
REGIONAL COOPERATION AND PROMOTING STABILITY IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD: A CENTRAL EUROPEAN SECURITY IDENTITY AFTER 2004

ALEXANDRA TIEANU

INTRODUCTION

Timothy Garton Ash wrote in 1986 that “[i]n the last few years we have begun to talk again about Central Europe, and in the present tense. This new discussion originated not in Berlin or Vienna but in Prague and Budapest.” (Garton Ash, 1986: 1). During the 1980s, Central European intellectuals have constructed a certain cultural representation of their region as a response to a repressive and closed Communist regime by adapting its characteristics to the external and domestic circumstances. The moral victory of these dissident intellectuals over the local Communist regimes in 1989 brought the discussion on Central Europe from the cultural realm into the official political narrative of four states that were now returning to democracy. The political dimension of Central Europe drew back on themes and ties created first at cultural level, and then evolved to comprise the new challenges of the 21st century, i.e. the Euro-Atlantic accession of the Central European states. What was constant during these decades were the limits given to the Central European region, by intellectuals writing about its culture, or by politicians planning its common development, as they referred only to three, and then four, states: Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic and Slovakia), Hungary, and Poland, or as they were known from the 1990s on, the Visegrád states.

During the 1990s, the Central European states reconfigured themselves as a region by integrating a series of political and economic elements as the newly democratic states were trying to address and adapt to the attraction of Western Europe. And since the West was to a great extent preoccupied

with maintaining and perpetuating the security and stability of the European continent, Central Europe transformed the representation it projected outwards from a cultural identity into the image of a group of states that had successfully applied the economic, social, and political reforms of transition. Moreover, as they were narrowing the gap towards NATO and the European Union, preparing themselves to become full members at the beginning of the 21st century, a new discussion emerged in the field of regional and European security as Central Europe was becoming the Eastern most region of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and was bordering both candidate and non-candidate countries.

This paper focuses on how a Central European Security Identity has appeared and was developed in the four Visegrád states (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia) after their accession to the European Union in 2004, and how it was envisioned within the framework of both the EU and NATO. The regional perspective through which the Central European states understood European security after 2004 capitalises on their common traditions and efforts, and especially on their success story of political and economic transformations from Communism to democracy. We will start our analysis from two research questions. First, we will study how the Central European Security Identity was formed and adapted after the 2004 EU enlargement, by taking into consideration the cultural, historical, and political ties that exist between the four Visegrád states and how their mentality lead to a common objective also in this field. We will discuss here not only the cultural background that created a common regional identity, but also the political narrative of the 1990s that focused on common goals and strategies towards the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Second, we will analyse some outcomes of the Central European Security Identity in terms of successful common strategies starting with 2004, presenting how it was institutionalised within the Visegrád Group or the European Union and giving some examples of its practical application. In order to analyse how the Central European security identity was understood, the paper discusses several relevant official documents issued by the Visegrád Group and the European Union. Also, we will take into account statements made by the heads of state and

government from the four countries when addressing a certain regional or European potential threat, or when discussing their state's foreign policy strategies towards the near vicinity. As this analysis is intended to have a regional perspective, the focus of the paper will be on Central European perceptions of its security, its initiatives towards promoting stability and cooperation at its south and east, and its regional common interests.

A CENTRAL EUROPEAN REGIONAL IDENTITY IN TERMS OF SECURITY

As a cultural or political representation, Central Europe has always depended on the external context to which it referred, constantly seeking to reposition itself more or less closely to Western Europe. Creating a regional identity was not a new idea as for Central Europe it was a discussion that started to shape itself during the entire 20th century as an adapted response to a certain situation that was occurring in Europe. When after 2004 the idea of a Central European Security Identity was envisioned as part of the Euro-Atlantic environment, it was based on previous cultural, historical, and political ties between the four Visegrád states.

First of all, the dissident intellectuals from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, constructed during the 1970s and 1980s a cultural representation of Central Europe in their literary, philosophical, and auto-biographical works by using common ideas, values, or symbols in order to respond to the official rigidity of the local Communist regimes. Focusing on the specificities of the Central European region not only created a common stand against Communist, but also developed a shared mentality and way of perceiving the world (Kundera, 1984; Konrád, 1986: 109-121; Miłosz, 1981: 24-45). But regardless of Central Europe being Kundera's tragic destiny, Konrád's dream, or Miłosz's utopic project, it was an intellectual discourse that dominated the last decades of the 20th century and suggested the mental existence of a regional community with a characteristic identity that challenged the political division of Europe.

Second, the cultural perspective on Central Europe's specific identity relied also on its shared historical experiences and the particularities that have differentiated it from the other areas in Europe. Central Europe as

a historical macro-region relied on the argument that history was the determining factor in its evolution between an Eastern and Western Europe regardless of the time period (Halecki, 1944: 18; Havel, 1992: 125-126). Therefore, Central Europe has developed in a specific manner due to its shared history and positioning at the crossing point between the spheres of interest of several Great Powers (Bibó, 1986: 155-158, 193; Szűcs, 2000: 109-191). And one of the definitory elements that shaped Central Europe in terms of identity and culture was the common Habsburg experience as a catalyst of a particular tradition and mentality (Hanák, 1998).

After the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989, Central Europe became a political concept that was built on its cultural and historical specificities. The Post-Communist discourse on Central Europe adapts itself to the new European circumstances of transition and Euro-Atlantic objectives. This European discourse in Central Europe focused on a region that has certain cultural and historical particularities, but its political future lies in the 'return to Europe', a larger entity understood as civilisation and coherent political organisation. Václav Havel, the freely elected president of Czechoslovakia presented the common future of Central Europe in his first official address in a foreign state: "We have an opportunity to transform Central Europe from what has been a mainly historical and spiritual phenomenon into a political phenomenon. We have an opportunity to take this wreath of European states – so recently colonized by the Soviet Union and now attempting to build a relationship with the nations of the Soviet Union based on equality—and fashion it into a special body. [...] This authentic friendship—based on a proper understanding of the destiny imposed upon our countries, on the common lessons it taught us, and above all on the common ideals that now unite us – should ultimately inform a proper coordination of our policies in a process we both refer to as 'the return to Europe'" (Havel, 25 January 1990). Creating the new Europe of the future, became the political objective for the Central European states as it translated into implementing successful economic, social, and political measures meant to ensure stability and security in the region. This could best be done by coordinating their policies and adopting common positions in most areas of interest, an

aspect underlined also by the diplomacies of Hungary (Antall, 27 July 1991) and Poland (“Fragmenty sejmowego wystąpienia ministra Krzysztofa Skubiszewskiego: Trzeźwa postawa w trudnych czasach”, 15 February 1991). Politically, this led to the establishment of the Visegrád Triangle in 1991 between Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, which later became the Visegrád Group (V4) after Czechoslovakia’s separation (Fawn, 2001: 66), and mentally to the projection of a representation of Central Europe as an example of successful economic and political transition from Communism to democracy.

Another condition that favoured the shift in the discussion on regional identity from a cultural point of view to a political and security perspective was that concerning Central Europe’s possible role in Post-Communist Europe. If during the 1980s a significant part of the Central European narrative stressed its in-between-ness, its intermediate position between Eastern and Western Europe (Konrád, 1984: 91; Kundera, 1984), the new political representation of the region is centred on the similarities and closeness to Europe. This intermediate perception of the Central Europeans that was for a long time considered the main source of their geopolitical vulnerability could be now transformed into an advantage in the mid-1990s, as the Central European buffer zone could become a bridge between EU member-states and an Eastern Europe struggling to overcome the challenges of transition. Central European states could provide a model for the rest of the Post-Communist countries (Konrád, 1999: 9-13) in order to adapt and transform themselves, and later also negotiate with and join the Euro-Atlantic structures.

From a security point of view, Central Europe felt always vulnerable due to its geographic proximity to hot zones or possible conflict areas. And therefore, the idea of ensuring regional security through cooperation was paramount for the Central European states during the 1990s and early 2000s as the way to ensure the Euro-Atlantic institutions of their genuine goals of fostering stability and democratic values in their region (Tökés, 1991: 104-105). Hungary’s Prime Minister József Antall brought into discussion the need for European security and cooperation as early as 1990 (Antall, 7 July 1990) and the Visegrád Group also had meetings

between Defence Ministers (Fawn, 2001: 62). The first challenges to regional security that the Visegrád states had to address were the possibly instable domestic situation in Russia in the mid-1990s and then the wars from Yugoslavia (Valki, 1994: 108-120). But however destabilising these circumstances threatened to become, the Visegrád states opposed the idea of developing regional military structures and underlined the need to strengthen their cooperation with NATO in order to promote and maintain stability in their region and in Europe. This came from their desire to not derail their Euro-Atlantic objectives and from their efforts to associate their states with NATO and EU structures also in the field of regional security (Tökés, 1991: 111-113).

At the beginning of the 21st century, as new forms of global threats started to emerge and the Central European states were on the short track to becoming full members of both NATO and the EU, a new concern towards regional security started to be discussed. After their accession to the EU on 1 May 2004, the four Visegrád states would become a considerable part of the Eastern most border of the Euro-Atlantic institutions and would be faced with dealing with a series of more or less destabilising threats coming from non-member states. The interest that arose in the Central European states in the years immediately before 2004 about creating a security identity focused on addressing the challenges derived from being a member state of both NATO and the European Union, in order to regionally respond to potential threats in its near vicinity. This initiative was envisioned within the framework of these two institutions, by using their capabilities and guidelines, and therefore fully integrated and compatible with their Security Strategies. This common security identity (Samson, 2009: 6-7) capitalised on the previous perception of Central Europe as a model for economic transformation and fosterer of democratic values in the countries from its vicinity, and sought to present some strategic regional objectives in view of the future EU accession (Dunay, 2003: 49-50). Its main goals would thus refer to promoting regional stability through cooperation within the Euro-Atlantic structures.

After 2004 when the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia became full members of both NATO and the EU, the main objectives

of the Central European Security Identity involved addressing regional, European, and global potential threats as a common approach within both structures. This common strategy implied a strengthened cooperation between the four Central European states within EU and NATO organisms in view of managing possible instable situations in their near vicinity. The focus for their efforts was to create relations of cooperation, as well as to promote democracy and stability in the regions situated south and east of Central Europe (i.e. the Balkans and Eastern Europe). A secondary aim was to strengthen ties with the prospective candidates to the European Union and NATO, in order to further their democratic transformation and economic development for a smooth future accession, by using the past tradition of Central Europe as a bridge between east and west, as a promoter of dialogue and peaceful partnership between all sides.

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF A CENTRAL EUROPEAN SECURITY IDENTITY

Immediately after the fall of the Communist regimes in 1989, all decision-making actors from the Central European states noted the paramount need to maintain regional stability and project guarantees towards Western Europe that the situation in Central and Eastern Europe will not degenerate into potential threatening circumstances. They also stressed their main objectives as they entered the transition to democracy to be those of the Euro-Atlantic integration and thus all their efforts will be oriented towards cooperation and transformation. The first official documents that took into account the common approach of cooperating and maintaining stability in view of Euro-Atlantic candidacy and negotiations were those drafted within the Visegrád Triangle in the early 1990s. The 'Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration' signed in Visegrád in February 1991 (Jagodziński, 2005: 236-237) starts from the historical, cultural, and spiritual similarities between the three states as the basis for a close cooperation with interests both at regional and at European level. Although quite general at first, a common strategy in terms of security developed in the Central European states later

that year when faced with the internal events from the USSR and Yugoslavia that needed a regional response. The Cracow Declaration published by the Visegrád states in October 1991 (Tökés, 1991: 112-113) referred to the need to strengthen the partnership with NATO and to closer involve the latter's structures in the region. The documents that followed focused mainly on cooperation and coordination in view of fulfilling the criteria and preparing to accede to NATO and the EU (The Tatra Statement given by the President of the Czech Republic Vaclav Havel at the Visegrád Group Summit, 3 December 3 1999).

In the following years and up to the official accession to the European Union in 2004, the Central European states converged their interests in the field of security to adapt to, implement, and support NATO policies and the EU security and defence policy in order to foster stability in their region and fulfil the criteria for integration. The joined actions between the Central European states and the Euro-Atlantic institutions were directed at assuring both institutions of their commitment towards integration, as well of their full interest and support in managing potential threatening situations in their close or far vicinity (Declaration of the Presidents of the Visegrád States, 19 January 2001). As new global threats emerge (especially after the attacks of 11 September 2001), the Central European states stress the importance of their cooperation as a vital factor in the stability and integration of the region, an objective they will continue to further after NATO's enlargement (Joint Statement adopted at the 8th Meeting of the Chairmen of Foreign Affairs, Defence, and European Integration Committees of the Parliaments of the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, January 31-February 1 2002).

In 2004, after becoming full members of the European Union, the premises of a Central European Security Identity can be observed in the documents of the Visegrád Group, as well of the EU. The common security identity took into account the nature of regional and global threats and the manner in which they were perceived by the EU and NATO (in which the Central European states were members), but also the way in which the Central European states related themselves as individuals and as a group to certain threats (Samson, 2009: 8). This common strategy also reflected

the pro-Atlanticist orientation of Central Europe (Hynek, Střítecký, 2009: 19-30), as they followed the US and NATO's initiatives in foreign policy and military actions. But most importantly, it gave them a common position in certain issues of regional interest that could transform itself into a pressure group in sensitive areas (Wagrowska, 2009: 33). The most important document that institutionalises a common security identity for the Central European states within NATO and EU structures is the 'Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic on the Cooperation of the Visegrád Group Countries after their Accession to the European Union' from May 2004 (The Kroměříž Declaration, 12 May 2004). Besides stressing the specific regional identity of Central Europe, this Declaration underlined the strengthening of cooperation within the Central European states within the Euro-Atlantic structures as full members even after achieving the goals of integration in order to foster stability and provide an example for the other Post-Communist neighbours. The guidelines set by this Declaration refer not only to the close cooperation between the four Central European states, but also to the full cooperation and action within EU and NATO institutions, especially in what cross-border cooperation and addressing regional or global threats are concerned. As they became the Eastern border of the Euro-Atlantic institutions, the Central European states developed a common strategy in terms of identity in order to assure the two organisations that they can efficiently maintain regional stability and establish a productive dialogue with the candidate states in view of the next waves of enlargement. As a group, they could rely on their previous experience of cooperation in order to act together within NATO and EU structures to promote issues of regional interest.

After the EU 2007 enlargement, Central European states adapted their interests in terms of security as they no longer were the Eastern most border with the accession of Romania and Bulgaria. What became the main interest was first Eastern Europe (the Ukraine, Belarus, and the Republic of Moldova) and then the Balkans, in an effort to promote political and economic reforms in order to stabilise the region. The focus on achieving and maintaining security in the wider region of Central,

Eastern and South-Eastern Europe translated in the active involvement in different EU initiatives by presenting themselves as an indicator of successful transformation and integration (Chiantera-Stutte, 2003: 327). Central European states become active partners on behalf of the EU in the European Neighbourhood Policy addressed to Eastern Europe drawing back on their perception as a bridge between integrated and non-integrated Europe (Joint Political Statement of the Visegrád Group on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy, 22 January 2007). Also, they were also involved in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (European Commission, 2010), as it covered a wide range of areas and implied a dialogue between member states, candidates, and non-member states fostering economic cooperation, the development of infrastructure and communications, as well as providing financial and logistical support for future integration within the EU.

OUTCOME OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN SECURITY IDENTITY

When taking into consideration the outcomes of a common strategy put forward by the Central European states in terms of European security and regional stability, we should study the period following their EU accession in 2004. Although the Central European Security Identity was constructed by the four Visegrád states as part of their membership within the EU and NATO and thus using their structures, three observations can be made on its purpose and outcome.

First, the common security identity, like the cultural and historical specificities before, maintained and consolidated the perception of a group mentality for the four Central European states within the Euro-Atlantic institutions. As a group they could act in favour of promoting certain issues of interest such as cross-border cooperation and environment, the fight against organised crime and illegal immigration, or infrastructure (Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrád Cooperation, May 12, 2004). Also, they could act as a pressure group in specific areas of regional interest, especially in those that involve cooperation with Eastern or Balkan neighbours.

Second, after 2004 the Central European states supported the accession of candidate and prospective countries by sharing their experience and working together in different areas for a smoother transition once the EU decided to enlarge. They built a productive dialogue with Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia as they were preparing to become member states of both NATO and the EU, cooperating with these states within different initiatives (for example, the EU Strategy for the Danube Region). This strategy of supporting the EU applications of their neighbouring states was based on the mentality the Central Europeans were projecting of themselves as an example of political and economic transformation during the transition from Communism to democracy and as a bridge between a developed and integrated West (to which they now belonged) and a less developed and potentially unstable East. It is a perspective they promoted since the mid-1990s as they economically surpassed their Eastern neighbours and created the Central European Free Trade Agreement, but then supported the most developed neighbouring states to gradually join them.

Third, as part of both NATO and EU structures, Central European states provided a common response to global and regional threats, as well as an engaged participation in the joint operations deployed by these organisations. As such they contributed with troops to NATO military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, or to peacekeeping operations in the Balkans. As well, they took act of the internal evolutions from the Eastern European countries (Belarus, the Ukraine, and the Republic of Moldova) and offered formal or informal support, as well as observatory assistance during political events.

CONCLUSIONS

The Central European Security Identity developed at the beginning of the 21st century and especially after accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to the European Union on 1 May 2004 starting from previous regional affinities and ties. It was based on cultural and historical arguments of a Central European regional identity, as well on the Post-Communist political discourse of cooperation and dialogue in order to

‘return to Europe’ and to integrate in the Euro-Atlantic institutions. After 2004, it preserved in a certain manner the regional character and mentality of the four Central European states, as they often acted together as a group on issues of regional interest.

Its main objectives were to address the immediate geopolitical challenges in the Central European region and its near vicinity that could affect the Visegrád states’ road to accession. Therefore, Central European states promoted cooperation, peaceful partnership, stability and democratic values in their dialogue with other candidate or non-member states. Since Central Europe bordered two potentially unstable regions (Eastern Europe and the Balkans), the efforts made by the Visegrád states were essential for European stability and needed to be synchronised with NATO and EU initiatives.

But most of all, the Central European Security Identity developed as part of the states’ membership in NATO and the EU. It was, therefore, completely integrated within their structures and envisioned to function within the Euro-Atlantic initiatives and areas of interest. Its main characteristic, however, was that the four Central European states created their own community within these structures on the basis of their regional interests and sensitive issues which led to their activism in certain areas in view of promoting and maintaining security in the wide geographic space of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe.

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