



Preserving **EU** *Security*

Regional cohesion is key to challenges posed by multiple crises and new uncertainties

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If a major driver of integration evolution is the pressure coming from the internal and external environments, then today's security environment presumably guarantees the further development of the European security community. International terrorism, the massive flow of refugees, an armed conflict on Europe's frontier and the lack of internal coherence within the European Union should theoretically pose no new problems in terms of quality, since the community has already encountered them in one way or another. Still, the terrorist attacks by the Islamic

State and its supporters within Europe, the migration predicament, the crisis in Ukraine and Brexit, above all else, have created a new dynamic with security as its core issue. At the same time, these problems call for self-reflection and for drawing conclusions about EU policies and the actions of member states. That includes the countries of the Visegrád Group, an alliance of four Eastern European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. In this regard, the EU's internal and external problems highlight shortcomings in the sphere of geopolitics, institutions and principles.



National Guard members protect a presidential administration building in Ukraine in December 2016 as nationalist groups demand the release of jailed supporters.

In the wake of Brexit, the geopolitical outlook for Europe seems dim. First, Britain's departure from the EU represents the loss of a member with considerable capabilities in world politics, finance and security. While the breakup will have its consequences for Britain, without a doubt Brexit has diminished the EU as a global player. Second, the struggle for Ukraine's future is painful for Europe because of its political and ethical importance. In fact, although the main source of conflict was the country's decision to have closer ties with the EU, this crisis on Europe's eastern frontier has emerged as an opposition between the West and Russia in which United States-Russian and NATO-Russian relations tend to have a greater echo than the EU's role.

Meanwhile, despite continual efforts to create an efficient and effective operation, in certain areas, the EU is overdeveloped and underdeveloped at the same time. Border management is one of these areas: On the one hand, the EU has established freedom of movement in its territory along with the necessary mechanisms. On the other hand, external border management was left to members on the outer rim whose capabilities crumbled under the pressure of mass migrations. Because of the migrations, a wavering in member state solidarity and trust can be sensed in Central and Eastern Europe related to certain EU actions. The European public, for example, is deeply divided — on the overall European and national levels — about welcoming a large number of refugees. For many, this raises questions about protecting national sovereignty, which — from an institutional perspective — is related to an intergovernmentalist critique primarily aimed at the European Commission's political role and a lack of trust among member states.

THE HISTORICAL FACTOR

To understand the increasing unease, one needs to grasp the East-Central European view of current developments in European security. First, the perspective of these countries is determined by their geographical positions and their historical experiences. The Central and Eastern European region is on a fault line between the West and East. Therefore, geopolitics has always been a noteworthy factor in these nations' foreign and security policies. Although these countries — due to their similar paths throughout history — are usually regarded as a single group, their respective geopolitical thinking is diverse. This is revealed in their stances on the true threat sources. In other words, history taught them different lessons on how Russia should be dealt with and on how much they should rely on their partners in Western Europe or in the U.S.

Second, and as a consequence of the geopolitical aspect, it should be noted that despite critiques aimed at Brussels, the countries in the region have a firm devotion to Euro-Atlantic integration. Having regained their freedom and independence after the Cold War, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe began to pursue a foreign policy aimed at a "return to Europe." And even though

The Brexit vote raises questions about the future of a European security policy.



the road toward EU accession — and EU membership — was not free from disappointments, keeping the EU together and strong is not a question for them. This was visible in the case of Brexit as well. The Hungarian government, for example, indicated during the referendum campaigns that — in addition to the other Visegrád countries — it prefers the United Kingdom to remain in the EU and regarded the other member states' decision to stay in the EU as a "positive answer to the most important question." In fact, the four Visegrád countries formulated a decisively pro-EU stance for the post-Brexit period, emphasizing that the future relationship between the U.K. and the EU should be set in a way that protects and strengthens the EU.

Accordingly, the Central and Eastern European countries do not seek division, especially with their Western European partners. The continent's separation into Old Europe and New Europe, in relation to the 2003 Iraq intervention, was an awkward experience for countries in



the region because they came into confrontation with their Western EU partners — particularly French and German ones. In addition to stark differences in foreign policy, this division represented a gloomy period for these nations because it also suggested a ranking of European countries. People in Central and Eastern Europe are highly sensitive about this. One of the defining historical experiences for these nations has been their history of subordination to greater powers; they are uncomfortable being second-class members of the community. A reminder of this was Poland's argument in favor of expanding NATO infrastructure to its territory — a position formulated years before the current crisis in Ukraine. Transcending their stormy past, the EU accession of the countries in Central and Eastern Europe — their “return to Europe” — has made the term New Europe historically and culturally inaccurate and unacceptable. This is even more understandable when considering another historical experience of these nations, namely their role as a potential buffer

due to geography. The late Oskar Halecki, an expert on the region's history, pointed out that in certain periods the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were bulwarks of Christianity and Western culture, something often forgotten.

‘NEW EUROPE’ AND SECURITY

In light of the current challenges from the East and the South, the Visegrád countries set security at the forefront. Their more realist, security-oriented view has been revealed in the Ukraine crisis. First, again due to geographical and historical reasons, they are more involved and experienced in dealing with Russia and thus are able to more distinctly formulate their respective opinions on increasing the allied military presence, their support for Ukraine and on the sanctions against Russia. The Visegrád nations' threat perceptions vary. This was initially obvious with the enhancement of NATO's military presence in the region, albeit within the unanimously

Polish, United States and British flags fly during NATO's Anakonda 16 exercise near Torun, Poland, in June 2016. Poland pushed to expand NATO's footprint on its territory.

Hungarian police rush to help a family of migrants who, in their desperation, threw themselves onto train tracks in Bicske.



agreed upon policy of reassuring Eastern allies and increasing defense budgets. What's more, defense cooperation has become an outstanding pillar of joint Visegrád activities, symbolized by various military exercises and the formation of the Visegrád Battlegroup.

While there is room for development, the members have shown proactive intentions, as demonstrated by their signing of the Long Term Vision of the Visegrád Countries on Deepening Defence Cooperation in 2014, as well as their joint will to preserve the trans-Atlantic bond, for example, through the Visegrád countries' participation in organized reassurance rotations in the Baltics. In the broader sense of trans-Atlantic security, defining the Ukraine crisis in a geopolitical context first emerged among the Visegrád countries. The EU receives sharp criticism since, despite its efforts, it is not viewed as a key player in managing the conflict. In fact, even though Kyiv's dramatic pivot from Moscow was spontaneous and unexpected, the EU played an important role by offering the possibility of closer EU-Ukraine cooperation. As mentioned earlier, the Central and Eastern European members of the EU, including the Visegrád countries, have chosen to "return to Europe," thus sharing their neighbors' enthusiasm for European integration. Nevertheless, in addition to their definite support, they expect the EU to be a much more decisive actor in helping Ukraine.

From the Visegrád perspective, the EU has proven to be quite weak in the geopolitical sense, not only in Ukraine, but in Syria as well. Regarding the latter, the

Visegrád countries would prefer to tackle the problem at its roots — that is, to end the war in Syria — though they are aware that the EU is incapable of performing such a task. Its geopolitical weight is further decreased by the pending withdrawal of the U.K. This development provides additional evidence that continental Europe needs a joint European army. This idea is not new; however, its topicality is underlined by the uncertainties of U.S. foreign and security policy. How will the presidency of Donald J. Trump — whose positions on certain issues during his campaign showed either similarities or stark differences to that of Visegrád statesmen — affect U.S. relations with Central and Eastern Europe (if at all), and what implications would this have on European security and on the EU in general? While it is too early to adequately answer these questions, it should be noted that the trans-Atlantic relationship will evolve and that both discord and solidarity could create incentives for deeper regional and European security cooperation.

Such cooperation is currently tested by the refugee crisis, which Central and Eastern European countries view primarily as a security issue, setting them on a separate path from some of their Western European partners. In this regard, the Old and New Europe division lives on: From the latter's perspective, the first group represents countries politically stalled and incapable of adaptation, whereas the second group consists of countries with a more realist view of the challenges facing Europe. Consequently, the Visegrád countries strongly emphasize the protection of external borders, which is crucial for



two reasons. First, it serves to halt irregular migration and thus reduces the costs of maintaining internal security, and second — in relation to the latter point — it provides assurance for the preservation of the Schengen Agreement. Hence, the issue of migration unifies the Visegrád countries, which view the European Commission's crisis management initiative as overstepping its original mandate and prefer the role of political guidance be given to the European Council (and the national parliaments). The Visegrád countries have protested against the commission's previous migration policy — which in their view made the problem worse by creating a pull factor for further irregular migration — and have proposed the alternative joint Migration Crisis Response Mechanism. The Visegrád option would be based on the principle of “flexible solidarity,” whose purpose is to provide more legroom for member states in determining the form and extent of their participation. Although the feasibility of these proposals remains to be seen, they indicate a more assertive role for the Visegrád countries in security policy.

Still, the Central and Eastern European countries' restraint from division and subordination prevails. A striking example is the EU's relationship with Russia in light of the Ukraine crisis. More than one Visegrád country raised concerns about the potential for the economic sanctions imposed on Russia to turn counterproductive. Moreover, there are fears that these sanctions will put Central and Eastern European countries at a disadvantage because their Western European partners will be better positioned to reopen economic relations with Russia once the situation

normalizes. These are just worrisome thoughts, as in practical terms no Visegrád country ever intended to breach unity in the sanctions policy. Nevertheless, it does raise the trust issue, which is also evident in energy security. Debates over the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project are yet to be settled, and the potential negative effects of the pipeline connecting Russia and Germany are perceived differently by members of the Visegrád Group. That said, economic sanctions and energy security issues both raise questions of trust on economic security between Western and Eastern EU members. In a broader sense — and, specifically, regarding management of the refugee crisis — the Visegrád countries put special emphasis on the importance of trust as the foundation of cooperation and joint action within the EU. In other words, in the eyes of newer EU member states, the cornerstone of European unity is the principle of equal partnership.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Visegrád countries, preserving unity in Europe should start with enhancing their regional cohesion. Keeping in mind that even though they identify the same set of challenges (e.g., migration, terrorism, the disintegration of the EU and a deteriorated relationship with Russia), their threat perceptions in these areas vary. Accordingly, they should continue to be cautious when formulating their slightly different respective national positions so they do not become distant from one another or from partners in the wider region. Moreover, intensified bilateral and multilateral cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe should help the Visegrád countries and their partners make their voices heard in Western European capitals, Brussels and the world.

Secondly, learning from previous lessons, old dividing lines should be avoided. Several security issues — ranging from migration to energy policy — set the Visegrád countries apart from some EU members. The Visegrád countries have rightfully identified trust as a fundamental starting point in taking action on these matters. While there is a chance that the scenario of Old and New Europe repeats itself regarding other issues, it would be counterproductive: With the U.K. leaving the EU, the Visegrád countries lost an important ally within the EU on several security-related issues.

At the same time, countries with different security viewpoints than those of the Visegrád Group should remind themselves that the Visegrád countries — and the nations in Central and Eastern Europe in general — have a great historical experience in the challenges of geopolitics, and the lack of European unity and equality. Their firm commitment to the West did not change their history, nor has it gained them full acceptance by Old Europe. Accordingly, challenges from both the East and the South first affect the newer member states, and their arguments are not exclusively aimed at pursuing their respective national interests, but are pertinent to the overall interests of the wider European security community as well. □