

## The revival of ‘Central Europe’ among Hungarian political elites: its meaning and geopolitical implications

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### Abstract

Over the past years, the concept of ‘Central Europe’ has been revived by Hungarian political elites and this study aims to find out how and why. It is based on a content analysis of political speeches and communications, compared with actual policies and statistical data. It is observed that the government is the only political force to engage in the new discourse of ‘Central Europe’. The study finds that both the geographic extension and the connotations of ‘Central Europe’ have changed fundamentally. Often associated with the territories of the Dual monarchy up until the early 2000s, the notion today appears to be used synonymously with the likewise reinvigorated Visegrad Four. Yet while the latter has kept its geographic confines intact, ‘Central Europe’ has no clear boundaries. Such a malleable concept can more flexibly serve various geopolitical goals, such as Hungary’s intention to include Croatia and Serbia. The meanings associated with ‘Central Europe’ have changed just as much. Not long ago a symbol for Hungary’s (and its neighbours’) ‘return to Europe’, Central Europe has re-emerged as a ‘channel of protest’ vis-à-vis the West. Disillusioned by the EU following the financial and refugee crises, Hungarian political elites have been envisioning ‘Central Europe’ as the continent’s new growth hub and a safe space free from migrants. Economic data contradict the former vision. As Euroscepticism and a hard-line stance against refugees are no (longer) unique stands of the Visegrad Four, the question is what remains of ‘Central Europe’.

**Keywords:** ‘Central Europe’, Hungary, Visegrad Four, geopolitical narratives, ‘channel of protest’

### Introduction

A dormant concept following the eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU) in 2004, ‘Central Europe’ has been revived over the last years in the Visegrad Four countries<sup>2</sup> but most noticeably in Hungary. Whereas references to Central Europe<sup>3</sup> have been omnipresent lately, the Hungarian government appears to have no explicit ‘Central Europe policy’<sup>4</sup>. We thus need to put the bits and pieces together in order to see if there is any coherent logic appearing. This study therefore

aims to find out which connotations Hungarian political elites attach to the notion today, why they employ it, and what the geopolitical implications are. It is based on a content analysis of political speeches and communications, especially of key decision-makers of the government. This delimitation is not only justified by the fact that Hungary’s current government coalition has had an overwhelming majority in the last seven years, but also by the observation that it is the only significant political power lately to engage in the narrative-building of ‘Central Europe’.

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<sup>2</sup> The Visegrad Four cooperation consists of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary. It has historical roots dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but was more recently re-established in 1991.

<sup>3</sup> The Hungarian term is *Közép-Európa*. The denomination *Köztes-Európa* refers to a much larger area (cf. MEZŐ, F. 2001) and has not been used by Hungarian policy-makers in the past years.

<sup>4</sup> There are of course policies related to the Visegrad cooperation. Also, a macro-regional strategy was developed during the Hungarian EU Presidency in 2011 for the countries located around the Danube, thus covering a rather different area than the Visegrad cooperation.

## Geopolitical narratives

By containing distinctive “geopolitical orientations toward certain states and regions of the world” (O’LOUGHLIN, J. *et al.* 2006, 130), geopolitical imaginations and narratives serve to provide indications for a given society regarding where it belongs, or ought to belong (BALOGH, P. 2015, 194). At the same time, concepts such as ‘Eurasia’ (BASSIN, M. 2012; ERŞEN, E. 2013), ‘Central Europe’ (MEZŐ, F. 2001) or ‘Eastern Europe’ (WOLFF, L. 1994; ROMSICS, I. 2014) do not possess over a fixed meaning or territorial shape but are constantly evolving in time and space. As such, they can be seen as ‘empty signifiers’ (LACLAU, E. 1996), i.e. notions that mean little per se but that can be filled with almost any content, for instance to legitimise pragmatic policy purposes (*cf.* ERŞEN, E. 2013).

Especially in societies undergoing rapid change – as in post-cold war Central and Eastern Europe – such narratives are often adopted by elites to reorient their subjects towards new areas and geopolitical constellations (BASSIN, M. 2012, 553), with significant implications on foreign but also domestic policies. Accordingly, answers to questions such as ‘who we are’ and ‘where do we belong’ have been sought after with a particular intensity in times of major crises in the region (MEZŐ, F. 2001, 82; ROMSICS, I. 2014, 59).

### The concept of ‘Central Europe’ in a nutshell

Of all European macro-regions, defining Central Europe has been among the most difficult and the concept has come and gone throughout history<sup>5</sup> (MILETICS, P. and PÁL, V. 1998, 217; MEZŐ, F. 2001, 81). In the 1970s and 1980s, ‘Central Europe’ became a symbol of anti-Communism especially among the more rebellious intelligentsia in the Eastern Bloc (MEZŐ, F. 2001, 92). Understanding the notion as a ‘channel of protest’ against major

powers (*ibid.*, 98) is particularly important and will be returned to.

KUNDERA, M. (1984) saw in Central Europe a culturally homogenous region artificially divided by the Iron curtain, hence in need of reintegration. The region was largely equated with the areas of the pre-WWI Habsburg lands not only by him but also by numerous Hungarian intellectuals (e.g. Hanák, Konrád, Fejtő) and soon-to-be Czechoslovak president Václav Havel (MILETICS, P. and PÁL, V. 1998, 221), although Polish intellectuals were keen to add the whole of Poland (NEUMANN, I.B. 1993). What they all agreed on was that Central Europe was also to be defined against Russia (*ibid.*) and perceived as an unquestionable part of the West. These ideas led to shaping a narrative on the need to ‘return to Europe’, eagerly adopted by politicians as a legitimacy for these countries’ integration into various western alliances such as the EU (MOISIO, S. 2002). Yet once ‘Central Europe’ filled that purpose, it was much less often invoked.

### The revival of ‘Central Europe’ in Hungary

Despite the relative silence around ‘Central Europe’ in the 2000s, the notion was occasionally referred to by Viktor Orbán (president of the party Fidesz, in opposition between 2002–2010). A few months ahead of EU enlargement, in 2003 he claimed “there exists a Central Europe outside the Union” whose countries possess over unique “cultural and intellectual roots and background”, and among which one can observe a “willingness for (mutual) understanding” (ORBÁN, V. 2006, 225–226). Yet the ambiguity of this perception is well indicated in a 2004 statement he made: “in spite of all my respect and love of the Central European idea, a sturdy Central European cooperation is not an appropriate method for pursuing interests within the European Union” (ORBÁN, V. 2006, 353). In 2009 he even said “many things bind us Central Europeans together. Not just nice days, but – as with old married couples – also antagonisms and feuds between our countries” (ORBÁN, V. 2010, 64).

<sup>5</sup> On Hungarian uses of ‘Central Europe’ and related terms in the 1930s and the 1940s see HAJDÚ, Z. (2013).

A few months following his re-election as Prime Minister (PM), Orbán claimed in Cairo that “the economic future of entire Europe depends on Central Europe” (MTI 2011). He said the EU has a lot of internal, especially economic problems, and stressed the main goal is the defence of the euro (*ibid*). Moreover, Orbán emphasised “we do not believe in a clash of civilisations, which is very dangerous... Instead, we believe in human dignity” (*ibid*). He also claimed to adhere to Christian-Muslim coexistence and the possibility of cooperation (*ibid*).

In 2012 in Balványos, Romania, Orbán explained: “we are starting to study our entire history from new, earlier unknown perspectives”, thus constructing a “brand-new interpretation of reality”. In this the main role goes to the Central Europeans, who possess over shared roots: in contrast to the West, we did not live through those forty years of a welfare society”, therefore “the principle of responsibility has not disappeared from politics” (orbanviktork.hu 2012).

In 2013, the Prime Minister claimed “the next decade will be Central Europe’s”, envisioning that the region’s weight will significantly grow within the EU (Mandiner 2013b). He also said it is a “serious responsibility and duty for Central Europe to increasingly contribute to the Union’s efforts to manage the challenges the continent is facing” (*ibid*).

In 2014, in the company of incumbent Polish PM Donald Tusk, Orbán went further with a statement that “the Central European region *can* be one of the engines of the continent’s economic and cultural revival” (my emphasis), adding that “this mission may bring the two countries even closer together, carrying the possibility of a great era for both” (Magyar Nemzet 2014). He also emphasised the centuries-old bond between the Hungarian and Polish peoples, referring to a number of historical events. Orbán said Poland’s leadership and people “have stood on our side at every difficult moment even in recent years”, and expressed his gratitude to the Polish friends (*ibid*).

By October 2015, Orbán already envisioned that “Central Europe *will* be the

EU’s growth engine in the coming decade and a half” (MTI 2015, my emphasis) at the opening ceremony of the International Telecommunication Union World conference, that year held in Budapest. He stressed that Hungary has the fastest developing digital economy in the Union, employing 15 per cent of the labour force that places the country only behind Ireland and Finland (*ibid*). At the same time, Orbán has explicitly foreseen a special role for Hungary within the region at least since the expansion of the Bank of China in the country: “Hungary is capable of becoming Central Europe’s centre of growth” (KamaraOnline 2015). The PM added the expansion is strengthening an alliance that can facilitate a new Silk Road between China and Hungary (*ibid*).

During the refugee crisis of 2015, Hungary and especially its government received massive attention due to its strict policies against refugees and migrants, including the building of a fence along its southern borders (SVENSSON, S. *et al.* 2017, 7). Instead of going into details here, one can quote Hungarian government spokesperson Zoltán Kovács: “we need not to manage the migration situation, but must stop migration at the borders” (MTI 2016). Kovács stressed the increased weight of the Visegrad Four (V4) within the EU due to its consensus and common policies related to the issue (*ibid*).

Following the terrorist attacks in Munich and Nice in summer 2016, Orbán said “it is entirely clear that migration means danger”, and “a common European army must be established” (Felvidék.Ma 2016). Orbán further emphasised the need for the Central European states to represent that Europe needs fundamental changes (*ibid*).

In September 2016, in the company of the Prime Ministers of the V4 and Ukraine Orbán stated that “the European dream has moved from Western Europe to Central Europe” (NOL 2016). In his view, a generation of European politicians had a “secret dream”, according to which the EU can achieve that the Member States forget their national and religious identities; their historical identi-

ties can be weakened and replaced by a European identity. “Yet it has become clear that there is no identity that can replace the previous one” (*ibid*).

Following talks with his Serbian colleague Aleksandar Vučić in November 2016, PM Orbán predicted that “Central Europe – the Visegrad bloc of countries – will be a great success story: it is here where thoroughly great economic opportunities are and will be present, to which Serbia can also connect” (Tóth, P. 2016). Discussing Hungarian investments in Serbia, both Prime Ministers confirmed bilateral relations have never been better (*ibid*).

In his lecture dedicated to Polish historian Waclaw Felczak at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków in December 2016, Orbán said “Central Europe is experiencing a renaissance, and is growing and developing continuously and dynamically” (COPM 2016). Moreover,

the Hungarians and the Poles have come to understand that they must seize control of their fates, and by uniting their efforts history has given them the chance to make Central Europe the most successful region in Europe and the world. This is what the V4 are working on, and there is no point in aiming for a lesser goal (*ibid*).

According to the PM “economically and politically Central Europe is Europe’s most stable region”, adding that “we should not allow our critics to shroud accurate assessment of the situation” (COPM 2016). In today’s “Europe stricken by immigration”, there is continuing relevance for Felczak’s principle of “back to our roots”: in other words, back to our Christian, national and European roots. Orbán stressed Felczak was a true Central European citizen who felt very much at home “in the intermediate world between the West and the East” (*ibid*). He further claimed “the Western and Eastern dictatorships which sought to cast their shadow over Central Europe always had to reckon with the close bond between the Hungarian and Polish peoples, as this was an obstacle to their plans for oppression. They did their best to try to destroy this bond” (*ibid*).

Lamenting Hungarian losses in Russian trades due to the sanctions, in January 2017

Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó stated in an interview that “Central Europe has always been on the receiving end in conflicts between East and West,” accordingly, Hungary seeks to be one of the “pillars” of the re-establishment of European-Russian relations (MTI 2017a). Hungarian-Russian initiatives for the near future include the enlargement of the Paks atomic power station; negotiating with Gazprom to cooperate beyond 2021; contemplating action against persecution of Christians; and the refurbishment of four Orthodox churches in Hungary (*ibid*).

That same month, in a conference speech Orbán said that from a Central European angle the continent can barely be recognised: “Europe is struggling with four major crises at once” – migration, competitiveness, demographics, and foreign policy – and recently it has been unable to respond to any of them satisfactorily (miniszterelnok.hu 2017a). The Prime Minister claimed that “[o]n the path to competitiveness... Central Europe is not doing badly... Hungary is in a fair position among Central European countries, and we are performing fairly well in terms of the sum our central budget devotes to innovation as a proportion of GDP” (*ibid*).

In his latest State of the Nation Address, Orbán asked himself what is wrong with Western Europe: “From here in Central Europe, the first thing that comes to mind is that prosperity has made them all mad” (miniszterelnok.hu 2017b). According to the PM:

Until now, we have been taught that mature Western democracies are of a higher quality than Central European democracies... This may once have been true, when the European democracies were at their zenith. But since then the era of “open societies” has been established in the western half of Europe and across the Atlantic. And with this came its system of policing political thought: political correctness. A few years ago democracy in the European Union was still based on argument... This is one reason it was also so attractive to us Hungarians... (*ibid*).

As a reaction then,

[w]e announced our own Hungarian political and economic system... [T]he cast-iron guarantee for tax



reductions and wage increases must always be the competitive Hungarian economy. The mortar which binds the walls of the Hungarian model is courage: something without which no political structure can remain standing – especially here in the windswept openness of the Carpathian Basin (miniszterelnok.hu 2017b).

Praising his government's policy to have stopped 'the migrants', Orbán said "[w]e will of course be letting in genuine refugees: Germans, Dutch, French and Italians, terrified politicians and journalists, Christians who have been forced to leave their homes and who here in Hungary want to find the Europe they have lost in their homelands" (*ibid*).

Later in February 2017, Orbán claimed "Central Europe is competitive compared to Western Europe, and – thanks also to the tax system – many Western companies accordingly feel it is better to establish a factory here than at home" (COPM and MTI 2017a).

A day later, in his speech at the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism, Orbán said "today people no longer talk about the fact that communism, like national socialism, emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an intellectual product of the West, but that in the end it was we Central Europeans who were forced to live under this originally Western idea" (MTI 2017b). Further, "it is no accident that Europe has a guilty conscience when it comes to the crimes of communism, but here in Central Europe, even after a quarter of a century we still remember the nature of tyranny – the reminders of which are everywhere" (*ibid*).

In a speech in early March 2017, Orbán explained why he saw it necessary to create a national banking system in Hungary following the financial crisis: "when lending opportunities in the world began to shrink, lo and behold, the banks didn't start disinvestment in their own countries, but here in Central Europe, repatriating their money to Austria and Germany" (miniszterelnok.hu 2017c).

Also in early March this year, the Visegrad Four adopted a declaration on the future of the EU, a document that Orbán said "enjoys Hungary's support one hundred per cent" (MTI and kormany.hu 2017). According to the Prime Minister "everything is in flux",

because in our era a new world order is coming into being, and at times like this everyone has an obligation to establish their place in the new order (*ibid*). Further, in recent years there has also been a progressive "creeping withdrawal of powers" from the nation states. This, however, is a bad development, and must be stopped: "we must firmly stand by our national interests", adding that on this issue Hungary found its V4 partners to be understanding (*ibid*).

At a conference in late March 2017, Orbán stated that the European future lies in the Visegrad Four, expecting the centre of gravity of European growth to shift from the continent's western region to its central region (MTI 2017c). The PM explained everywhere to the west of the V4 the ethnic and social compositions of societies are changing significantly. In his view this is a negative development: "We are protecting ourselves against this and this is a major advantage for us" (*ibid*). At the same time, "the countries of the V4 continue to have strong cultural foundations, the essence of which is that while they are modern societies, they continue to insist on their Christian roots (*ibid*). In addition, the PM continued, "in Central Europe we have unwavering faith in the strength of families, and this is also an enormous competitive advantage in economic growth" (*ibid*).

At the same event, the Prime Minister predicted that in 8–10 years the V4 will be spoken of as Europe's most powerful economic engine; praising the cooperation by expressing the belief that "the Visegrád states will be able to renew European democracy and the whole of the European Union" (MTI 2017c). Further, Orbán stressed that while Hungary has overcome the financial crisis, economic growth stands at around 3 per cent – a level trapping countries in a state of average development. The question he proposed is how to move from this range to a growth bracket of around 5 per cent (*ibid*). The Prime Minister observed "there is a need for innovation and a completely different economic mentality". He added that "[i]f we are not more innovative than the Western European

countries ... our state of development will remain at an average level" (*ibid*).

A day later, at the congress of the European People's Party Orbán claimed "Central Europe's position is that if matters continue like this, in our generation's lifetime there will be a Muslim majority in Western Europe" (COPM and MTI 2017b). He added "the West is keeping us under ideological pressure", while Central Europe wants to reform migration policy (*ibid*).

A few days ahead of Hungary taking over the V4 presidency on July 1, Minister of Prime Minister's Office János Lázár said migration will be at the heart of Hungary's presidency as "Europe's future is at stake"; Central Europe has a major role in this area, he said, calling on the region to live up to its "serious obligations" (MTVA 2017, 2). Lázár called the European Commission's latest procedures launched against Poland "unfair"; Hungary will always be prepared to defend Poland's interests in the "European political theatre of war" (*ibid*). Lázár further claimed the EU "is in trouble, given that one of the most important member states is leaving the bloc" (*ibid*).

Most recently, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó said Central Europe must play an important role in restoring Europe's security and competitiveness, adding that "concerning migration, it must be made clear that the wave of migrants can and should be stopped..." (MTVA 2017, 5). Hungary urges cooperation between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union, Szijjártó said, arguing that western Europe is home to the continent's advanced technologies while eastern Europe is rich in minerals and raw materials. "If we can align these two ... then Europe's competitiveness on the global economic stage will receive a significant boost" (*ibid*).

## Analysis

### *Geographies of the 'new' Central Europe*

Despite frequently referring to 'Central Europe' over the past years, no Hungarian po-

litical elite has really defined exactly which territories (should) form the region. Nevertheless, a number of references have been made in this regard that together provide a clearer picture of what they have in mind.

The clearest demarcation of 'Central Europe' is against the West in general, and Western Europe in particular. The latter is almost never spoken about in positive terms, but is on the contrary a source of a number of evil political ideologies. Moreover, the PM's statement that Austrian and German banks repatriated their money from Central Europe during the financial crisis implies that the former countries are not part of the region.

Central Europe is sometimes also demarcated eastwards by Hungarian politicians, but this is more difficult due to the country's varying relations with Romania (24.hu 2016) and Ukraine (MTI 2017d) and the presence of ethnic Hungarians there. While Hungarian-Russian relations have never been better, some of the quotes above testify to a continued fear of East-West confrontation, which has deep historical roots (*cf.* HAJDÚ, Z. 2013, 76). At the same time, the PM's choice to commemorate Polish historian Felczak as someone who felt "very much at home in the intermediate world between the West and the East" suggests Central Europe is not imagined to belong to either, however, defined. Similarly, the Foreign Minister's visions reflect a region potentially connecting the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Further spatial delimitations of 'Central Europe' are even more ambiguous, in particular towards south. We saw above that Serbia was invited to link up. Hungary's previous foreign minister János Martonyi (CHMIEL, J. 2017) but also Viktor Orbán shall have suggested to expand the V4 to include Croatia (FOY, H. and BYRNE, A. 2016), a country whose EU-scepticism is increasingly binding it to the new 'club' (ANASTASIJEVIC, D. 2016). Moreover, Hungary's and Slovenia's economic ministers have recently called for closer Hungarian-Slovenian economic relations, believed to improve the competitiveness of Central Europe (MNE 2017).

The label V4+2 has proven particularly malleable. Initiated by Austria in 2001, it aimed to intensify the V4's cooperation with Austria and Slovenia particularly on issues related to the Western Balkans (NÁDAS, N. 2011, 15). Later, however, V4+2 referred to the Visegrad states' cooperation with Romania and Bulgaria on territorial planning, resulting in a vast Common Spatial Development Strategy for the six countries (ISD 2014).

#### *Geo-economics of the 'new' Central Europe*

Over the past years, Hungarian political elites have been trying to 'sell' Central Europe as an increasingly coherent region and a prosperous market in places like Jordan (Mandiner 2013a); India (MASZOL and MTI 2013); Japan (Magyar Nemzet 2013); to Azerbaijan (MTI-Eco 2014); and China (profit7.hu 2014). Given that all these countries lie in Asia, this is also consistent with the government's foreign policy of 'Opening to the East' (FARKAS, Z.A. *et al.* 2016; BALOGH, P. 2015). Increased trade with emerging markets is certainly not a bad idea per se, and the government has also set up a worldwide network of Hungarian National Trading Houses since 2012 (Index 2016). Yet unfortunately, the company operating the network is running with huge losses (*ibid*), thus the global ambitions of Hungarian trades still need to bear their fruits. Instead, 80 per cent of Hungarian exports are going to the rest of the EU (*ibid*).

The reality is that East Central Europe is tied to the German economy in a multitude of ways (KSH 2017), and this is often an asymmetrical relationship. Companies from Germany (and elsewhere) have invested heavily in East Central Europe primarily due to lower labour and other costs. The activities they typically engage in (such as manufacturing, lower-skilled services) often have a lower added value in the supply chain than the ones that remain in the company's mother country. East Central European economies are thus highly dependent on

Germany – they are doing okay when the German economy is doing well (BENZ, M. 2014), but are obviously not the ones to reap off the lion's share of the profits.

Whereas the Visegrad states' combined population is equivalent to that of France (SCHMIDT, A. 2016, 122), its share of the EU's GDP was in 2016 estimated at 5.26 per cent; France's at 15 per cent, and Germany's at 21 per cent (*cf. ibid*, 121). In the latest Global Innovation Index Germany ranked 9<sup>th</sup> and France 15<sup>th</sup>, with the Visegrad countries' position ranging between 24<sup>th</sup> and 39<sup>th</sup> (DUTTA, S. *et al.* 2017, 14). At the same time, the V4 are spending a significantly lower share of their already lower GDPs on research and development (R&D) than Western Europe, let alone South Korea (PÁLINKÁS, J. 2016). It is therefore unclear how Central Europe could become the most successful region in Europe – let alone in the world – in 8–10 years, as Hungary's PM prophesises.

It is also unclear why Hungary would be leading the way forward in that process. The country's position in the region has already weakened during the economic crisis (EGEDY, T. 2012, 171), and this trend has continued ever since. Hungary is in fact the only Visegrad country that fell back in the Global Innovation Index since 2011, ranking 25<sup>th</sup> that year (DUTTA, S. 2011, 18) but 39<sup>th</sup> six years later (DUTTA, S. *et al.* 2017, 14). The country was ranked the most innovative among the Visegrad countries in 2011 (DUTTA, S. 2011, 18) but the least innovative in 2017 (DUTTA, S. *et al.* 2017, 14). Hungary also has the lowest GDP per capita PPP among all the Visegrad countries (DUTTA, S. *et al.* 2017, 215–287). Whereas the country is spending a slightly higher share of its GDP on R&D (1.4%) than Slovakia (1.2%) and Poland (1%), it is clearly outnumbered by Czechia where this figure stands at 2 per cent (*ibid*).

Further, Hungarian National Bank chief György Matolcsy and PM Viktor Orbán believe that in Hungary industrial corporations can find labour and low taxes (miniszterelnok.hu 2017c). In reality, Hungary is experiencing its worst labour shortage on record

(SZAKACS, G. and KASOLOWSKY, R. 2016). It is true that the government is planning to introduce the EU's lowest corporate tax rate (BYRNE, A. 2016), but the effects on the national budget and welfare are yet to be seen.

It is therefore not too surprising that one can note an – otherwise very untypical – uncertainty of the Hungarian PM in one of his recent speeches (MTI 2017c) regarding the future of the Hungarian economy. Leaving his own question of how to move from a growth bracket of 3 per cent to 5 per cent unanswered (“there is a need for innovation and a completely different economic mentality”), he recently requested the National Bank chief to compile a book on how to make Hungary competitive ([miniszterelnok.hu](http://miniszterelnok.hu) 2017c). Contrary to his earlier statements about Hungary and Central Europe already being competitive ([miniszterelnok.hu](http://miniszterelnok.hu) 2017a; COPM and MTI 2017a), this can be seen as an admission that they are not.

#### *Ideologies and geopolitics of the ‘new’ Central Europe*

From its beginning up until 2004, the single main goal of the V4 was to help each other in joining western alliances as soon as possible (CHMIEL, J. 2017). The ideological elements implied were the adoption of standard EU norms related to human rights, democracy, etc. Whereas such norms indeed stemmed from outside, the V4 countries readily adopted them at the time.

Following EU enlargement, it is clear that it was the refugee crisis of 2015 that really pulled the Visegrad Group together; i.e. the clear consensus among these countries to go against the (then-)mainstream European – and especially German – policy towards refugees and migrants (KANIOK, P. 2015). It is also in this light that the growing emphasis on the need to “go back to our Christian roots” by the Hungarian PM needs to be seen. At a major conference in Poland, accompanied by the head of Poland's ruling party Jarosław Kaczyński, Viktor Orbán even saw the pos-

sibility of a “cultural counter-revolution” to reform the post-Brexit EU, calling for more power to be devolved to national parliaments (FOY, H. and BUCKLEY, N. 2016). After their discussion, the Hungarian PM was named “Man of the Year” by the Polish organisation that runs the conference (*ibid*).

It is true that Hungary's<sup>6</sup> – and the V4's – migrant stance, once denounced, has gained some acceptance across Europe (HIGGINS, A. 2015). Further, V4 cooperation on issues like energy<sup>7</sup> or pushing for the equal quality of seemingly identical consumer products across the EU may well be necessary (CHMIEL, J. 2017). Finally, the lamentation of Brexit by Orbán, Lázár and some other V4 leaders also reflect their concerns with being left in a multi-speed Europe.

But while the Visegrad Four may have re-emerged as a sort of an ‘opposition bloc’ within the EU (BUCKLEY, N. and FOY, H. 2016), Central Europe is not as a united front as Hungarian leaders (and some others) like to see it. It is clear that the incumbent Hungarian and Polish governments are the main drivers behind this revived alliance; yet their completely opposite approach towards Russia for instance has been hampering their cooperation (Nič, M. 2016). According to WIECLAWSKI, J. (2016, 1), “[t]he Russian-Ukrainian conflict confirms a deep divergence of interests among the Visegrad states that seems more important for the future of the Visegrad cooperation than the recent attempts to mark the Visegrad unity in the European refugee crisis”. Further, in European institutions Fidesz has more often voted together with the previous than with the current Polish government party (VoteWatch Europe 2017), to which it allegedly stands much closer. Finally, these two governments' harsh EU-criticism is

<sup>6</sup> Although controversial for its religious bias, the Hungarian government has recently donated more than a billion HUF (3.2m EUR) to help Christian communities in the Middle East (About Hungary 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Opposing Nord Stream 2, a second gas pipeline planned to connect Russia and Germany by circumventing East Central Europe (BUCKLEY, N. and FOY, H. 2016), is a good case in point.



somewhat puzzling considering that Poles and Hungarians still have the most favourable view of the EU of any Member States (BUCKLEY, N. and FOY, H. 2016).

Yet the increasingly Eurosceptic rhetoric is distancing Hungary and Poland from Slovakia and Czechia, which as a result have started emphasising their close relationship with Brussels and Berlin (FOY, H. and BYRNE, A. 2016). Slovakia is in the Eurozone that makes it more integrated in the bloc, and Czechia has traditionally seen itself as the most “western” of the group, and values its relations with Germany more than any of its allies (*ibid*; NIČ, M. 2016). Two diplomats from the region said Prague and Bratislava could start showcasing alternative alliances, including with Austria (FOY, H. and BYRNE, A. 2016). There is also resistance to Hungarian suggestions to include Croatia in Visegrad (CHMIEL, J. 2017), seen as an attempt to tilt the group’s ideological balance towards Budapest and Warsaw (FOY, H. and BYRNE, A. 2016). As one diplomat expressed: “We don’t want to kill off the Visegrad co-operation, we see great value in it. But we don’t want it to be used as a shield for some kind of crazy cultural revolution” (*ibid*). Besides a varying appetite for radical reforms, such statements can also reflect the strongly varying importance of religion among the Visegrad countries. Either way, as NIČ, M. (2016, 281) put it “the honeymoon period seems to be over”.

## Conclusions

Over the past few years, the notion of ‘Central Europe’ has undergone fundamental shifts among Hungarian political elites both geographically and in its meanings. Imagined to consist of more or less the historic territories of the Dual monarchy up until the 2000s, the concept is today often a synonym for the Visegrad states. Yet the very fact that both denominations are invoked may well reflect a conscious choice. Unlike the Visegrad cooperation, which has after all main-

tained its clearly defined geographical delimitation since its re-establishment (1991), ‘Central Europe’ has no clear boundaries. Such a malleable concept can more flexibly be adopted for various geopolitical projects (*cf.* BASSIN, M. 2012, 555), such as excluding German-speaking areas or Hungary’s intention to include countries like Croatia and Serbia.

While underpinning Hungary’s and its neighbours’ ‘return to Europe’ up until the early 2000s, ‘Central Europe’ recently serves to demarcate them vis-à-vis the West. Unlike a decade or two ago, when focus was on adopting the principles of democracy, rule of law, checks and balances, human rights and equality, ‘Central Europe’ now emphasises Christian roots, national sovereignty and ethnic homogeneity. Hungarian leaders also envision the region as Europe’s future growth engine, and – relatedly – as a safe space without migrants. Considering that ‘Central Europe’ can be filled with such a variety of ideas qualifies it as an ‘empty signifier’ (LACLAU, E. 1996).

The fact that ‘Central Europe’ has re-emerged as a ‘channel of protest’ (*cf.* MEZŐ, F. 2001) can reflect a certain insecurity among Hungarian leaders regarding the future of Hungary and its neighbourhood. As numerous data presented have shown, the state of the V4 economies – and Hungary’s in particular – is far from as bright as some of the statements of Hungarian leaders would suggest. Further, Hungarian leaders increasingly present Central Europe as a victim of East-West confrontation and interests. While there are indeed several common challenges ahead of the V4, its key driving force is the alliance of the incumbent Hungarian and Polish governments, which are still divided on Russia. Slovak and Czech representatives are clearly less enthusiastic about Visegrad recently. In fact, the V4’s recent revival was largely a reaction to the refugee crisis. Thus if debates around migration will lessen, or – more realistically – various pro- and con-alliances within the EU emerge, the question is what will remain of ‘Central Europe’.

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