

Is the Central Europe Ever Going to be a Real Part of Europe?

(Study on Central Europe and its various sub-regional structures as regional responses to the end of the Cold War)

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Europe has experienced enormous changes in the post-Cold War period. Europe, once divided into two isolated blocks separating continent into two distinct halves, has suddenly awakened and started to unite. However, the process of “uniting Europe” hasn’t been an easy one and hasn’t finished so far. Even now, more than 20 years after the fall of Berlin wall, we cannot say that Europe is united. To be correct, only one, although the bigger part, of Europe is trying to unite itself into the European Union; while the far eastern part is still being left out and behind and is looked upon on as a second class Europe.

When talking about uniting Europe as a phenomenon of the post-Cold-War period, one question stands up, i.e. the question of the boundaries of Europe. What is Europe geographically differs from what is Europe as far as the traditional European values and heritage are concerned. The process of uniting Europe has been predominantly carried out and managed by the European Union as a dominant actor on the European continent. The European Union (EU) has had the ambition to cover the whole continent, if not purely geographically, then definitely ideationally. The spatial enlargement of the Union to all areas that belong to geographic Europe is, however, a long term process as not all concerned countries show sufficient economic and political performance to be eligible for the EU membership. As far as the so called ideational coverage of the Union is concerned, there is a clear sign that the EU strives to spread its adopted values as personal and economic freedom, democracy, security, rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, etc. to all corners of Europe (and even behind the boundaries of Europe). EU acts as the speaker of the whole Europe as well as its guardian.

During the Cold-War era, Europe was understood as a synonym for “Western Europe” and/or the European Communities. The Eastern part of the continent was side-tracked and

subsumed into the Soviet Block.¹ And what about the Central Europe? Is there something like the Central Europe?

In this paper, the main focus is on the Central European region as a unique area, greatly influenced by the geopolitical changes connected with the end of the Cold War. We try to look at regional responses of Central Europe in the post-Cold-War period aiming at finding its position in Europe. The big issue for Central European states has been the strive to tear away from the East and attach themselves to the West, while preserving the uniqueness of Central Europe. We come out of the premise that the Cold War has been shaping the regional activity of the Central Europe and has given this region a motto – an argument for future regional activities. We also ask question whether Central Europe is ever going to be a respected part of Europe, especially the Western Europe – what has been its biggest ambition.

Central Europe

Central Europe as a concept can be studied from various perspectives and has been the subject of many analytical works and empirical researches.² The concept of Central Europe is, however, a “floating” or dynamic one which means that the extent and content has been changing in time according to external conditions. Central Europe has been rather the subject than an object of European affairs. Moreover, this area is characterized by great variety and diversity of all kinds. In this context, Central Europe is understood to include 4 countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. Germany and Austria belong to the Western Europe; Slovenia or countries of former Yugoslavia form another unique regional group.

Let’s focus on the Central Europe covering 4 mentioned countries at the end of the 80s of the 20th century. “Central Europe” as an old regional concept has basically disappeared during the Cold-War era. As was mentioned before, all four countries belonged to the Soviet Block as members of the COMECON and Warsaw Pact. Their political, economic, security and social life underlay the Soviet rule. The dividing line in Europe was the so called Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall. Everything to the left of the Curtain was Western Europe; everything to the right was the Eastern Europe. With the political winds of change at the end of the 80s arouse the question of uniting Europe. Western Europe has been successfully undergoing the process of voluntary economic integration with some signs of closer political cooperation. Eastern Europe, however, was marked by forced, dysfunctional and ineffective economic, political and security integration with distorted ideas about economy and

¹ Apropos, Russia (either as the former Soviet Union or today’s Russian Federation) has never expressed the desire to join the EU which is highly improbable in near future, but on the other side tries to have some kind of special relations or partnership with the EU.

² For example see work of Oskar Halecký (e.g. *Borderlands of Western Civilization: a History of East Central Europe*. New York: 1952), Jan Křen (*Two Centuries of Central Europe*. Prague: 2005), Piotr S. Wandycz (*Central Europe in History from Middle Ages till Today*, Prague: 1998), Norman Davies (*Europe: a history*. Oxford: 1996), Timothy Garton Ash (*Central European by Choice*. ISE: 1992) and many others.

democracy. However, in these revolutionary times the concept of Central Europe has been revived as a label of 3 states (Czechoslovakia being one state then) differing in some ways from the rest of the Eastern Europe. Their geographic placement on the far Western border of the Eastern Soviet Block had a great impact on future changes. Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland showed better economic performance than the others. Moreover, the voices of opposition were once again heard more clearly.³

It was clear from the very beginning that the uniting of Europe was going to be a long term, challenging and risky process. New Central Europe, although better equipped than the rest of Eastern Europe, lagged significantly behind what meant Western Europe. First, in dept political, economic and social transformation was needed to get closer to the Western ideals of free market economy, liberal democracy and free society. Aware of their common history, Soviet experience, jointly perceived uniqueness, wish to get rid of Soviet past and common goal to join Western structures, they decided to create a platform for mutual discussion, coordination and cooperation on the regional basis. They created the so called Visegrad Cooperation Group in February 1991. It was the natural outcome of intensive personal contacts between Czechoslovak, Polish and Hungarian opposition realizing the need for political and economic change.

Visegrad Cooperation Group

Visegrad Cooperation Group, V3⁴ (later, after the split of Czechoslovakia in 1993, V4) has been a loose cooperation platform with no institutions, no legal authority, no binding documents. It was meant to facilitate complex transformation and mainly the gradual integration into Western (European and transatlantic) political and economic structures. The leaders stressed their common heritage, experience and jointly perceived values as preconditions for closer cooperation on the regional basis. Other countries were excluded (Austria and East Germany became part of developed Western world, later European Communities; Baltic states were too far and formed their own groupings; Ukraine and Belarus remained Eastern Europe; and former Yugoslavia was undergoing violent disintegration process.).

The main goals of the Visegrad cooperation were to become members of the European Union and NATO. V4 countries understood their integration into Western structures as a way to overcome artificial dividing lines in Europe and as a justification of their belonging to developed Europe. The motto of their effort had become their “return to Europe” where they have always belonged and from where they had been displaced by force.

We can say that the Visegrad Cooperation Group is a post-Cold-War creation of the Central Europe. It would not be correct to say it was a creation of the West. It wasn't. The initiative

³ All 3 countries had strived before to change or overthrow the regime, however, unsuccessfully – Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968, Poland 1980. But the ideas hadn't been defeated.

⁴ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu>.

came from within the region of Central Europe with the aim to get rid of the Eastern European label and get closer to the Western world. The West, namely the EC/EU, has supported regional cooperation as a pre-school of mutual communication, cooperation and trust building. However, the EC/EU support was only verbal and not always audible. The EU had not sent a clear signal that such regional cooperation is desired and would lead to full incorporation of members into the EU.

Moreover, it was never meant as an alternative to European integration. At least not by its creators, Central European elites. They have on many occasions stressed that V3/V4 should facilitate the smooth and fast integration of Visegrad countries into the EC/EU and NATO. V4 thought that by joint effort and mutual cooperation it would be easier and faster to adapt to Western conditions, and thus jointly enter the EU and NATO. However, it is true (although not provable) that some voices from within the Union suggested regional Visegrad Cooperation as an alternative to the full membership as they thought V4 countries were not at all ready to integrate. They also feared that the enlargement of the Union by poorer underdeveloped former Soviet countries (meaning V4 countries) would redirect attention and mostly funds to these countries instead of traditional recipients (especially Southern countries and France).

Reading the founding Visegrad Declaration 1991 and later declarations (especially Visegrad Declaration 2004)⁵ the Central European concept (as a region, cooperation platform and regional identity) is a frequent one. The stress on “Central” compared to “Eastern” has become a typical sign of mentioned Visegrad countries and their cooperation and part of their identity. “Eastern” meant underdeveloped, undemocratic, planned, forced, not free. The concept of “Central” was perceived as something that is not at all “Eastern”, but at the same time is still not fully “Western”. Central Europe has been unique in its initial conditions and desires. Moreover, the movement of “Central Europe” from the East to the West is visible. But has the Central Europe succeeded in its “return to Europe”?

The Visegrad Cooperation Group has played a significant role in this return to Europe. Although there were times (especially in the period 1993/94-1998) when cooperation was dysfunctional, “dead”, the V4 has survived until now. The most important achievement of this platform was undoubtedly the integration of the Visegrad countries into the NATO and the EU. The contribution of the Visegrad Cooperation towards the fulfilment of the main goal of concerned countries is difficult to measure, especially when the integration process is strictly individual depending on the preparation and performance of individual candidate states. However, we can conclude that such regional cooperation and coordination of regional and European affairs has had a positive and complementary impact on the final integration of the Visegrad countries into the EU and NATO.

⁵ See <http://visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=940> for all declarations.

Moreover, V4 Cooperation had also a regional dimension. If it was created purely in a teleological sense, only to facilitate the entry of members into EU, it is probable that such creation would dissolve and cease to exist. But that is not the case of the V4 Group. The Visegrad prime ministers signed a Kroměříž Declaration (or a new Visegrad Declaration 2004)⁶ prior to their EU entry stating their wish to continue in mutual cooperation in the format of the V4. They mentioned their satisfaction with fulfilling main goals set in the early 90s and defined new areas of future cooperation. Furthermore, they set guidelines for the functioning of such platform in the sense of setting a timetable of rotating presidency and scheduling meetings on various levels (presidential, prime ministerial, ministerial, expert). The only existing institution is the International Visegrad Fund of 2000 that finances Visegrad projects.

One of the main directions of the new post-enlargement Visegrad Group is the orientation on the Eastern Europe. The turn to the East was possible only after the final acknowledgement and justification of their belonging to the Western European circle. However, the “Central European” concept has incorporated elements of Eastern past and some fears of this unstable region. The “Eastern Europe” represents potential threat and instability also for the “Central Europe” (understandably because of the immediate proximity and the knowledge of local conditions). But also from some altruistic reasons (the willingness to share and mediate recent experience from transformation and association) and from the perceived need to profile themselves in the EU agenda, the V4 has become an initiator of some Eastern policy features, supporter of European ambitions of the Eastern neighbours and speaker of their wishes and concerns on the EU ground. However, the potential areas of Visegrad activity are numerous, but the active role of the V4 Group is inevitable. The V4 Groups has not, unfortunately, fully used its potential in exercising the mediation role between the West and the East yet.

CEFTA

The Visegrad Cooperation Group is, however, not the only post-Cold-War creation of the Central Europe. V4 was established as a purely political loose cooperation platform on the regional basis. The unwillingness to surrender more powers to a supranational entity was understandable due to unpleasant experience with forced integration within the COMECON and Warsaw Pact. The EU and NATO as the ultimate goals were the only organizations with supranational decision making that the countries were willing to join voluntarily.⁷ Not to repel all the advantages of regional cooperation, V4 was chosen to be a loose cooperation platform without any supranational institutions handling political matters. However, economic cooperation was also needed; moreover, economic cooperation and integration was required by the EC/EU (in the contrary to the “lukewarmly” supported political

⁶ <http://visegradgroup.eu/main.php?folderID=940&articleID=3939&ctag=articlelist&iid=1>.

⁷ Although there were referenda on the EU entry held in all respective countries, the integration into EU and NATO was mainly political decision of the states elites. However, the turn-out was slightly over 50% in all countries and the answer was clear “yes” for the entry.

cooperation). In this content, the **Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA)**⁸ was signed in 1992 with the aim to eliminate tariffs and quotas on their mutual trade. CEFTA could be considered as an economic integration structure (with one supervisory institution Joint Committee) registered by the WTO. Such trade agreement was necessary precondition to join the EC/EU. CEFTA was thus purely utilitarian measure – members had to withdraw from CEFTA after their entry into the single market of the EU. CEFTA, however, has transformed and enlarged to include countries of Western Balkans – potential candidates for future EU enlargements. The adjective “Central” is thus rather symbolic representing the original ideas of free trade agreement of the Central European countries heading towards the full integration into EU.

The original CEFTA as such had clearly positive impact on the integration of the Visegrad countries into the European economic structures. However, the trade itself between Visegrad countries had not risen significantly. It was due to very similar structure and unpleasant state of production and the whole economy as a heritage of Soviet era. The Visegrad countries were more competitors to each other than trade partners.

What other regional attempts of Central Europe to move to the West were visible?

As was shown on two examples above (V4, CEFTA), the strive of Central Europe to get rid of the Eastern label and move to the West has become a typical feature. Of course, the integration into the EU, NATO and other Western organizations are on the top list of activities of “re-placing” Central Europe more to the West. However, in this article we try to investigate other, rather regional, initiatives of Central European states. We can identify other examples of regional activity of 4 Visegrad states facilitating such orientation. One example is the **Regional Partnership**, i.e. Visegrad Cooperation extended to Slovenia and Austria. This initiative originated on the Austrian proposal (to overcome temporary political isolation of Austria) and besides Austria included Slovenia as the most advanced country of the former Yugoslavia. However, Regional Partnership as an ad hoc discussion platform has not been used too much. Other formats of the Visegrad external cooperation opened after the EU enlargement. Visegrad states, encouraged by their final EU membership, started to open up to further external cooperation, especially in the **V4+ format** (as stated in the Visegrad Declaration 2004). This extended cooperation was a partial answer to calls for membership in the V4 voiced by countries of Western Balkans (V4 refused to enlarge several times as it would violate the uniqueness of current 4 members vis-a-vis other regions and states) and also a way how to extend regional cooperation within the framework of “ever closer Europe”. Such formats were successfully used with Ukraine which became the No.1 country on the V4 agenda.

To be precise there is one more regional initiative incorporating Visegrad countries aiming at cross-bridging existing dividing lines and preventing the creation of new ones – **Central**

⁸ <http://www.cefta2006.com/>

European Initiative (CEI)⁹. CEI - described as the oldest modern regional organization in Central and Eastern Europe – also served as a means of superseding differences between the West and the East. Originating in revolutionary year of 1989, it *“aimed at overcoming the division in blocks by re-establishing cooperation links, among countries of different political orientations and economic structures”* (<http://www.ceinet.org/content/cei-glance>). Gradually, all Visegrad countries became members. Compared to previous regional structures, CEI was the only one including countries of the EC/EU (understand of the “West” –Italy, Austria), Central Europe and Eastern Europe as well. This is a prototype of organization fostering cooperation and eliminating borders. The Central European Initiative covers a great variety of states of Central and South-Eastern Europe and aims at equalling political and economic differences among its members by activities in the fields of education, civil society, tourism, science, infrastructure or environment. It has 18 members now and its focus has moved further to the Balkans to help them move closer to the EU and Western structures.

All mentioned initiatives of the Central Europe were directly connected with the geopolitical changes of the end of the 80s of the last century. However, a long term impact of such changes can be visible also in recent initiatives covering studied region. These are represented especially by the Eastern Partnership. **Eastern Partnership (EP)**¹⁰ as an EU initiative launched in 2009 during the Czech Presidency of the Council aims at building special partnerships with countries to the East of Union’s borders – so called Eastern Neighbourhood. Initiative includes 6 countries, two of them (Ukraine, Belarus) directly bordering on Visegrad countries. The proximity together with the knowledge of local environment and historical experience with similar regimes predetermines the V4 to become initiator and supporter of such initiatives. V4 has thus showed significant activity in pursuing the Eastern Partnership. The original proposal of such policy was introduced by Poland and Sweden, during the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU the EP was officially launched, three successive Visegrad EU Presidencies have declared to pursue EP, the Czech Commissioner Štefan Füle became responsible for the agenda of enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy. V4 Group frequently stresses the readiness to intermediate transformation and association knowhow to Eastern Partners and wishes to play a major role in the EP agenda within the EU. In the involvement of the V4 countries in the EP, we can clearly find elements of the Soviet past – in this case, they can be used in a positive way to find a suitable profile of the Group within the EU agenda. Well managing of such policy would reaffirm the belonging of the Visegrad Group countries to the responsible West, accredit the Central Union uniqueness and at the same time tackle the Eastern past.

⁹ <http://www.ceinet.org/>.

¹⁰ http://www.eas.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm.

Conclusions

In this paper, the main aim was to identify the regional cooperative responses of Central Europe to the end of the Cold War. Central Europe, in this context the synonym for the Visegrad Group countries, has been significantly influenced by the end of the Cold War. It was due to its placement on the frontiers of the West and the East and its unique historical background. Central Europe has used the geopolitical changes of the end of 80s to start the “move” from the East to the West, while preserving the uniqueness of “Central” Europe. Besides natural individual activity of each concerned state, collective effort was also needed in such turbulent times. Regional voluntary cooperation as a specific phenomenon of the post-Cold War era differs from forced cooperation of the previous regime. The Central European region realized the potential of joint cooperation and coordination on the way to Western political and economic structures. Such mutual cooperation resulted not only from common values, geography and historical experience, but also from commonly perceived challenges and goals. The most significant and for Central Europe most known form of regional cooperation has been the Visegrad Cooperation Group as a loose political cooperation platform and CEFTA as the economic integration. Besides, the four concerned countries also developed wider formats of cooperation (Regional Partnership, V4 + formats) or became members of wider regional organizations as CEI. Visegrad countries have recently become active in pursuing Eastern Partnership policy or the Danube Strategy policy of the EU.

From all mentioned regional cooperation and integration formats we can conclude that all are in some way post-Cold-War products of the Central Europe. Central Europe has been striving hard to get rid of the Eastern past and move closer to the Western future. These regional structures can be understood as attempts to facilitate such move from the East to the West.

To answer the question whether Central Europe was successful in using the opportunities of the end of Cold War and becoming a firm part of the Western society, we cannot give a clear answer. The integration into the EU, NATO and other Western structures, also with the help of regional cooperation and integration formats, has been a great success and a clear sign of becoming a part of the West. However, even in the uniting European Union, there are visible differences in economic level or standard of living between its members. It would be foolish to compare Slovakia with Great Britain or France. Still, the Central European countries have made an enormous progress in the last 20 years and their EU membership has been a great success. The uniqueness of Visegrad countries and their road from the East to the West is the feature that makes the Central Europe “Central”. So, trying to answer the question, we say that Central Europe has succeeded in moving closer to the “West”, but still remains “Central”.

Resources:

CEFTA: <http://www.cefta2006.com/>.

CEI: <http://www.ceinet.org/>.

EP: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/eastern/index_en.htm.

V4: <http://visegradgroup.eu>.