 2024, <https://www.euronews.com/2024/02/27/central-european-countries-show-deep-rifts-on-ukraine-war-at-v4-meeting> (access: 24 June 2024).

regional cooperation.²² Soon after the summit traditionally good Czech-Slovak relations were challenged, since the Czech prime minister Petr Fiala decided to cancel the joint session of the governments with his Slovak counterpart. After the weakening of Polish-Hungarian ties, the rise of tensions in Czech-Slovak political relations contributed to the suspension of political cooperation (except for a few symbolic high-level meetings). In several areas of sectoral agenda, however, cooperation continued to be rather intensive, which also applies to collaboration among experts and scholars. Informal dimension of cooperation has also been actively supported by the International Visegrad Fund, *de facto* the only V4 standing institution. In short, civic Visegrad superseded the political one.

The aim to revitalize the Visegrad cooperation was in the agenda of the Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, since for Hungary it was the most important regional cooperation format. Similar position was taken by the new Fico government created after the September 2023 parliamentary elections in Slovakia.²³ The prime minister himself openly declared his support to the V4,²⁴ while the importance of the grouping was also stressed by different representatives of the Slovak government on various occasions, e.g. at the meetings of foreign minister Blanár with his Czech and Hungarian counterparts.²⁵ While the response of minister Jan Lipavský was not really enthusiastic, the position of Péter Szijjártó was more positive. The need to provide the V4 with a new trigger was also one of the outcomes of the meeting of

²² *Premiér: Bolo to jedno z najpodstatnejších stretnutí pre budúcnosť V4*, www.vlada.gov.sk, 27 February 2024, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-bolo-to-jedno-z-najpodstatnejších-stretnutí-pre-budúcnosť-v4/> (access: 10 June 2024).

²³ *Programové vyhlásenie vlády Slovenskej republiky 2023–2027*, <https://www.nrsr.sk/web/Dynamic/DocumentPreview.aspx?DocID=535376> (access: 10 June 2024).

²⁴ See, for instance, *Premiér: Našou ambíciou je oživiť silu a dynamiku V4*, www.vlada.gov.sk, 9 December 2023, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-nasou-ambiciou-je-ozivit-silu-a-dynamiku-v4/> (access: 12 June 2024).

²⁵ See the press conference of the Slovak minister of foreign and European affairs Juraj Blanár with his Czech counterpart Jan Lipavský. *Minister Juraj Blanár v Prahe: Naše výnimočné vzťahy s Českom nesmú zostať len tradíciou. Niet pre nás bližšieho partnera, preto chceme rozvíjať strategickú spoluprácu vo všetkých smeroch a v prospech našich občanov*, www.mzv.sk, 6 November 2023, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19710559 (access: 10 June 2024). Active approach of Slovakia towards the V4 was also stressed at the meeting of minister Blanár with Hungarian minister of foreign affairs and trade Péter Szijjártó. *Minister Juraj Blanár: Nezabúdame na hodnotu dobrého susedstva s Maďarskom, preto sa usilujeme o korektné vzťahy a rozvoj spolupráce*, www.mzv.sk, 8 November 2023, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19719366 (access: 10 June 2024).

the prime ministers Fico and Orbán in Budapest.²⁶ The call for the revitalization of the V4 made by the two prime ministers, however, was not responded by their Czech and Polish counterparts.

SLAVKOV TRIANGLE (S 3)

Due to the deepening of dividing lines in the V4 format in recent years the preferred regional initiative for Slovak and Czech political leaders became the Slavkov Triangle (S3), at least until the change of the government in Slovakia in autumn 2023. Unlike V4, S3 is a minilateral cooperation format among countries of similar size—Austria, Czech Republic, and Slovakia.

S3 was considered a platform for the development of mutually beneficial relations among the three countries, also in the field of sectoral cooperation and issues of European importance. The latter included the EU budget, the rule of law, support for the Western Balkan countries to become EU members, and migration. The main goals of Slovakia's Presidency of the S3 (July 2022–July 2023) included the support of Ukraine and the Czech presidency of the Council of the EU. In case of the latter Austria and Slovakia were expected to assist their Czech partner to implement the presidency agenda.²⁷ The 2023–24 Austrian Presidency, in addition, focused on energy transition and energy security, international law, digital transformation, transport, and development cooperation.²⁸ S3, nevertheless, always had an important political dimension too. It was both due to declared political goals of its founders—foreign ministers, as well due to the ambition to discuss EU policies.

The cooperation did not only take place solely between the three countries of the format, but the S3+ formula also opened up possibilities for the involvement of other actors. The joint trip of the ministers Alexander Schallenberg, Jan Lipavský and Miroslav Wlachovský to Skopje at which they declared full support to the ambitions of North

²⁶ Robert Fico v Budapešti: Krajina nemôže byť potrestaná za to, že bojuje za svoju suverenitu, www.vlada.gov.sk, 16 January 2024, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/robert-fico-v-budapesti-krajina-nemoze-byt-potrestana-za-to-ze-bojuje-za-svoju-suverenitu/> (access: 10 June 2024).

²⁷ Ivan Korčok: Počas nášho predsedníctva vo formáte Slavkovskej spolupráce budeme stavať na spoločných hodnotách, www.mzv.sk, 20 June 2022, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=12822955 (access: 10 June 2024).

²⁸ *Slavkov Format*, Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, <https://mzv.sk/en/web/en/diplomacy/slavkov-format> (access: 10 June 2024).

Macedonia to accede the EU, could serve as an example.²⁹ The S3 also showed ambitions to find partners for cooperation outside Europe, which can be demonstrated on the example of the S3+India foreign ministerial meeting.³⁰

Given the different positions of participating countries on the strategic issues, such as the support to Ukraine or cooperation with Russia, the future of S3 is difficult to be predicted. The ambition of Czechia and Slovakia to replace the V4 by S3 when it comes to the consultation and potentially coordination of EU related issues is now being challenged, as the Czech and Slovak positions started to differ significantly after the 2023 elections in Slovakia. Similarly to V4, new geopolitical reality also has an impact on the intensity of contacts within S3. The future of S3 would depend on the willingness of Austria and especially the Czech Republic to invest in this format, taking into the consideration the new political reality in both countries after the respective parliamentary elections. The format has nevertheless remained primarily an instrument in the hands of foreign ministers, with quite a limited outreach to other levels of the governments. Its informal character makes it rather a discussion forum than an efficient platform for coordination of joint interests and the lack of tangible results also does not allow the leaders to sell it properly. Unlike in V4, the civil society dimension is completely missing in S3. Also there does not exist any substantial academic work on S3.

The new Slovak minister of foreign and European affairs, Juraj Blanár expressed his support to cooperation within S3³¹ in a phone call with his Austrian counterpart Schallenberg just a few days after the creation of the new Slovak government, though the prime minister Robert Fico rather put emphasis on the 'revitalization' of V4.

²⁹ *Minister Wlachovský v Skopje: Oceňujeme pokrok, ktorý Severné Macedónsko dosiahlo pri eurointegračnom procese, teraz však nesmie poľaviť, ale stavať na dosiahnutých výsledkoch*, www.mzv.sk, 13 July 2023, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=18569504 (access: 10 June 2024).

³⁰ *S3 Countries and India Want to End the War in Ukraine*, Radio Slovakia International, 3 January 2023, <https://enr.si.rtv.s.sk/articles/news/313416/s3-countries-and-india-want-to-end-the-war-in-ukraine> (access: 10 June 2024).

³¹ Besides other issues, such as migration, cooperation in the S3 format was discussed during the phone call of foreign minister Blanár with his Austrian counterpart Schallenberg just a few days after the creation of the new Slovak government. *Minister Juraj Blanár: S Rakúskom nás spája množstvo spoločných záujmov i cieľov, máme záujem o posilnenie spolupráce v regióne aj v rámci EÚ*, www.mzv.sk, 31 October 2023, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=19645063 (access: 12 June 2024).

The proof that S3 is still 'sort of alive' was the meeting of the national coordinators from the three ministries of foreign affairs in June 2024.³²

THREE SEAS INITIATIVE (3SI)

Even though the 3SI is perceived as a relatively new regional initiative, which is still in the process of development, the number of participating countries makes it significantly different from both the Visegrad Four and Slavkov Triangle.

3SI originated as a presidential initiative and to a large extent it remains to be so. Originally the presidents of Poland and Croatia had been the driving actors of the initiative, today, besides Poland, particularly Romania and Baltic states turned out to be the main promoters of the format. 3SI expanded territorially, as Greece joined the initiative in 2023,³³ but despite the existence of informal institutions and 3SI Investment Fund it has remained a weakly institutionalized initiative. The idea to create a permanent secretariat of 3SI did not materialize. This means that 3SI remains to be the 'coalition of the willing' rather than a coherent block of countries or even an international organization.³⁴

Despite some ideas to make 3SI a political entity which would in practice mean the creation of the block of countries in the EU that would counterweight 'bigger old member states', particularly France and Germany, the initiative has remained to be predominantly oriented on sectoral cooperation. The focus on energy, transport and digitalization enables the participating countries to look for common grounds and work on joint projects.³⁵ Still, individual countries do

³² *Vo Viedni rokovali národní koordinátori Slavkovského formátu: Slovensko, Česko a Rakúsko pokračujú v regionálnej spolupráci*, www.mzv.sk, 8 June 2024, https://www.mzv.sk/pressreleasedetail?p_p_id=sk_mzv_portal_pressrelease_detail_portlet_PressReleaseDetailPortlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&groupId=10182&articleId=23209678 (access: 24 June 2024).

³³ More detailed analysis on the potential of 3SI to attract new partners could be found e.g. in the article of Konrad Popławski, *Do gry wchodzi Grecja, liczy na nią Ukraina. Inicjatywa Trójomorza to dla regionu wielka szansa*, Klub Jagielloński, 8 May 2024, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2024/05/08/do-gry-wchodzi-grecja-liczy-na-nia-ukraina-inicjatywa-trojmorza-to-dla-regionu-wielka-szansa/> (access: 10 June 2024).

³⁴ See also Piotr Bajda, 'The Three Seas Initiative at the End of 2020 in Statu Nascendi', *3 Seas Initiative Insight Barometer* 1, 2020, pp. 14–16, https://interethnicum.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/BAROMETER_1_ISBN-ENGLISH-VERSION_final.pdf (access: 10 June 2024).

³⁵ According to Grzegorz Zbińkowski 3SI is both 'economic and geopolitical initiative', which might be a disputed thesis from the point of view of the author of the article, but he still rightly summarizes the economic objectives of 3SI, as well as aims of the first summits.

not participate in the initiative with the same intensity, which is also reflected in the number of submitted and supported projects.³⁶ In particular, Austria, Czechia and Slovakia can be named as the countries which—for different reasons—have been rather hesitating when their more intensive involvement in the initiative is concerned. Still, even these countries assign certain importance to 3SI, particularly in the development of the sectoral agenda. The former Slovak president Zuzana Čaputová might serve as a good example, as at the 3SI summit in Bucharest declared that initiatives like 3SI can ‘provide certain financial and investment opportunities for the country, especially when infrastructure projects are concerned’.³⁷ She also underlined the importance of the business summit that followed the 3SI summit for which she brought a group of Slovak businessmen with her.³⁸ On the other hand, the Forum of the regions of 3SI can serve an important instrument complementing regular summits and business fora, as it can attract regional and local stakeholders and connect them directly.

Weak institutionalization and focus on sectoral cooperation prevented 3SI from becoming the ‘victim’ of the changing geopolitical environment. The provision of the observer status for Ukraine in 3SI can be rather considered as a symbolic gesture supporting its future accession to the EU. 3SI also does not serve as a platform to discuss or coordinate EU policies, therefore individual countries positions—even if significantly different, as can be demonstrated on their attitude on Russia—do not play a major role.³⁹ Generally, initiatives

See: Grzegorz Zbińkowski, ‘The Three Seas Initiative and its Economic and Geopolitical Effect on the European Union and Central and Eastern Europe’, *Comparative Economic Research. Central and Eastern Europe* 22: 2, 2019, pp. 105–19, <https://doi.org/10.2478/cer-2019-0015>.

³⁶ See, for example, Andris Sprūds and Mārtiņš Vargulis, eds, *Three Seas Initiative—Mapping National Perspectives* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2022), https://liia.lv/en/publications/three-seas-initiative-mapping-national-perspectives-1002?get_file=1 (access: 10 June 2024).

³⁷ Čaputová: Summit Trojmorja môže dať Slovensku investičné príležitosti, *teraz.sk*, 6 September 2023, https://www.teraz.sk/najnovsie/caputova-summit-trojmorja-moze-dat/739011-clanok.html?utm_source=teraz&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=click&utm_content=%253BsNajnov%25C5%25A1ie%253Bimg (access: 12 June 2024).

³⁸ Prezidentka sa zúčastnila na samite lídrov Iniciatívy Trojmorja, *www.prezident.sk*, 6 September 2023, <https://www.prezident.sk/article/prezidentka-sa-zucastnila-na-samite-lidrov-iniciativy-trojmorja/> (access: 12 June 2024).

³⁹ According to Wojciech Roszkowski, ‘The Russian threat has never brought the Central and Eastern European states together. Given their location, the threat was and still is evident among the Baltic States, Poland and Romania, much less so to Hungary, and to a much lesser extent to Slovakia, Czechia, Slovenia or Croatia. Recently, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this threat resurfaced almost everywhere, as the memory of the Soviet domination in the half-century after the Second World War is still vivid.

that avoid political discussion and decision making are more immune to the impact of the changing international environment and geopolitics as such. As Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek wrote in reference to 3SI,

The theory of realism explains well the motives of competition and conflicts, focusing on the aspect of security and power, and admitting the primacy of the political sphere. When explaining cooperation in the framework of the Three Seas Initiative, this approach faces difficulties. In this case, the emphasis has been shifted to the economic dimension.⁴⁰

It would be interesting to see how 3SI will develop in the future, as some of the stakeholders consider it as a geopolitical entity that should provide another guarantee for the Western anchoring of those countries *vis-a-vis* the expansionism of Russia. Political elites in Poland, far the biggest 3SI country, also seem to be divided on this issue. The (geo)politization of the initiative, however, would also bring the danger of being more exposed to the changing geopolitical reality. This could bring other divisions to 3SI and even accelerate its fragmentation.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Despite rising security threats, experience with a direct military conflict in the immediate neighbourhood, the return of geopolitics to international relations, as well the efforts of some powerful actors to interfere in internal political events, the Central European countries decide their future foreign policy orientation freely. The governments in Central European countries formed on the basis of democratic elections, can, however, weaken the geopolitical anchoring of their own countries and their belonging to the West. This might happen despite the still favourable historical circumstances and the absence of open pressure from the great powers. The outcome of the election

Hungary proved to be an exception here, where more profound memories of the Treaty of Trianon and the Hungarian-speaking population living abroad had become apparent.' Wojciech Roszkowski, 'The States of Central Europe in the European Union—between the Opportunity for Development and a Threat to Identity', in Piotr Bajda, ed., *Small States within the European Union* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Akademii Wymiaru Sprawiedliwości, 2023), p. 15, <https://cbpe.pl/2024/01/31/small-states-within-the-european-union/?fbclid=IwAR3zjSVofwLcB0FbWieuj4FID7u-ISZqDLWslhhu5vTxME0Eo1Rn-XJ-E> (access: 10 June 2024).

⁴⁰ Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek, 'Inicjatywa Trójmorza w świetle teorii realizmu. Polityczne aspekty nowej formy współpracy dwunastu państw', *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* 72: 1, 2019, p. 131, <https://doi.org/10.35757/SM.2019.72.1.07>.

also affects how these countries can make full use of the opportunities offered by EU and NATO membership.

Risks questioning their foreign policy direction exist in each of them. These affect not only the cohesion of the integrationist structures such as the EU or NATO, but also bilateral relations between individual countries and, last but not least, regional cooperation. Political cooperation in V4 has been negatively influenced by increasingly diverging attitudes of the participating states. Differences in the issues of strategic importance have also affected S3, where cooperation is on much less intensive level than in 2023. So far, the changes in the geopolitical environment have not significantly influenced 3 Seas Initiative, primarily because it keeps focusing on sectoral cooperation and avoids political discussions that would enable political representatives of the participating countries to present diverging views. Even this, however, does not make 3SI immune forever to changing foreign and security policy preferences of its 'member states'.

Due to the weakening of the above-mentioned formats of cooperation, Central European countries look for other options of minilateral formats. These include ad hoc coalitions with other EU member states, revitalization of already existing formats or creation of the new ones. The first example would include the coalition of the countries providing military support to Ukraine, which also includes the Czech Republic and Poland. In terms of the revitalization of already existing initiatives, the Weimar triangle consisting of France, Germany and Poland could be mentioned. When new formats are considered, the Lublin Triangle could serve as an example. The summit on migration, which was initiated by the Slovak prime minister Robert Fico in late 2024 and in which his Hungarian and Serbian counterparts took part, could perhaps be considered as the beginning of new regional format as well.⁴¹

However, it is still worth striving to preserve the formats like V4, S3 or 3SI, as they represent an important communication platform for Central European countries and their representatives. Potentially, some of them could also become platforms for a closer coordination of all participating countries. The precondition for such a development would be the removal of dividing lines between some countries of the region, which, however, seem to be drawn with a sharp pencil.

⁴¹ *Joint Statement Adopted at the Trilateral Leaders' Summit of Slovakia, Hungary and Serbia on 22 October 2024*, Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, <https://www.vlada.gov.sk/tlacove-spravy/fico-eu-nepotrebuje-redistribuciu-migrantov-ale-ochranu-vonkajsich-hranic/?csrt=18264304536808354132> (access: 21 January 2025).

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