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### Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics  
Düsternbrooker Weg 120  
24105 Kiel (Germany)  
E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)  
<https://www.zbw.eu/econis-archiv/>

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*the*  
Visegrad  
Countries  
*in*  
Crisis

edited by  
Jan Pakulski

## **The Visegrad Countries in Crisis**

Edited by Jan Pakulski

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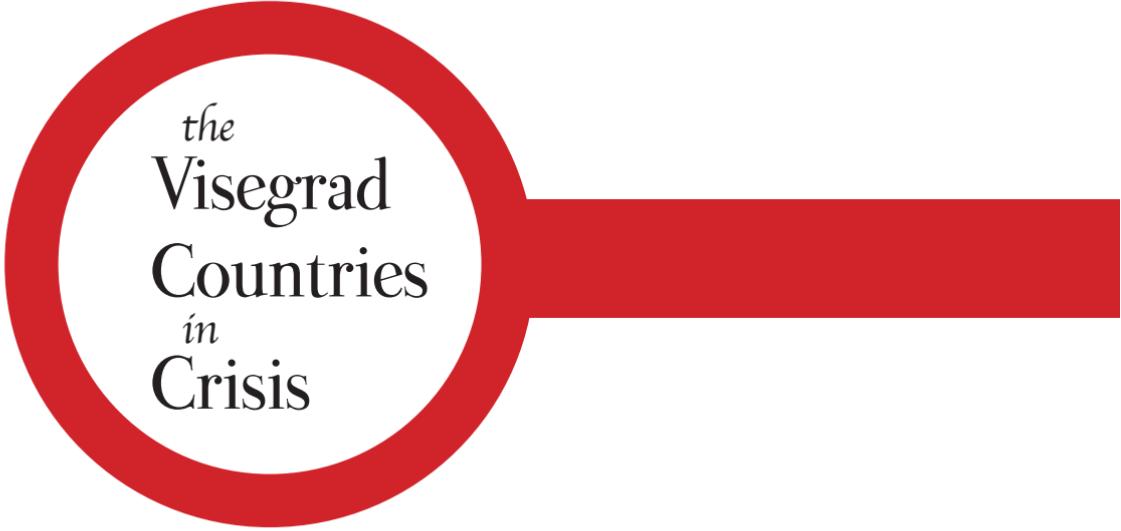
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# Introduction

**A**fter two decades of successful economic growth, stability and “democratic consolidation” all countries in the Visegrad alliance face crises and uncertainties, most of which reflect the upheavals in Europe. Their unity is threatened by flareups of populism, widening internal divisions and disagreements, as well as increasingly divergent paths of development. Will the V4 – indeed, the entire EU – survive in the face of the growing centrifugal pressures, both internal and external? The book addresses this general question by analysing crises tendencies within each of the V4 countries and by placing these analyses in the broader V4, European, and global context.

The Visegrad Group was formed in February 1991 in Visegrád, Hungary, as a political alliance of three CEE leaders and friends – Lech Wałęsa, Václav Havel and József Antall – with the aim of coordinating the process of post-communist transformation often described as “a joint return to Europe”. After the January 1993 “velvet divorce” between Czechs and Slovaks, the V3 became V4 – now consisting of Hungary, Poland and the Czech and Slovak Republic – though the overall form and aims of the Alliance remained unchanged. The key factors motivating the Founding Fathers of the Group were:

1. the desire to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc in Central Europe;
2. the ambition to overcome historic animosities between Central European countries;
3. the belief that through joint efforts it will be easier to achieve the set goals, i.e. to successfully accomplish social transformation and enter the European integration process;
4. the proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites. (Visegrad Group 2016)

Three features of the Visegrad Alliance are particularly important in order to understand its subsequent evolution and the current woes. First and foremost, it was a leadership alliance reflecting the

proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites. With a move away from politics of the original founders, gradually replaced by critics and opponents, the Group has been experiencing growing tensions. Second, the Group was originally clearly pro-liberal, pro-EU and pro-integrationist. It reflected the liberal-democratic political and ideological commitments of the founding leaders, as well as the shared goal of “returning to Europe”. Originally, it meant building the liberal-democratic institutions modelled on the Western ones, and joining NATO and the EU. The political successors of Wałęsa, Havel and Antall, especially in Poland and Hungary, do not share these commitments, and this change makes the liberal “substance” of the alliance exposed to challenges, especially after the membership in NATO and the EU was secured, and after the EU was hit by the series of crises. Third, the alliance experiences new circumstances, different from those that shaped the process of transition and accession. It was formed at the time of a rapid economic growth, peaceful co-operation with Russia, and a widely shared enthusiasm for the EU unification, the latter seen as an elite-led liberal-democratic project (e.g., Haller 2008). Today, the entire region is facing security threats (ranging from terrorism to Russia’s interventions in Ukraine), economic stagnation, immigration crises, and a strong populist anti-liberal backlash. These problems form a background of the current political upheavals, observable in all four V4 countries.

The current woes contrast with the initially successful development of the V4 countries. Between 1990 and 2015, the GDP per capita in the V4 countries nearly quadrupled (tripled in Hungary). Incomes and consumption grew even faster, allowing for the gap between the Eastern-Central and Western-Southern EU members being reduced. Cooperation between the V4 countries, initially conducted exclusively within the boundaries of political and security/defense matters – continued to widen. Political leaders conducted regular meetings, issued “joint statements” and coordinated their stand on the EU and other international fora. Economic relations (trade, investment), however, remained weak, overshadowed by competition for the Western EU markets and investment. On the other hand, relations with the Western EU members were friendly and harmonious, backed by the widening collaboration in the security and defense dimensions.

Since about 2008, the member countries, inasmuch as the Group as a whole, have been facing multiplying problems in maintaining the shared liberal and pro-EU path of transformation. They also face growing difficulties in maintaining a solitary stand vis-à-vis the “core” EU, NATO and Russia. In a way, this could have been expected in

the light of the fact that the original goals of the Alliance had been achieved, that political leadership in each country has undergone changes, that the relations with Russia soured, the EU has sunk into a major economic recession. In addition, the immigration crisis has deepened, and all V4 elites have been facing anti-liberal backlash reflected in the “invasions” of nationalistic populists (e.g., Barr 2009, Ash 2016). But the strength of their backlash, and the sharpness of “illiberal turns” in Hungary and Poland, has surprised most of the political observers.

The problems escalated and divisions widened in the 2010s, with the growing security concerns and the deepening economic, as well as immigration/refugee, crises in Europe. The Russian military interventions in Ukraine have elevated tensions between the EU, NATO and Russia. They also strained the Eastern Partnership project. The 2008 crisis, which morphed into the pan-European economic slowdown, has weakened the liberal consensus within the EU and V4. The Polish political elites had initially succeeded in manoeuvring through the 2008-9 crisis, at least partly due to Poland’s collaboration with Germany, conservative finance policies and generous EU subsidies. The Hungarian, Slovak and Czech political elites experienced deep recessions, and they adopted more “national” and “interventionist” strategies of recovery, currently embraced also by Poland. While the V4 alliance survived the worst stage of this “Transatlantic Crisis,” the unity, solidarity and liberal orientations of the leaders have been seriously undermined (Best and Higley 2014). The most immediate, and the most important cause of tensions, though, has been the immigration/refugee crisis and the anti-liberal backlash it triggered.

The EU leaders have been dealing for years with consecutive waves of economic immigrants from CEE. The problems these waves caused have worsened since a sudden “tsunami of refugees” hit Europe in 2013-15. Refugees, now mixed with economic migrants, have been coming from the destabilized, war-torn and impoverished regions of the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans. Such a sudden inflow triggered a powerful anti-liberal and anti-immigration backlash coming from the populists-nationalists, who portray immigrants as job-takers and treat refugees as security risks. In fact, the EU elites have been caught unprepared for both emergencies. They have responded to the refugee crisis by employing ad hoc measures, such as the infamous “distribution quotas” that have been universally despised. The latter, in turn, triggered further political-populist backlash, exacerbating internal political divisions as a consequence. The newly elected Polish leadership of the Law and Justice (PiS) party rejected the quota system. Similarly,

Slovakia's PM Robert Fico, followed by Hungary's Viktor Orbán, have launched a legal challenge to the EU allocation mechanism, describing the policy as an infringement of national sovereignty, security threat and a political-cultural "ritual suicide".

The issue of refugees has polarized entire nations, opening the way for populist-nationalist mobilizations in the Czech and Slovak republics, and sharp "illiberal turns" in Hungary and Poland. Moreover, the turns mark not just a regime change, but also to the formation of a new type of "illiberal state":

[T]he new state that we are constructing in Hungary is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state. It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organization, but instead, it includes a different, special, national approach. (Orbán 2014)

Following the "illiberal turns" the entire state apparatuses of Hungary and Poland have become subject to partisan purges, as well as political, economic and cultural "nationalization." Both are anathemas to the liberal-democratic model of constitutional state based on rule of law, and they end the liberal path of pro-EU transformation. The "illiberal counter-revolution" accompanying these turns involves phenomena such as: centralization of power in "single decisional centers", as well as partisan clientelism imposed through purges of the state administrations, the judiciary, the public media outlets, the education system, and the national culture. While the changes in Poland are relatively new, they were sketched out by the PiS leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, already in 2011 in a programmatic "Report on the Third Republic" (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość 2011). These radical changes not only weaken the liberal-democratic foundations of the political regime (Higley and Burton 2006), but also increase the danger of "political decay" (Fukuyama 2014). Above all, they undermines further the unity of the Visegrad Group. As one observer points out,

Hungarian PM Orbán, who has been accused of authoritarianism and xenophobia and who is eager to end his country's isolation within the EU, met up with Kaczyński at an early stage [of the illiberal turn in Poland]. Their ultimate goal might be the creation of an obstructive "Visegrad front", opposing the system of mandatory redistribution quotas for refugees and defending "traditional values." Yet it still remains to be seen whether such strategy will work out, since Slovakia strongly distrusts Orbán's deployment of irredentist rhetoric and Poland cannot possibly be pleased with his Russia-friendly stance. The Czech Republic, being one of Europe's most secular countries, will not feel comfortable either with Kaczyński's dream of a Catholic counter-reformation. (Bult 2016)

A wave of nationalistic populism hitting political elites in Czech and Slovak Republics has triggered similar political turbulences, though neither of the countries undertake a regime change of the Hungarian and Polish proportions. Both national elites, though, experience the anti-liberal backlash, the widespread populist-nationalistic mobilisations, and the accompanied political strains.

The divisive impact of populism stems to a large extent from the widespread deployment of anti-elitist demagoguery, politics of resentment, and frequent use of inflammatory language that carries on hate and apportioning blame. Populism thrives in the environment of conspiratorial anti-establishment visions of “hidden enemies,” especially in the communication environment dominated by social media and scandalizing press. The role played by vigorously partisan media conglomerates in CEE (or strictly speaking, by the politically connected “media barons” emerging during the chaotic process of privatization and political struggles) deserves a brief comment. These “media barons” standing behind the populist surges, such as Father Rydzyk in Poland, Ivan Zach and Andrej Babiš in the Czech Republic, and Gábor Széles in Hungary, have been playing an important role in accelerating the changes discussed. They become key members of decision-making elite circles and main beneficiaries of political turns that bring the populist leaders to power. Father Rydzyk’s media have paved the way for electoral success of Jarosław Kaczyński; Zach and Babiš have been the key message carriers for Miloš Zeman; Gábor Széles provides media rostrum to Viktor Orbán. The partisan media have been playing a major role in whipping up anti-immigrant and anti-refugee fear, as well as channeling this fear into nationalistic votes during election campaigns. The impact of the anti-liberal media on democracy and press freedom ranking of the most afflicted countries has been disastrous. In 2016 Poland dropped 29 places and ranked 47<sup>th</sup> in the press freedom index developed by Reporters Without Borders. Hungary plunged to 67<sup>th</sup> position (2016 World Press Freedom Index).

All these developments, as we suggest in the book, amount to a crisis, or rather a series of overlapping crises affecting not only the individual V4 countries, but also the entire EU and the developed West. As a consequence, the leaders and elites are abandoning the original liberal paths of development - this is taking place most rapidly and conspicuously in Hungary and Poland. They open a widening division between Hungary and Poland on the one hand, and the Czech and Slovak Republics on the other. Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán are not only more radical nationalist leaders than their Czech and Slovak counterparts, but also the

aspiring leaders of the entire Visegrad Group. Yet, they differ in their attitudes and policies toward Putin's Russia, Ukraine, energy security, and relations with Germany – and these differences make the Polish-Hungarian alliance fragile and the leadership aspirations unrealistic. Robert Fico, the Slovak PM, and Bohuslav Sobotka, the Czech PM, distance themselves from the EU-critical campaigns by the Polish and Hungarian leaders. They follow a different, more pragmatic-economic and less ideological development strategy, abstain from partisan purges in their elites, and continue the liberal paths of transformation, though with some, mostly rhetorical, concessions to nationalistic populists. At the same time, they maintain a “common front” in the Visegrad Group in criticizing the EU immigrant/refugee policies and calling for internal reforms within the European Community. This is a difficult balancing act: maintaining good working relations with the EU (especially with Germany) and the Visegrad Group, while avoiding confrontations with Putin. Yet, they are critical of the EU, especially its structure and the refugee policies, and NATO's eastern policies. In fact, Miloš Zeman, the left-leaning Czech President, has recently supported the idea of a referendum on the EU and NATO membership. So has Marian Kotleba, the leader of an influential People's Party in Slovakia. Such “balancing” contributes to the fragility of the Group and uncertainty about its future.

All the above remarks highlight another common theme of the book: a focus on leaders and political elites. Such an approach, foreshadowed in many earlier publications (e.g., Best and Higley 2014), seems most appropriate in the analysis of the Alliance based on “the proximity of ideas of the then [1991] ruling political elites” (Visegrad Group 2016). This focus on the key political actors does not ignore institutional frameworks within which all elites operate, especially the state, rule of law and democratic accountability (e.g., Fukuyama 2014). Nor does it overlook mass attitudes, especially the anti-immigrant, nationalistic and religious-conservative movements mobilized by new leaders and elites. But all the authors see institutional frameworks and mass movements as constantly being shaped, formatted and adjusted by political leaders and elites – the same leaders and elites that mobilize nationalistic-populist and anti-immigrant movements.

One more introductory comment is necessary. The book focuses on the last decade, thus continuing the main themes of the CEE chapter in “Political Elites in the Transatlantic Crisis” (Frič et al. 2014). It is also an outcome of an international conference “Visegrad Countries in Crisis” funded by an IVF Small Grant and organized in July 2016 in Collegium Civitas, Warsaw. Most chapters are updated

and edited versions of the conference papers.

The book starts (Chapter 1) with a concise overview of the main challenges faced by leaders and elites in the developed West by the doyenne of elite analyses, John Higley. It is followed by an analysis by György Lengyel and Gabriella Ilonszki of the Hungarian “illiberal turn” executed by Viktor Orbán, with the authors’ attention focused on the political consequences of the turn. In Chapter 3, Jan Pakulski analyses the crumbling elite consensus and the accompanied “illiberal turn” in Polish politics, especially the impact of the turn on Poland’s political developments and relations with her neighbors. In Chapter 4 Pavol Frič looks at political developments in the Czech Republic, paying special attention to the relations between political and military elites there. Chapter 5, written by Soňa Szomolányi and Zsolt Gál, overviews the recent political developments in Slovakia, with particular focus on the growing influence of nationalistic populists who adopt a “double-faced” political rhetoric. The four country-specific analyses are supplemented by a brief analysis by Krzysztof Jasiecki of trade relations within V4 countries (Chapter 6). Finally, a short conclusion addresses the matters of the current state of the V4 Group. As argued in this book, it is increasingly fractious, and its leaders are desperately looking for a new identity and new more pragmatic bases for collaboration. It also faces a critical backlash from the “core” EU, whose leaders are increasingly critical of the upsurge of nationalistic populism, especially of the “illiberal turns” in Hungary and Poland. They are also critical of the attempts at turning the Group into a tool for the anti-integration contestation. These criticisms make the future of V4 highly uncertain.

*Jan Pakulski*

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# Chapter 1

## Visegrad Countries in the Endangered West \*

### John Higley

Emeritus Professor at the Department of Sociology, The University of Texas at Austin. His book "The Endangered West. Myopic Elites and Fragile Social Orders in a Threatening World" was published by Transaction Publishers in 2016.

\* This chapter contains excerpts from Higley, John. 2016. *The Endangered West. Myopic Elites and Fragile Social Orders in a Threatening World*. Transaction Publishers.

**I**t was perhaps inevitable that during the 25 years following the Visegrad agreement in 1991, the resolve of Visegrad elites and publics to play integral roles in the West would lessen as policy disputes within and between the four countries increased. Embroiled in bitter domestic political competitions and perceptions of diverging national interests, elites and publics in the four Visegrad countries have tended to lose sight of problems that are common to all Western societies and endanger the West as a whole. This chapter considers why Visegrad elites and the countries they lead need to be more conscious of dangers the West faces and why they must, in concert with other Western countries, seek ways to contain them.

What is the West? In his seminal book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington conceived of the historic West as coextensive with Western Christendom in Europe and its offshoots in North America and Australasia (1996:47-53,157-63). I adopt Huntington's conception of the historic West and his corresponding demarcation of the contemporary West as encompassing the European Union countries, together with the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Because of economic circumstance or political tradition, Norway, Switzerland, and Iceland are not formal members of the European Union, but they are clearly part of the West. Dense trade relations, mutual defense interests, as well as abundant cultural similarities and ties link all of these countries. Although each has distinctive features, all of them generally exemplify Western conceptions of human rights and representative government, and they possess the type of productive economy that has created Western prosperity.

Writing in 1996, Huntington thought that the four Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and the three newly independent Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania), as well as Slovenia, Croatia, Cyprus, and "too-small Malta." would probably become members of the EU, thereby making it coextensive with Western civilization's historical boundaries in

Europe. All have since entered the EU. Huntington wondered, however, if Bulgaria and Romania, which lie in whole or part beyond the West's historical eastern boundary, would be welcomed into the EU, and he speculated about the possibility of Ukraine splitting in half along the civilization fault line that divides its Orthodox eastern and Uniate western parts (1996: 37). For better or worse, Bulgaria and Romania entered the EU in 2007, while Ukraine's aspiration to gain EU status was one cause of the secessionist warfare that broke out in 2014, not far east of the fault line Huntington discerned. In addition, he treated Greece as not part of Western civilization but as its important "Classical source" (1996: 162-63). He observed that Greek participation in the EU since its admission in 1981 had not been easy and that Greek governments had much difficulty adapting to EU principles and mores, an observation amply born out by Greece's tribulations in the Euro zone since 2000.

There is, of course, much more to say about Western and world developments during the two decades since Huntington wrote. Obviously, he could not foresee such pivotal events as the 9/11 and other terrorist attacks on Western countries; the US-led retaliatory invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in 2003; the spread of antediluvian and savage Islamist forces partly as a result; the crippling transatlantic financial crisis that began in 2008 and the protracted economic recession that followed it; the "Arab Spring" in 2011 and its chaotic aftermaths; the large-scale migration of people from the Middle East and further afield to Europe during 2014-2015; the heightened awareness of climate change and its ominous implications; and so on. Overall, however, Huntington's conceptions of the historic and contemporary West were sound and, with qualifications here and there, I employ them.

## **The Optimistic West**

Two basic historical circumstances created a principled optimism about political and social life in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. First, after about 1700 and until at least the Great Depression of the 1930s, the running together of clever artisanship, scientific reasoning, and readily available land and other natural resources supported the agreeable notion that increases in economic productivity would eventually meet Western societies' needs on a substantially equal basis, thereby dissolving most serious political and social conflicts. Second, from the defeat of invading Turk forces in front of Vienna in 1683 until at least World War I, the West's clear military superiority over the rest of the world allowed Westerners to presume that their countries would never

be faced with the threat of cultural degradation, enslavement, or extermination at the hands of a non-Western power, although the proximity and despotic character of Russia, which was only part West, was a constant concern of Central East European elites and populations.

These circumstances and the optimism they produced had a profound impact on how Westerners conceived of politics and society. Expectations about the long-term equalizing effects of material progress allowed them to suppose that radically different definitions of social justice would eventually be joined in a synthesis acceptable to all. The sense of safety from conquests by non-Western peoples allowed them to believe that, in the meantime, domestic conflicts in the pursuit of social justice could be fully explored, exploited, and fought out without risking the loss of one's own culture. In both respects, the modern historical experience of Westerners strongly inclined them to think of politics as an unrestricted means for achieving their ideals.

There are now many indications that the circumstances fostering optimism in the West were temporary and fortuitous. Although the optimism to which they gave rise lingers on, the circumstances themselves have basically ended. Today, Western countries face powerful foes, some of them fanatically anti-Western, possessing the weaponry with which to inflict devastation on Western populations, no matter how suicidal and "irrational" such attacks might seem from the West's standpoint. In domestic affairs, protracted economic downturns and environmental problems threaten the West's continued material progress, while the inability to provide reasonably attractive and secure jobs for millions of unemployed and underemployed Westerners exacerbates distributional conflicts.

Western countries *may* continue to enjoy important advantages over the rest of the world for another twenty, fifty, or even a hundred years. But there is no longer any general ground for assuming this. Despite much internal dissension, Western countries *may* be able to defend themselves against non-Western threats to their security, but Westerners have no self-evident basis for assuring themselves that this will be so. It *may* happen that over the next generation or two increases in economic productivity will be large enough to buy off serious discontents through relatively painless distributions out of an economic surplus. But there is no reason to take this for granted. If the ways people think about political and social prospects reflect, in the main, their basic circumstances, then these uncertainties in the current and foreseeable situations of Western societies will in time give rise to outlooks much less optimistic than those that flourished during the past two or three centuries.

Yet dangers confronting the West are dire, and the need to adopt more realistic outlooks is urgent.

## **Relations with non-Western countries**

Current and foreseeable political and social conditions in most countries outside the West make Western attempts at close relations with them inadvisable. The most important of the political conditions is elite disunity. This is widespread among non-Western countries and there is no reason to think that it will become much less prevalent during the next several decades. Elite disunity guarantees severe conflicts that force individual leaders and cliques to concentrate on their own survival instead of making prudent assessments of their country's difficulties and needs. It causes political regimes to oscillate between two unsatisfactory configurations: nominally democratic and openly authoritarian.

In earlier decades when countries outside the West sought to emulate Western political systems more consistently than they now do, authoritarian rule often reverted gradually to democratic forms. But these reversions are becoming less common. When an authoritarian regime now confronts a crisis, it is likely to be replaced by another and often harsher authoritarian regime. Apparently, the idea of a democratic political order appeals less and less to the most powerful factions in the disunited elites of many non-Western countries and it is conceivable that authoritarian reversions to democratic forms will become an empty political category by this century's midpoint.

Elites and governments in Western countries have strongly tended to ignore or misjudge the limitations of politics in non-Western countries where elites are fundamentally disunited. A failure to see the difficulty of intervening effectively in them has been common to both right-of-center and left-of-center elite factions in the West. By disregarding what is not possible politically in such countries, elites, policy advisers, and commentators have inflated the expectations of Western publics about what can actually be achieved through Western efforts. Attempts to police democratic and human rights practices with cajolements, threats, and sanctions spearheaded by Washington or other Western capitals, and with exposés and condemnations by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have led Western publics to expect changes that are, in fact, impossible. Factions out of power and suffering repression in non-Western countries have tended to judge Western gestures as ineffective and irrelevant, while factions clinging to power have viewed an insistence on Western political

practices as probably fatal for their survival and as foolish, devious, or simply perverse.

Not surprisingly, therefore, policies aimed at edging countries with disunited elites towards representative democratic government and respect for human rights have involved Western countries – and, because of its power, the United States in particular – in ultimately disastrous alignments with inherently weak, unstable, and short-lived regimes. Propped up by Western support, these regimes have persistently violated the political norms and practices that Western countries uphold. In reality, treating a non-Western country with a disunited elite as an ally inevitably means deferring to the frequently desperate political circumstances, fears, and practices of that country's most powerful elite factions, while at the same time chiding its government for violating democratic practices and human rights. This can only discredit the Western governments that act in this way in the eyes of those now large and numerous groups in Western societies who are inclined to make moral judgments about the shape of things in the world.

Here, then, is one basic limit on the West during the next one or two generations. Western countries cannot afford close political relations with countries outside the West whose elites are disunited. Regimes in them are inevitably unstable and close relations not only discredit Western governments, but as the aftermath of the Shah's overthrow in Iran has shown, it is extremely difficult for them to get along with successor regimes. Western elites and governments must accept that there is no way in which they can effectively prevent countries with disunited elites from coming under the rule of unsavory regimes. At present, Western and, more specifically, the Visegrad countries' relations with Ukraine, whose elites are deeply disunited and whose political regime is clearly unstable, are a case in point.

It may seem that this basic limit on the West precludes nearly all relations with non-Western countries. But while it argues against anything resembling close relations, day-to-day diplomacy centering on trade and financial relations need not be impeded. Discussions of tariffs, terms of trade, monetary and credit arrangements, and the like are not precluded, nor are various concessions in trade arrangements that may be reasonable and desirable. The advisability of forgiving some non-Western countries' debts that obviously cannot be paid, or can be paid only with great suffering, is an open question. Consideration could be given to measures that might go some way towards meeting the earlier demands of non-Western countries for a "new international order." Yet, so long as these countries differ greatly from Western countries in economic levels,

elite organization, and political practices, there is no case for close relations with them.

## **Relations among Western countries**

Respect for human rights and other liberal political principles, the benefits and problems of affluence, fears of terrorist attacks, and awareness of the need to combat climate change and other environmental threats are sufficiently strong and uniform among Western countries to support close relations. Since World War II and since the Visegrad countries' independence from Soviet rule, warfare between Western countries has been unthinkable. Indeed, their obvious interest in mutual defense is probably stable and strong enough so that formal alliances like NATO are relatively unimportant.

As regards the possibility of coordinated military actions by Western countries in areas outside the West, responsibility lies primarily with the United States, which is the principal military power. There have been and will continue to be controversies over whether other Western countries maintain large enough military forces and are adequately consulted in US plans and actions, but such controversies are inherent in the situation, they cannot be fully alleviated, and by themselves they are not likely to have disastrous consequences. Similarly, controversies between more pacifist and more bellicose factions in Western countries over the proper use of military force, intelligence agencies, and communications surveillance are unavoidable. To manage and contain these controversies, Western elites must improvise policies and compromises on some issues. But overall, the underlying commonality of defensive interests among Western countries is probably sufficient to make coordinated, if necessarily limited, military and police actions, such as NATO's three-week bombing of Bosnian Serb forces in 1995, its twelve-week bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, and its seven-month air assault on Libya in 2011, as well as extensive intelligence sharing and surveillance, reasonably effective in military and security respects.

Western culture, economic organization, and political practice extend beyond the West's formal boundaries. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are cases in point, as are Israel and South Africa. Most Latin American and Caribbean countries also constitute extensions of the core West. If survival of these outposts and extensions is threatened, elites and governments in Western countries will face difficult decisions about intervening militarily to "save" them. These decisions will have to be governed strictly by immediate military, logistical, and technical considerations. Western societies cannot

allow a further weakening of their political systems and social orders by protracted, costly, and politically divisive military excursions outside the West. Thus, military intervention to keep Ukraine intact, the western half of which is at least a potential outpost, has had to be judged inexpedient. Ukraine's eastern and southeastern regions are situated on Russia's defense perimeter and oriented culturally and economically toward Russia. Western military intervention to prevent Ukraine's loss of those regions to Russian-backed insurgents would risk war with Russia. The same calculus would apply to intervening militarily in East Asia should the survival of Western outposts be threatened by China. As regards Israel, it may be possible to ensure its continued existence and independence, but as the US-led negotiations to prevent Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons demonstrated, not on terms and conditions that Israel's governing elite would prefer.

The European Union and its offshoot, the Eurozone, have expanded in size and administrative reach. This has manifested the desire of powerful economic and political elites in Europe for "ever closer union." It is widely acknowledged that since its start in the 1950s, European integration has been a project almost exclusively driven by elites, with European publics and voters little consulted. EU and Euro-zone integration has, of course, been uneven and subject to slowdowns and detours. Skeptics have been inclined to regard the EU as an unrealistic pursuit of Immanuel Kant's world of universal peace, and many economic analysts have regarded the Euro zone as an ill-considered effort at monetary union without necessary fiscal and political union. Reflecting this skepticism, the deep and protracted economic recession ushered in by the 2008-2009 transatlantic financial crisis has given rise to worries that the EU and Euro zone will disintegrate.

In many difficult "summit" meetings, the top leaders of Euro-zone countries authorized "bailouts" of teetering banking systems in Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Spain (the acronymic PIIGS countries), together with "haircuts" of creditors holding public and private bonds issued in those countries. The prices charged for bailouts were austerity programs that slashed government spending and instigated politically fractious labor market and welfare reforms. Efforts to keep the Euro zone intact were sorely tested in 2015 when a third bailout of Greece and what amounted to subordination of its economic policies and administration to the European Commission and European Central Bank were agreed in exceptionally heated negotiations. The most important and powerful elite groups and factions in EU and Euro-zone countries thus appear to persist with their integration project – the possible but in my view unlikely exit

of Britain from the EU notwithstanding. Powerful economic elites, in particular, are loath to abandon the commercial advantages of a single EU market and single currency. Although national identities and an upsurge of nationalist-populist parties that hinder further integration are formidable, dominant elites will probably succeed in containing fissiparous tendencies and push cautiously ahead with the integration project, if for no other reason than that their prestige and credibility depend upon doing so.

However, migrations by large numbers of asylum-seeking refugees and other migrants fleeing violence, joblessness, disease, shortages of food and water, and the increasingly dire effects of climate change in many countries outside the West constitute a major challenge to the West as a whole. Facets of this challenge include:

- ✘ The West's extensive and porous land and sea borders and the relative ease with which migrants and human-traffickers penetrate them;
- ✘ Culturally distinct but electorally consequential migrant diasporas whose members oppose policies limiting migrations by family and ethno-religious kin;
- ✘ The difficult cultural, economic, linguistic, and social assimilation of these diasporas and the sizeable numbers of unemployed and underemployed people in them who are in essence demoralized outsiders vis-à-vis Western social orders;
- ✘ The inclination of some of these demoralized outsiders to launch vengeful attacks on host populations in collaboration with fanatically anti-Western forces outside the West;
- ✘ Populist-nationalist parties and movements demanding a halt to migrations and less tolerance of cultural and religious practices by members of existing diasporas;
- ✘ Uncertainty about the economic and labor market effects of large-scale migrations in a context of low Western fertility rates, ageing populations, high unemployment, and low economic growth.

Paul Collier, a British economist, has analyzed these and other facets of mass migrations to the West (Collier 2013). In a model he has developed, the income gap between Western and non-Western countries is the principal driver of migration. Diasporas of differing national or cultural origins are the chief facilitators of migration, because they provide support for new migrants and decisively lower the costs of migrating. Collier observes that the driver of migration, the income gap, shows no signs of narrowing, which means that migrations to the West will continue and that diasporas facilitating

them will increase in size, thus further lowering the costs of migrating. The implications are that migrations will accelerate and there is little prospect of reaching an equilibrium point where they would level off. Hence, migrations to the West of potentially epic proportions may be in store.

If Collier is right, common Western policies and practices responding to migrations are essential. Yet large-scale migrations create serious divisions within and between Western countries that render common policies and practices hard if not impossible to achieve. During 2015, approximately 1.6 million asylum-seeking refugees and economic migrants, coming primarily from war-torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but also in significant numbers from countries in Africa and South Asia, sought safer and more satisfying lives by entering the EU illegally after perilous sea and land journeys. A coherent and authoritative EU policy to diminish and regulate the influx and settle migrants in member states proportionate to the states' populations has been conspicuously absent. EU member states have been left to improvise responses while blaming each other for worsening the crisis.

Two broad scenarios are plausible. The first is that the external pressure of large-scale migration will force the EU's greater political integration, with EU institutions acquiring substantially more power over the relevant actions and policies of member states than they have had. The other scenario is that the EU will effectively buckle under this external pressure. Nationalist backlashes against large influxes of culturally and religiously alien migrants will not only force the re-imposition of national border controls between EU member states, they will fuel ugly harassments, arrests, and forcible deportations of migrants, with member states ignoring EU directives and turning the EU Commission and its bureaucracy into a paper tiger. Yet these scenarios may be too stark, and a middle way producing a somewhat shrunken EU, Euro zone, and external Schengen border may be more likely.

In the United States, a comprehensive reform of immigration policies that would deal, *inter alia*, with the status of 11 million undocumented migrants has been stymied politically for thirty years. Political paralysis has led to expensively militarized southern land and sea borders and to the arrest and deportation of three to four hundred thousand undocumented migrants annually. US border defenses along with a declining fertility rate and somewhat improved economic circumstances in Mexico, as well as a scarcity of rudimentary jobs in the low-growth US economy, have recently lowered the annual net inflow of undocumented migrants to nearly zero. But whether this signals a permanent diminution of illegal

migration, principally from Central America and the Caribbean, must be doubted. During summer 2014, for example, between forty and fifty thousand mostly unaccompanied offspring of impoverished Mexican and Central American families suddenly appeared at the southern land border and pleaded, successfully, for federal and state governments to help them join family relatives and acquaintances already living, many of them illegally, in the U.S. At least 20,000 additional migrants sought entry during the latter half of 2015, and at least another 60,000 were forecast to arrive during 2016. If attempts to reform US immigration policies remain stymied, or if economic conditions and social order in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean deteriorate further, desperate, large-scale efforts to enter the U.S. will resume.

In the Antipodes, Australian governments have directed ships of the Navy to stop and seize asylum seekers and other migrants attempting to reach the country's vast northern shore aboard boats supplied by Indonesian human-traffickers. The policy of both Labor and Liberal governments in Canberra has been to detain illegal migrants for lengthy periods in grim camps at remote locations outside and inside the country. Because illegal entry to Australia can be accomplished mainly on boats that can be apprehended, the country's rather draconian policy has greatly diminished migrant inflows. Even more distantly located than Australia, New Zealand has not yet been much of a destination for illegal migration, and it has conducted a generally welcoming policy toward the relative few who have arrived. Yet, if rising sea levels force inhabitants of low-lying Polynesian islands to flee to New Zealand, a more restrictive policy will be difficult to avoid.

The world's current population of 7.3 billion is projected to increase to about 10 billion by 2050. Together with an increasing incidence of failed, failing, and war-torn states outside the West, this means that attempted migrations to Western countries are likely to increase greatly in magnitude. A consequent sense of embattlement and strenuous efforts to cordon off the West seem unavoidable. Although a full cordoning off is presumably not feasible, how far to move in this direction and with what measures will constitute morally agonizing and deeply contentious political questions within and between Western countries during the next several decades. However, a common sense of embattlement and the necessity for a common response are likely to foster the West's substantially greater political integration by mid-century.

## Concluding Observations

A generally high living standard has been the West's most distinctive feature for at least the last 150 years. After World War II, and in the Visegrad countries after the collapse of state socialism, the standard has become so high and general that observers speak of "mass affluence". Accompanying it are many qualities of life that thoughtful Westerners are inclined to treat as ultimate goods: safety from interpersonal violence; wide educational opportunities; a feeling that one's views and wishes are reflected in a representative political process through which public policies are determined. As unique historically as the prosperity that has facilitated and made them possible, these refinements of life afford greater self-respect and dignity to larger proportions of Western populations than has ever been the case in another civilization.

During the past several decades, the spread of optimistic views among elites and educated strata led many to devalue these advantages of Western populations and press for major changes of a broadly egalitarian or laissez-faire kind. But while it is easy enough to imagine a society in which everyone would feel socially equal or ambitiously entrepreneurial and at the same time be free and fully allegiant politically, even in imagination it is not possible to fill in the details of such a society if one simultaneously presumes modern urbanism, large and impersonal organization, science and technology. It is part of the hubris with which elites and educated Westerners have recently viewed the world that many have spoken as though such a society is more or less readily attainable. The problem is that one can sharply condemn the inequalities, marginal social statuses of many Westerners, bothersome government regulations, anemic rates of economic growth, and other shortcomings perceived to afflict Western societies today only by invoking a completely imaginary ideal as the standard for comparison. If, by contrast, one undertakes a real comparison with other urbanized societies, past or present, it is impossible not to recognize the unprecedented advantages that Western societies afford very large proportions, although by no means all, of their members.

An important refrain in public discussion is whether Western populations deserve their advantages. The answer must be that in any meaningful sense of personal merit, neither present Western generations nor those of the recent past clearly "deserve" the greater affluence, human rights, health care, and numerous other advantages they enjoy. Some Westerners have been kind, some have been prudent, some have been honest; but some have been bullies and not a few have been thieves. All one can say, broadly, is that through force of circumstance and without ever clearly foreseeing the conditions

to which their collective conduct was leading, Westerners followed the motives and did the things that brought the West its recent and present advantages. It must be admitted that, except sometimes in warfare and rebellion, relatively few Westerners made serious voluntary sacrifices to better the human lot.

This means that if there could be a deliberate sharing of the most central and distinctive cultural traits of Western societies among the world's population as a whole, or if the organization and functioning of Western politics and social orders could be deliberately shared with all those who have not been part of them, Westerners would have no substantial moral grounds for refusing to apportion their advantages equally with the rest of the world. But neither selected cultural traits nor the components of ongoing political systems and social orders can be parceled out. Only the material products of Western societies – goods and services – can be allocated more equally, either through voluntary donations or through payments of tribute.

A difficulty is that redistributing Western material goods and services to the rest of the world would not reliably spread the essential and valuable aspects of Western political behavior and social organization. If some workers outside the West get a little more money to spend because of Western donations or payments of tribute, they do not at the same time acquire Western attitudes towards work, human dignity, and personal independence. By the same token, if elite and upper-class persons outside the West obtain sumptuous homes, private airplanes, access to exclusive resorts, and other luxuries on the basis of Western donations or tribute, there is no reason to suppose that they thereby absorb Western proclivities toward individual prudence, reasonably honest business practices, and respect for civil liberties.

On the contrary, if donations or payments of tribute were seen as acts of Western weakness or placation, providing them would reinforce the already strong tendency in relatively impoverished, politically unstable societies outside the West to regard graft and extortion as the normal ways in which people and countries advance themselves. At least, it is difficult to see how merely sharing the West's material products more equally would over any reasonable length of time foster an acceptance of the complicated ways of exchanging more or less mutual satisfactions that have flourished in the West. Not only might the more equal distribution of Western societies' material possessions throughout the world actually discourage Westernization, there is the danger that if subventions reached high levels they would undermine the West's own ultimate political and social goods. Because these ultimate goods – personal safety, political

representation, civil liberties – depend in considerable measure on affluence for their workings, any large redistribution of Western wealth and possessions on a world basis would likely undermine or even destroy them. At the same time, and for the reasons given, it is unlikely that these ultimate goods would be re-created outside the West.

This is why, in current and foreseeable circumstances, Western societies have no obligation to share their resources and advantages beyond normal acts of charity in the face of calamities and beyond negotiated or unavoidable concessions in conditions of world commerce. If anything, they have a positive obligation to defend, in so far as they can, what is already theirs. They have an obligation, that is, to preserve those central aspects of the West that have been broadly beneficent for its populations. Within practical limits, therefore, it is incumbent on Western countries to support and defend each other against non-Western encroachments and to accept into the Western fraternity only countries that seem securely within the tradition of personal independence, limited political power, and respect for human rights that is the essence of the Western ideal.

The countries that comprise the West today, which include the Visegrad countries, have reasonably stable political regimes and should in this respect be capable of preserving the central features of Western civilization. They should be capable of doing this, that is, if their elites and publics can find ways to contain and manage increasingly ominous international and domestic trends. Visegrad elites must recognize clearly that they are inextricably involved in this Western effort.

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# Chapter 2

## The Illiberal Turn in Hungary: Institutions and Leadership

**T**he Hungarian elite settlement reached during the 1989 Round Table talks was called into existence by the elites of the newly emerging parties of democratic opposition and a reform-minded section of the former state socialist bureaucracy. The foundations of the said elite settlement included multi-party parliamentary democracy, market economy, respect for civil rights, and Euro-Atlantic integration. The political actors of the negotiations have accepted each others' legitimacy and tacitly agreed upon the peaceful character of the planned changes. During the negotiations preceding the Euro-Atlantic (that is, NATO and the EU) integration the new Hungarian political elites willingly cooperated in the process of transformation. What is more, elite consensus largely prevailed, thus enabling a swift and successful systemic change.

In the academic analyses of this change that prevail, emphasis has been placed on how the new power arrangements, which came about as a result of these agreements evolved, how the main actors' interests adjusted to new circumstances, and how the new institutions were formed and performed. It seemed to be the case that for the first 15 years or so of the transformation process initiated through the elite settlement was successful. The new democratic institutions worked well, and liberal-democratic competition was accepted as the only game in town.

More recently, however, this game was disrupted, suggesting that some dysfunctional implications of major institutional reforms may play out in the long run (Pierson 2000). Students of social-political change remind us that if/when the main actors in the process of transformation change (or their preferences) alter, or the newly created institutions do not work well, the established institutional arrangements are challenged. This has been the case in Hungary, and this is the principal argument of this chapter. In the first section we outline the reasons and the consequences of the challenge to the post-1989 institutional arrangements by focussing on the changing intentions of the crucial political actors, and on a growing institutional inefficiency. The latter can be repaired by regular

### **György Lengyel**

Professor at the Institute of Sociology and Social Policy, Corvinus University in Budapest. He writes on political and economic elites, postcommunism, and European integration.

### **Gabriella Ilonszki**

Professor at the Institute of Political Science, Corvinus University in Budapest. She has expertise in comparative politics, political organizations and parties, and women and politics.

adjustments of rules – which is a normal practice in all stable liberal democratic regimes. However, such adjustments have not worked in Hungary because the aims and intentions of the key political actors exceed the adaptive capacity of key institutions. This leads to what may be described as a “creeping regime change”. In the chapter’s second section we outline the nature of the new regime and the characteristics of the “game changing” political leader and Prime Minister. Finally, we conclude by arguing that the new regime also suffers from fundamental inefficiencies.

## **The background and framework of institutional changes**

The partisan structure emerging in Hungary in the process of post-communist transformations provides a context and explanatory background for our analysis. It can be described as moderate pluralism with a tendency for increasing polarization between the left (the socialist MSzP and their liberal ally, SzDSz) and the conservative Fidesz. Although the latter changed its name frequently (1995: Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Party; 2003: Fidesz – Hungarian Civic Alliance), it remains to be universally referred to as Fidesz. The second name change stems from a structural alternation, when a part of the conservative side of the political spectrum has been absorbed by Fidesz.

Polarisation has undermined the position of the reformist party cartel that consisted of the entities supporting systemic changes (Ilonszki and Várnagy 2014). Halfway through the second decade of transformation the positions, strength, goals of the parties of the original cartel were fundamentally transformed. Fidesz has emerged as the winner of this process, having its organizational power enhanced. The Socialist MSzP has lost their organizational power and dynamic, although it still managed to secure electoral victories in 2002 and 2006. Fidesz has also moved towards the conservative side of the political spectrum, centralised its decision-making structure, evolving into a leader-centred party. These changes destroyed the cartel consensus and resulted in the paralysis of legislative process, decision-making deadlocks, and increasing political-administrative inefficiency.

The tipping point of the crisis came about in 2006, when a speech of the socialist PM Ferenc Gyurcsány was leaked to the press. This self-critical address, delivered to party activists after the election victory, destroyed the reputation of the MSzP and led to party’s gradual political decline. The 2006-2010 period of chaotic rule accelerated this decline, leading to an electoral demise. When in

2010 a new political entity in play, the extreme right-wing Jobbik, won seats in the parliament, the old cartel was practically defunct, and its members could not defend the insiders from damaging attacks by the newly established competitors. Until that point only the parties advocating systemic change managed to gain mandates at parliamentary elections (with the single exception of MIÉP, an extreme right party). The discredited socialists suffered a huge electoral defeat, while Fidesz scored an outright constitutional majority (2/3 of the seats in the parliament). This, in turn, allowed its leader, Viktor Orbán, to pursue radical reforms, including fundamental changes in the old institutional framework. The constitutional majority threshold, which had been created to ensure consensus building in important legislative areas, became merely a power instrument for an ambitious leader.

Regime's vulnerability to leader-driven changes, often arbitrary and self-serving, was apparent in other areas as well. The economy grew successfully between 1997 and 2001, but the development stalled in 2002-2010, mainly due to the socialist government failing to implement substantial reforms. One reason for it was MSzP's unsuccessful attempts to combine social justice (protection of those who did not benefit from the transformation) with rewards for entrepreneurial initiative. The other reason was the growing animosity between the two big parties. No agreement about the direction of reform could have been hammered out even in areas where the two parties agreed "in principle". Moreover, Hungary was hit by the 2008 financial crisis at the worst possible time, that is when the elite consensus was collapsing. Therefore the impact of the crisis was significant: in the autumn of 2008, Hungary became the first EU member state asking for the EU and the IMF emergency loans.

Initially, Viktor Orbán had difficulties in mobilizing public support for his reforms because the obvious institutional inefficiency and former political paralysis had undermined public confidence in liberal democracy. Such state of affairs, however, started to change when highly politicized protests and street demonstrations, seldom seen before, evolved into daily events. Public trust in politicians and political institutions declined (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2010, 2012). As a result, anti-establishment populist ideas and agendas, embraced by Fidesz and its leader, became easy to sell. All these developments contributed to both the unexpectedly large election victory by Fidesz in 2010, and to the radicalism of reforms that followed.

In a modern representative democracy no majority can expect to govern "forever". This uncertainty provides a sort of balance: the majority should accept that they will at some point become

a minority (Moe 1990). Thus they are normally not interested in undermining the foundations of the “democratic game”. Orbán proved an exception to this rule, partly because of his contempt for the socialist opposition, and partly because of his frustration with the decisional paralysis and institutional inefficiency in the face of the increasing economic uncertainty and political instability. He sought to eliminate this instability and uncertainty – and to cement his power – by introducing majoritarian rule, and by using the advantage of the constitutional majority. The reference to direct involvement of the people and the power of popular majority has become common practice. “Public surveys” (mail questionnaires sent out to all citizens, often based on biased questions and having implicit evaluations) have been conducted to gain public consent for substantial constitutional changes. The new Constitution was accepted in 2011 with minimal consultations and against the will of the opposition parties. The general debate on the new Fundamental Law lasted for only five days and there was no “approving” nationwide referendum.

## **The game change**

Given that criticisms of political strategies of the new Hungarian regime are widespread and well known, we shall focus below only on less obvious and less known critical points. They concern institutional changes that weaken the liberal democratic game and concentrate power in the hands of a single actor. We argue that the sudden institutional transformation instigated by Victor Orbán in Hungary has given way to a substantial game change, and that this game change generates a new type of political regime.

The new Constitution extended the majoritarian rule onto the field of economic management. Public loans and matters of state budget management could only be legislated upon with a 2/3 majority support. Consequently, only governments with such large a majority could shape the fundamental economic-budgetary decisions. Orbán’s government has been using its constitutional majority to extend control over economic management.

The most immediate ones, though, were changes in the electoral system. They demonstrate how the efficiency considerations and political actors’ own power interest interplay and merge. The electoral reform was presented to the public as an “efficiency measure”, an attempt to streamline legislative process. Very soon, though, it became an instrument for promoting partisan interests (Ilonszki and Várnagy, 2015). The new electoral law passed in 2011 enhanced the majoritarian bias and hindered the opposition. It was adopted

against the protest of the opposition parties. The laws giving the government control over the public media were introduced in a similar manner, attracting criticism from the European Union. The independence of the newly structured media regulatory bodies, especially the National Media and Info-communication Authority, as well as its Media Council, was curtailed. This, in turn, was followed by a wave of appointments of party loyalists to the media organisations, and the distribution of broadcasting rights to party supporters, which seriously undermined objectivity and freedom of information (Bajomi-Lázár 2013). The formerly influential Constitutional Court, once regarded as the safeguard of democratic constitutional principles, was taken over by the party clientele. While some of these regulations are not unique for Hungary, a “context-sensitive approach” reveals that they served the party leaders well in undermining the rule of law and creating a brand new political regime (Uitz 2015).

The change sparked international criticism, which was, however, dismissed and proved ineffective. Despite several statements on behalf of the OSCE, the European Commission and European Parliament, as well as the European Court of Justice’s rulings, no action was taken to defend the rule of law and the democratic game. Some claim that the European political environment makes such defensive action impossible (Sedelmeier, 2014). Others argue that the new member states (including Hungary) comply with the formal rules in policy terms (Zhelyazkova, Kaya and Schrama 2016), while they abuse democratic rules in substance. Such conduct is therefore difficult to challenge and correct. The vagueness of the very nature of human rights may also be important a factor preventing their enforcement (Conant 2014). Finally, the democratic backsliding and ineffective responses by the EU can be attributed to the deepening European crisis.

Initially, the Hungarian government and its representatives applied double talk in EU-related issues. More recently, they use the argument of “domestic matters” to divert international criticism. In principle, though, domestic and international politics work in concert. As Putnam (1988: 434) argues, “there are powerful incentives for consistency between the two games” – political leaders have to respond to domestic pressures in order to win elections. However, they do not simply respond to electoral pressures and public demands but also create them. Survey results, for example, demonstrate that the Hungarian population’s intolerance of immigrants and refugees has been increasing after critical comments made by political leaders.

Some qualifications are appropriate here. One is that the Hungarian survey results do not differ from those in other V4 countries. In the

autumn of 2015, for example, one-third of Hungarians, two-fifth of Poles, half of Czechs and almost two-thirds of Slovaks thought “we should not admit refugees” (Simonovits 2015). Moreover, in 2015, when the refugee crisis hit Hungary and the government started an anti-immigration campaign, the proportion of both xenophobes and xenophiles decreased. Researchers argue that higher media exposure of the immigration issue increased a policy-sensitive line of thinking. It should be also stressed that the media carry widely divergent messages, both internationally and within Hungary (Kenyeres and Szabó 2016). In spite of the apparent inconsistency, they also prove effective in reducing external criticisms and shaping public opinion in line with governmental narrative. Thus in early 2016 already over 75 per cent of Hungarians thought that refugees increase the likelihood of acts of terrorism, foster unemployment growth and limit access to social benefits (Wike et al. 2016).

The Hungarian economy is also undergoing some radical changes. After the landslide victory in 2010, the Orbán government introduced strict fiscal controls and applied special measures aimed at maintaining the budgetary balance. Perhaps the most controversial of them was the nationalization of private pension funds. Branch-specific levies were introduced, and increased proportion of state property in banking, media and public utilities was transferred under a direct public control. These measures concerned those sectors where the monopoly income, as well as chances of rent seeking, were strongest, and where state patronage was widely sought. Obligatory communal work, introduced by the Orbán government after the elections, was expected to promote socialization and employment. However, according to critics, it did not result in the unemployed retiring onto the labor market. The new labor code favoured employers' interests. The flat-rate tax and high VAT depressed the living standards of lower classes and widened social inequalities. Today, income inequality in Hungary is similar to Poland and higher than in the Czech and Slovak republics.

These measures have produced mixed results. The Hungarian gross national income per capita and the employment rate are the lowest in V4, while the central government debt to GDP ratio is the highest in the Group (WDI 2015). The export reached 95 per cent of the GDP (like in Slovakia), which is higher a rate than in other countries. The number of newly established businesses is also much higher in Hungary than elsewhere in V4. Foreign direct investment, which plays an important role in the Hungarian economic transformation, has been significantly higher in Hungary than in the rest of the V4 countries (OECD 2015). The FDI to GDP ratio decreased from 2006 to 2011 and, largely due to selection

measures introduced by the government, it shows a cyclical pattern. In short, Hungary has an open and vulnerable economy with low unemployment rate, high level of indebtedness and significant role of foreign capital. This vulnerability is further increased by massive party-political clientelism.

Clientelistic corruption seems to be creeping in. Long-term rental of state-owned lands, privileges in investment and preferential treatment in access to EU-funds are dished out to Fidesz clients, according to critics. As one of Orbán's advisors explained in an interview "What is called corruption is practically the main policy of Fidesz", referring to selective support granted to those Hungarian entrepreneurs who manifest political loyalty to the ruling party. Such selective support has helped Fidesz to strengthen its leading position in the countryside and among industrial agents (Lánczi 2015). It appears to be the case the government is building up a "client class", including not only those entrepreneurs who are systematically privileged in the distribution of infrastructural investment projects, but also some middlemen, lobbyists, beneficiaries of land and tobacco shop licence auctions, grantees of national cultural funds, and beneficiaries of newly established foundations of the National Bank that aims to popularize innovative economic policy. In substantive terms, we are witnessing an attempt at controlling markets for land, labor and money (Lengyel 2016). The move away from the open competitive market, leading towards a controlled economy results in a double dependence of the population. In other words, people are dependent on multinational companies and on the party-controlled state.

### **The name of the game or a shift towards illiberal democracy**

The institutional changes and the new forms of authority exercised by Viktor Orbán amount to a new regime and a new form of state labelled by the PM and his acolytes "illiberal democracy" (Körösenyi and Patkós 2015).

The label "illiberal democracy", first introduced by Fareed Zakaria (1997), applies to regimes emerging in countries like Belarus or Kyrgyzstan, where elections are held regularly, but the results of these elections are highly predictable. In "illiberal democracies", Zakaria argues, rule of law and/or political opposition are constrained or suppressed. Although constitutional liberalism and democracy are interwoven in the last century of Western political development, it is important to separate them due to the fact that the two institutional settings may exist separately and did run different historical paths.

Liberalism in the classic sense is based on the rule of law, which includes respect for constitution and civil and political rights. Illiberal democracies do not show such respect, and they are widely regarded as “flawed” or “partial” democracies.

In a speech addressing ethnic Hungarians at Tusnádfürdő (Romania) in 2014, the Viktor Orbán applied the concept of “illiberal democracy” to both his own regime and a new type of party-state he planned to construct. He also presented it with a positive normative colouring (Orbán 2014, Halmos 2014). He argued that there were three systemic changes in the world order during the 20th century: the two world wars and the events of the years 1989–90. All produced new conditions, just like the current European crisis. The change was an important experience, but should not be used as a point of reference anymore. The new point of reference is 2008 and the following change in the economic and military world order. There is a strong economic competition between nations. A race takes place to create a new model of national communities and the state that makes nation states more competitive. This calls for adaptation comparable to the Chinese, Indian, Russian and Turkish models. The new setup is a labor-based society, and a party-controlled state. In such a state, the liberal idea of “everything is permitted which does not infringe the freedom of others” – the organizing principle of the 1989 elite settlement – is replaced by the rule “do not do to others what you do not want be done to you” taught by most world religions. The problem of this liberal model is that it weakens the nation state, while failing to protect the population from foreign indebtedness. Such indebtedness, in turn, leads to “debt slavery” of thousands of Hungarian families. This, argues Orbán, plays into the hands of those who want to weaken the nation and the state, and who are financed by foreign actors (e.g., the EU officials and civil activists).

Zakaria (2014) reacted by portraying Orbán as a “Putinist” – a strongman who uses nationalism and religious values in order to strengthen his powers and create illiberal state capitalism. According to Zakaria, Orbán did follow Putin in eroding judicial independence and civil rights, using nationalist rhetoric and muzzling independent media. Another critic of Orbán and illiberal regimes, Francis Fukuyama (2015) raised serious doubts about the economic performance of such regimes. Illiberal regimes, it seems, perform badly, and they have many critics and few apologists.

When such fundamental illiberal changes occur, the leaders introducing them are busy outlining, publicizing and advocating their illiberal visions. This directs our attention to the Hungarian “game changer”, Viktor Orbán.

## **The game changer**

The emphasis on the role of political leaders as key political actors reflects a broad “leader-centric trend” identified in developed societies and polities (Pakulski and Körösenyi 2012). In the past, we analysed Hungarian leading politicians as transformative and transactional leaders (Burns 1972, Bryman 1996), and we characterised the dominant Hungarian leadership style of the 21 century as transformative, with no sense to transactional gestures (Lengyel and Ilonszki 2010, 2012, Lengyel 2014). Now, we supplement this typology by adding three aspects of a political leader’s personality: political style, worldview and character (Barber 1972). It takes into account two external aspects, framing the personality traits: the power situation and the “climate of expectations” which includes a public need for legitimacy, reassurance and action. The leader’s performance reflects on these external needs while mobilizing, re-assembling and modifying nuts and bolts of his personality. Leader’s character has two dichotomous aspects: activity and the evaluation of his own performance (Barber 1972, George 2011, Qualls 2011). This conceptual-typological elaboration is useful in the analysis of the current Hungarian political leadership, especially the leader, “the game changer”.

Viktor Orbán is an experienced orator and capable debater. He is aware of what he aims to argue and he understands the needs and sentiments of his audience. His rhetorical style combines the elements of the vocabularies of lawyers and populist politicians. *Captatio benevolentiae*, that is, capturing the goodwill of the audience, is his strength, while argumentation is sometimes replaced by accusation, demonstration by aphorisms and clichés (Davis 2011). Orbán prefers to address his followers, rather than critics, and he limits his contacts with critical audiences to the necessary minimum. His leadership style is authoritarian; the pronouncements are authoritative. There are commands and assertions; objections and criticisms are not accepted. During his first period in government he ordered the council of ministers to stand-up and salute him – a symbolic emblem of his newly adopted authoritarian style.

As a young politician Orbán was an exponent of political liberalism (Kis 2014, 2016). He embraced the values of freedom and human rights, with seemingly less interest in egalitarian and communitarian values. Freedoms and rights remain in his repertoire, but they are overshadowed by references to “strength”. Liberty is always on the side of the strong people, he now claims. Although this sort of interpretation confuses liberty with capability,

it captures the imagination of the popular audiences. A good PM – said Orbán in a recent talk delivered to students of the Bibó István Kollégium (the lawyer students’ association) – should be coony (Orbán 2015). It is not deep professional knowledge of special fields that such PM deserves, but finesse. He should be able to “find his way between continually moving walls”, anticipate the upcoming problems, link them and decide the best course of action. Another virtue he promotes and emphasises is loyalty. A good leader should be a proper Magyar [Hungarian] man who does not guess national sentiment, but feels it. Good aspiring candidates for leaders should be resistant to character assassination, show courage and demonstrate determination. “If you are standing on the battlefield and three of them coming at you with a sword there is no room for moralizing, you need to slice them.”

Some critics accuse Orbán of contacts with the secret services during the old regime, (Simicska 2015) and of shady business activities around Fidesz (Petőcz 2001), leading to a swift enrichment of his family (Debreczeni 2013). Paradoxically, such accusations do not seem to dent Orbán’s reputation domestically, and they are not advertised abroad.

Orbán is an active politician, his transformative accomplishment are undeniable. But he is less blessed with transactional skills, which makes him rigid and uncompromising. When an American politician mentioned to him that Reagan „always left something on the table for his political opposition, just so they would feel they had won something too” Orbán’s immediate reaction was: „I could not possibly do that” (Puddington 2015). Yet, as he declared in one of his recent talks,

I believe we did an enormous job, not even our adversaries deny that. In the meantime – as it happens – we did numerous mistakes, blunders, we did put up a black. There is for example the extension of the telecommunication tax or as it became known the Internet tax. It is our credit that we don’t insist on our errors... One of the lessons is that the possibility of errors don’t make us afraid of decisions. (Orbán 2015a)

In many respects Orbán is pragmatic and ready to revise his former views. This is especially true in the international context, where his policy has often been described as “pragmatic adhocism” (Hegedűs 2014). While in one of his statements he compares Brussels to Moscow (Orbán 2011), he also declares regularly that the membership in the EU is a necessary condition for Hungary’s prosperity and security. What he criticises and rejects, it seems, is the federalist vision of the EU. Instead, he favors and promotes a vision of the strong sovereign nation states within the EU cooperative-

partnership framework.

The idea of the United Nations of Europe, the permanent weakening of the nation states is a mad and dangerous one.

– But for many the only rational solution is federalism in Europe.

– This idea does exist, it does have its supporters. I don't share this idea and one needs not to be afraid of it either. The Eurozone states long been trying to create a common budget and a common social policy besides that of the euro. Let us wait for the results. It may turn out that this is a good way, but it may unravel that one must not follow it. (Orbán 2015c).

Harsh rhetoric combined with pragmatism are not unusual in politics, but obvious contradictions or ambiguities may weaken their impact. And Orbán's statements contain many such contradictions, as well as ambiguities.

I, for example, belong to those who thought in 2004–2005 that the Visegrad cooperation has reached its objective and in the future most likely it won't be needed. And now, standing here in 2016, I can only say that never has there been such a great need for the Visegrad Four cooperation than now, after 12 years of getting the EU membership. If, that is, we want to be equal and equally respected members of the European Union. (Orbán 2016)

The same goes for the relationship with the great powers:

Building a strategy on the US Central-European policy is strictly forbidden, because it will be pulled out from under you... The Americans stressed [the importance of] Nabucco like hell, and I represented the same view, and attacked Gyurcsány saying why should we prefer the Russian South Stream from Nabucco. Then Americans declared that they won't invest in it... The political interest of the US is in isolation of Russia, and that would bring catastrophic consequences for us. Our interest is in the formation of a connection between the European continent and Russia which is advantageous for us. (Orbán 2015b)

Interestingly, Orbán is highly critical of almost all foreign leaders, except Putin and some of the political partners from eastern countries. It appears therefore that the PM uses a double language, double political vocabulary. One of them is reserved for the external (mainly liberal) consumption; another one is employed in communications with domestic supporters and other authoritarian leaders. This is a frequent phenomenon in contemporary politics – as pointed out by the authors of the Polish, Slovak and Czech studies below. A good example of such double language – and the hypocrisy it masks – is a giant poster addressed to refugees, extolling them to respect Hungarian regulations. These giant posters are written in Hungarian.

At the first glance, the PM radiates confidence, appears assertive, with highly positive self-assessment. But those who know him closely report doubts about this positive self-esteem. The latter feature could spark interest because the active-positive leaders may push aside formalities of democratic institutions when under threat. The Hungarian PM seems to be often acting along this principle. Active leaders with lower self-esteem, on the other hand, may respond in a rigid fashion when their power is challenged (Barber 1972:347, George 2011: 89). We suggest that from a strategic point of view there is some rigidity in the PM's behavior and we shall outline the consequences of this rigidity in the concluding section. Orbán's rigidity is manifested by his social vision of the state, and by his conflict-seeking habit. What he envisages is a strong nation state, relying upon clients whom one can trust, with sponsored enrichment of the capable few and minimal work-based expectations of the rest. Such an interpretation throws a new light on the current developments in Hungary. The political leader confronts not only his political adversaries, but also the disobeying oligarchs who overestimate their political influence and autonomy. In his vision, Hungary has a special place for a strong leader who always finds his proper enemy.

## **Conclusion**

In a secret speech ahead of the 2010 elections Orbán explained to his followers that the aim is to build a "central field of force" and keep it intact. He succeeded in protecting this "field" in 2010 and 2014. In the meantime, the Fidesz government has reshaped the basic democratic institutions and enforced elite change. As a result, the entire political game has changed. Majoritarianism, centralisation, weakened constitutional guarantees, curtailed civic and property rights as well as muzzled media have become central features of the new regime., one which extends its control over the entire state. It is also extending its control over economy and society through systematic clientelism, confrontation with the oligarchs, as well as control of civic organizations and the media. The prevailing political rhetoric is nationalistic and populist with the emphasis on a "Europe of nations". Similar authoritarian leaders, regimes and states are treated with polite understanding.

The new game – while successful in tactical terms – suffers from serious shortcomings which might result in a strategic failure. The Hungarian regime approximates closely an "illiberal (electoral) democracy". The difference between such illiberal electoral

democracy and electoral authoritarianism is paper-thin. If the key perennial feature of electoral authoritarianism is arbitrary rule and misuse of power and resources by the leader, it is possible to conclude that the governing elites in Hungary are moving in this direction.

Orbán's strategy carries a strong risk of political marginalisation and alienation from the "core EU". For Orbán, a leader who admires finesse, the liberal democratic architecture of the EU does not provide enough space for manoeuvring and fulfilling leadership ambitions. Some leaders outside the eurozone may presume that a confronting and transformative behavior might be more efficient than a rational-calculative, transactional one. Some rightly warn about the contamination effect, with concrete reference to Poland: "if a Member State is allowed to defy the democratic values of the European Union, systemically reaping all the material benefits of membership of the EU, others will inevitably follow suit" (Oliver and Stefanellyi 2016: 8).

Orbán is a game changer: he misuses the incumbent position and weakens institutional guaranties of liberal democracy, thus creating a new type of regime and the state. He clearly intends to solidify his power position in the long run by moving from liberal to illiberal democracy and from market economy to a state-controlled one. The new regime is meant to prevail for an extended period of time. This is the intention of the PM. Nevertheless, in reality, the extended time horizon is inconsistent with a short tactical focus.

Is this regime as well established and as durable as the PM expects and as his opponents fear? After all, electoral politics is fickle. Mindful of that, the PM restructures the regime and lays the foundations for a new state. The long term existence of such a state would require increasing returns. But such returns, that is to say, better performance and improving conditions for many, are not eventuating. The systematic undermining of the rule of law, and weakening the system of checks and balances, push the regime toward increasing inefficiency and erode its popularity. What is advertised as high responsiveness, may turn into high irresponsibility in the longer run. Mobilising anxiety, fear, envy and prejudice, demonising immigrants and attacking domestic critics may lead to winning an election, but it also undermines the public morale and, ultimately, long-term credibility of populist leaders.

The country's political system shows some symptoms of decay. While in the 1990s most of the Hungarian governance indicators (voice and accountability, rule of law, political stability and absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality and rule of law, control of corruption – see WGI 2015) were improving,

they started to decline since about 2006-8. In terms of “voice and accountability” the Hungarian estimates lag behind the rest of the V4 countries. The same applies to the indicators of “rule of law” and “government effectiveness”. “Political stability and lack of violence” seem stable, but the estimates of corruption have dramatically worsened. In 2006 the Hungarian corruption perception index (CPI) of Transparency International was the best among the V4 countries. In 2015 Hungary’s CPI scale, on a scale from 0 to 100, was 51 (equal to Slovakia) while the position of the Czech Republic, and especially Poland, was significantly better (Transparency International 2016). Judging by the Bertelsmann indicators (Sustainable Governance Indicators 2016), the Hungarian government’s consensus-building capability, as well as international co-operation and credibility dropped in the last decade from 9.9 to 5.8, from 9.3 to 6 and from 9 to 5, respectively. The indicators of sustainability, environmental policy and education policy worsened, too. So did the indicators of management performance, steering and policy learning capability. According to experts’ opinion, the estimates referring to democracy and market economy have worsened between 2006 and 2016 from 9.4 to 7.6 and from 8.9 to 7.8 respectively. It seems that while in 2006 Hungary scored above the V4 average in most of these measures, it fell below the average in the subsequent years. According to the latest Freedom House report (Freedom House 2016), the country’s democracy score dropped between 2007 and 2016 from 2,14 to 3,29 on a 7 point scale where 1 is the best and 7 is the worst possible assessment. The biggest decline was registered in “democratic governance”, “media independence” and “corruption”. In other areas (electoral process, civil society, local government and judicial independence) the scores are also worsening, but the decline is less dramatic. One may argue that this decline reflects the declining value of political liberalism in the eyes of the Hungarian governing elite. The PM’s transformative efforts, conflict ideology and combative character may prevent him from finding the way between “continually moving walls”.

These developments are not restricted to Hungary. In fact, as the next chapter shows, the “illiberal turn” – very similar to the Hungarian one and emulating the Hungarian “Orbánisation” has been diagnosed in neighbouring Poland. The anti-liberal nationalist-populist politics seem to spread in CEE, widening the national divergences in the transformation paths of the Visegrad countries.

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# Chapter 3

## Crumbling Elite Consensus and the Illiberal Turn in Poland

**Jan Pakulski**

Emeritus Professor at the University of Tasmania, Hobart, ASSA Fellow, and Professor at Collegium Civitas in Warsaw. He writes on elites, postcommunism and social inequalities.

**P**oland's democratic transition, described by its key architects as a "return to Europe", was an accomplishment of a new generation of political leaders and elites that emerged from the Solidarity "peaceful revolution", the 1989 Roundtable agreements, and the victorious June 1989 elections. The transformation was peaceful, consensual and elite-directed, as well as pro-Western and liberal-democratic in its aims and instruments. It involved a remarkably swift systemic change: construction of a sovereign constitutional state and pluralist liberal democracy, as well as formation of an open market economy, plural society, and free and open culture, unbound by political censorship. No less remarkably, the transformation was conducted in a liberal-democratic way: without violence, in line with the (revised) Constitution and "by the book," that is, with respect for laws and the newly established liberal conventions. It was crowned with Poland's accession to NATO (1999) and the EU (2004).

Importantly, the transformation was designed, directed and executed by the emerging Solidarity leaders and advisors, and pro-reformist "postcommunists" supported it. The elite managed to consolidate the initially wobbly democratic regimes and create a robust market economy – for a decade the fastest growing in Europe, quadrupling the GDP per capita in 25 years (1990–2015), and avoiding the 2008–9 recession. They also established good working relations with the country's neighbors, especially Germany, and became an informal leader of the Visegrad Group.

Such a swift and successful liberal transformation, as argued earlier (e.g., Higley and Pakulski 1993, Higley et al. 1996, 1998), was possible thanks to a broad ruling consensus worked out (and subsequently "adjusted") by the key members of the Polish political elite. This elite included not only the top political actors (parliamentary, party, state), but also the main business lobbies and the key "opinion makers" including the immensely popular Polish 'Pope John Paul II and the top members of the Catholic hierarchy, as well as the state-dominated business segment of the Polish elite which has been weak and heavily dominated by etatism

(see Wasilewski and Wesolowski 1992, Jasiecki 2002). The ruling consensus involved the key directions of transformation (“return to Europe”), that is, the formation of constitutional state, liberal democracy, market economy, pluralist society and free (uncensored) culture, as well as wide acceptance of new liberal-democratic political “rules of the game”: commitment to electoral competition, respect for constitution and rule of law, and restrained partisanship combined with political moderation. It also involved the division of powers between the executive, legislative and judicial bodies, between government and president, as well as the conventions safeguarding the inclusion, inasmuch as the autonomy of the key elite groups.

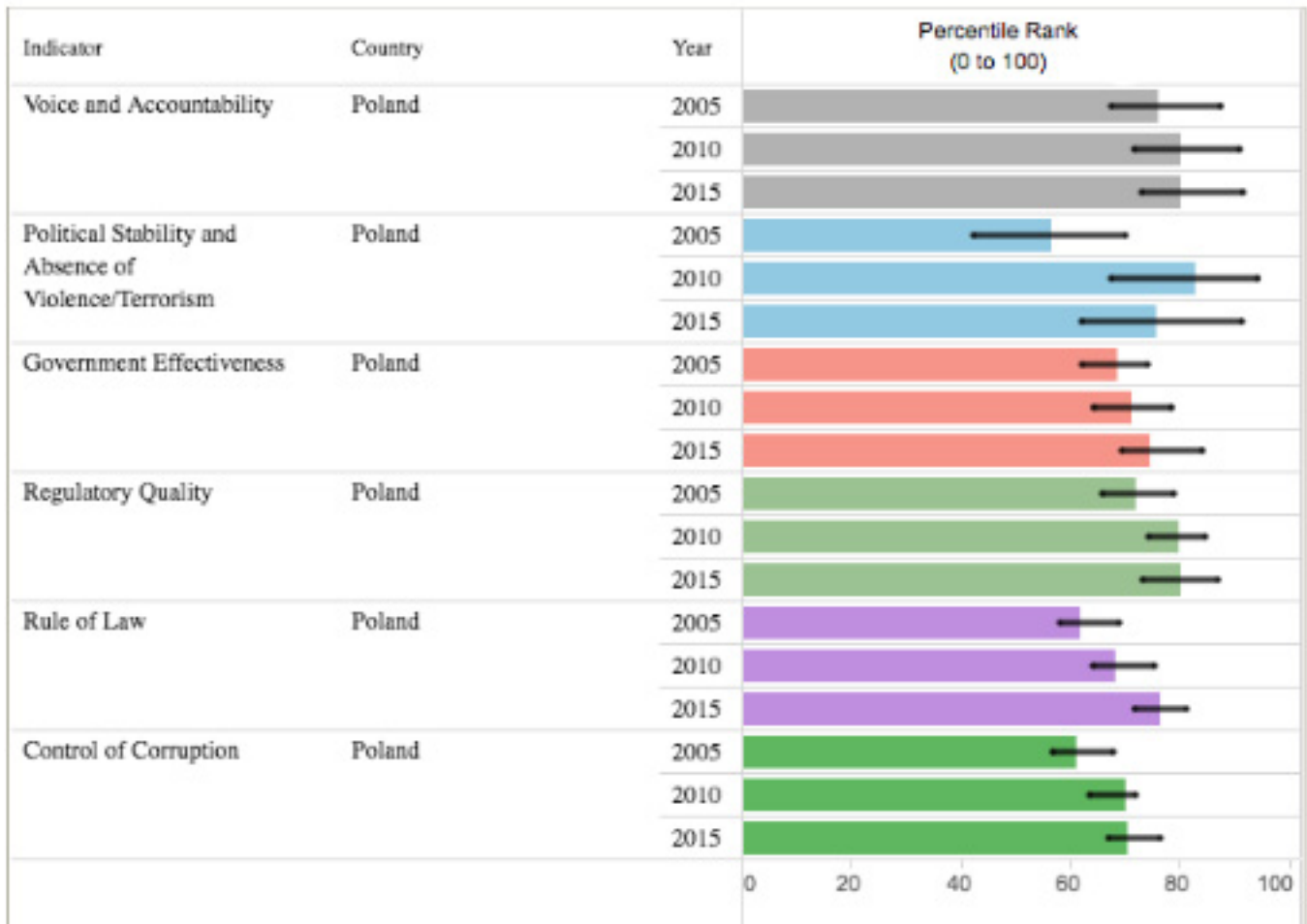
The consensus transformed Polish politics from a risky and violent fight (best illustrated by the brutal and destructive Martial Law, in place in the years 1981-2) into a “Western-type”, normatively regulated, safe and predictable game. Political game, to be sure, was tough and occasionally brutal, but it was a normatively regulated contest, thus consolidating the liberal-democratic politics and regimes (Higley and Burton 2006). Elite circulation, initially rapid and wide, became more stable in the second decade of transformation. Party politics was initially chaotic and fragmented, but moderate, with governments alternating between center-right and center-left coalitions. Importantly, the new governing elite showed some signs of openness, professionalization and broad integration (inclusiveness) – a great asset at the time of a rapid socio-economic transformation.

The ruling consensus encompassed all major political forces in Poland, including the ex-communists and the influential Catholic Church hierarchy. The Church informally sponsored the Roundtable negotiations and supported the first Solidarity government, led by a prominent Catholic intellectual, Tadeusz Mazowiecki. In his vision for social order in the new Poland and the new “Europe of the Spirit”, John Paul II, who had never hidden his friendship with Mazowiecki and his affection for Lech Wałęsa, stressed the need for the pro-EU orientation, ideological neutrality, dignity of the human person as the source of rights, respect for democratically agreed juridical norms, and tolerant pluralism in the organization of society. These were the core principles and norms that united the “mainstream” of the Polish political elite in the first two decades of post-communist transformations.

This broad elite-ruling consensus should not be confused with programmatic consensus or ideological unity. The ruling consensus was general and procedural; it regulated elite competition, so that the top power-wielders, representing diverse programs and ideological preferences, could resolve their ideological-programmatic differences in a peaceful manner. When entrenched within the ruling circles,

the ruling consensus laid the normative foundations for a “give-and-take” politics of compromises and deals (often secret, sometimes corrupt) which are typical of stable liberal democracies. The ruling consensus survived the stormy years of “systemic change” and paved the way for what looked like a “consolidated” yet “flawed” liberal democracy in Poland (Figure 1, see The Democracy Index 2015, especially pages 30-35).

[Figure 1. Worldwide governance indicators in Poland, 2001-14]



Obviously, there were also some problems (e.g., Rychard and Motzkin 2015). The economic transformation was uneven. It produced very high youth unemployment, especially among lowly educated and unskilled workers in the eastern regions of the country. The young Polish “millennials” had their life-chances reduced by poor working contracts, high public debt, burdens of ageing population, and rapidly increasing mobility barriers. While economic migration provided a temporary safety valve for discontent, political alienation was increasing among the young Polish “precariate”. Similarly, the less educated and less-skilled non-urban population benefited less from the widening prosperity than the highly educated urban

strata. The privatization process favored the “new postcommunist establishment” – a bias that caused widespread concerns. The most ardent Catholics felt alienated by what they saw as a flood of Western secular popular culture and the accompanied liberalization of lifestyles and loosening social mores. Staunch nationalists – who valued national sovereignty more than liberal democracy – felt disappointed by the EU regulations and threatened by the opening up of the Polish borders. But these problems did not undermine the liberal elite consensus. Nor did they affect the transformation – until they were politically organized and radicalized in 2010-15 by leaders of the Law and Justice (PiS) party.

### **The Smolensk debate - from rivals to enemies and traitors**

The ruling elite consensus – always tested, but never seriously undermined within the political “mainstream” – started to crumble the end of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, especially during the acrimonious debates triggered by the 2010 Smoleńsk plane crash in which Poland’s President, Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and his political entourage perished. The surviving twin brother of the killed president, Jarosław Kaczyński, supported by his most trusted friends and political allies in the Law and Justice (PiS) party, insisted that the plane was brought down. He accused Russia’s Vladimir Putin, the then Polish PM, Donald Tusk, and the entire Civic Platform (PO) “establishment” of complicity in what became known as the “Smoleńsk conspiracy”. The accusers included not only the close circle of Kaczyński’s friends, but also the oppositional segment of the political elite, including the scandalizing media, some senior catholic clergy, and, soon, a significant part of the public, predominantly less educated and rural. The accusations – made in spite of absence of any credible factual support – inflamed politics and transformed debates into acrimonious attacks on “enemies and traitors”. The ruling PO leaders were now portrayed as a corrupt ruling clique that usurped power by cutting secret deals with communists at the Roundtables and then eliminating the legitimate leaders. The language of resentment, hatred, condemnation and revenge replaced the language of political competition and rivalry thus contributing to the widening of the intra-elite rift.

The rift was widened also by the absence of Kaczyński’s more moderate twin brother, Lech, who, as a President of Poland (2005-10), defended the liberal consensus and political moderation. It was also deepened due to politicization and radicalization of a section of the catholic clergy who after the death of John Paul II

(2005) endorsed the “Smoleńsk conspiracy” and organized moral-religious crusades against PO leaders, including the then president (and ardent catholic), Bronisław Komorowski. Religious activists holding crosses and candles held regular protest vigils in front of the Presidential Palace and at rapidly multiplying commemorative shrines, demanding “the truth”, “justice for the victims”, and “the punishment of the perpetrators” (Wiśniewski 2016).

The ruling consensus weakened, and the rift widened further, just before and during the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections campaigns. A series of widely publicized illegal wiretapping records of private restaurant conversations by top PO politicians provoked wide and damaging accusations of arrogance and sleaze in the liberal establishment (though no illegality mentioned in the conversations was proven). The scandal helped the PiS leadership further undermine the image of the PO leaders as fair political players. Moreover, new European crises, especially the refugee and security crises, the latter triggered largely by terrorist attacks, boosted EU-skepticism both in Poland and throughout Europe, thus further dividing political elites. To these divisive “background factors” we must turn now.

### **The European woes and the sources of EU-skepticism**

By the time of the 2015 presidential and parliamentary election campaigns in Poland, the political scene in Europe had changed under the impact of the euro, debt and financial crises; the Russian threat magnified with the annexation of Crimea; the debates about sanctions imposed on Russia; and, in particular, the new unfolding refugee crisis. The new crisis has gained intensity due to terrorist attacks, security scares, and the squabbles about “refugee quotas” assigned by the EU to the reluctant northern and eastern members. These “quotas”, profoundly unpopular in the entire CEE, galvanized the critics and triggered mobilizations of anti-liberal, nationalistic, xenophobic, anti-migrant, and anti-EU entities all over Europe. These, in turn, were followed by backlash mobilizations of illiberal ant-globalist and EU-skeptical left.

The European Union – formerly a paragon of unity, security, stability and freedom – started to show signs of weakness and discord. The radical right blame liberal Eurocrats for poor design of the common currency, bad response to Greece’s debt crisis, security lapses facilitating terrorist attacks, and, most importantly, for the destabilizing labor migrations and uncontrolled refugee flows. Angela Merkel’s ill-considered invitation of refugees, poor border controls, security lapses, and widely publicized cases of criminal behavior by some refugees, all contributed to the anti-liberal anti-

EU backlash. Clumsy attempts at imposing refugee quotas on all EU countries – a measure designed to demonstrate solidarity in sharing the refugee burden – provoked an anti-EU rebellion in CEE and contributed to the shocking Brexit.

Russian interventions in Ukraine further increased European fears and deepened political divisions. The Eastern Partnership strategy, involving a non-military aid to Ukraine and a series of conditional sanctions slapped on Russia – temporarily reduced these fears. But the Russian counter-sanctions and the anti-EU propaganda campaigns have further divided European leaders, especially in countries bordering with Russia. By the time of the Polish election campaigns in 2015, not only the EU's positive image suffered serious blows, but also the pro-EU and pro-NATO unity was strained. The widening intra-elite rift in Poland and the divisive outcomes of the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections have to be seen in the context of deepening European woes and the weakening pro-EU consensus in CEE.

### **The divisive campaigns**

The Polish liberal governing party (PO) entered the 2015 election year leaderless (after the resignation of Donald Tusk), weakened by muckraking scandals, but still expected to win the presidential and parliamentary ballots on their overall economic record. The economy was strong, in spite of relatively high unemployment, and early opinion polls supported the expectation of a double (presidential and parliamentary) electoral victory for the incumbents. This was until April, when a sudden mobilization of a populist-nationalistic and anti-establishment Kukiz '15 Movement triggered panic reactions in the presidential entourage. The hastily organized election campaign conducted by the incumbent Bronisław Komorowski proved ill-suited, especially when encountering a strong populist and anti-establishment attacks mounted by a media-friendly and unashamedly populist PiS challenger-candidate, Andrzej Duda. Duda won the presidential contest by promising a radical change, criticizing "Poland in ruins" – a claim that was absurd in the light of the overall economic record, but reverberated well among a minority of frustrated "millennial" and less affluent Poles – and by promising economic handouts. He won narrowly, mainly by attracting (in the second round) votes of angry young Polish "precariats" (Standing 2011) who supported the anti-establishment Kukiz '15 movement. His victory, in turn, galvanized electoral support for PiS and its populist leader Jarosław Kaczyński.

PiS won the subsequent parliamentary poll, due to the earlier

presidential victory, as well as the support of the influential Redemptorist monk and catholic priest, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, the head of a powerful catholic (arch-conservative and EU-skeptic) media conglomerate that includes Medial Culture in Torun, the TV station Trwam, journals *Nasz Dziennik* and *Nasza Przyszłość*, and the Lux Veritatis foundation. Rydzyk's media outlets mobilized the culturally alienated, less educated and predominantly non-urban regular church attenders, the "pulpitariat". The fact that Rydzyk could conduct his highly partisan-political campaign with the blessing, or at least a silent approval, of the Polish Catholic Church hierarchy (formerly critical of Radio Maryja) is the best evidence of the collapse of the broad elite-ruling consensus.

The electoral support for PiS coming from the catholic media of Father Rydzyk (himself backed by the conservative segments of the clergy) has not surprised political observers. Already in 2012-14 a series of widely publicized conflicts between the PO government and the Catholic Church hierarchy soiled the PO-Church relations, brought to the surface some emotionally charged issues related to religious faith, and facilitated the Church-PiS rapprochement. The conflicts heated up with debates over pedophile priests, and they were further exacerbated by debates over the availability of IVF treatment, abortion rights, "gender issues" (gay rights and feminism), and – on the eve of the poll in 2015 – the acceptance of Muslim refugees. The tone of the debates, amplified by the Father Rydzyk's media, changed from rational to highly emotional. Rydzyk's Radio Maryja, with only 2-3 per cent of Polish regular listeners but over 0.5 million devoted and organized so-called Friends of the Radio Station, was most active in these campaigns that "articulated the feelings of Poles alienated by the country's brisk, materialist business culture and the decay in moral norms" (*The Economist*. March 15, 2015). The PO government was accused of tolerating "genocide" (abortions), aiding the persecution of Catholics, abating the destruction of families and – on the issue of refugees – supporting an "Islamic invasion". Some pro-government parliamentarians were threatened with excommunication, while Jarosław Kaczyński was portrayed as a patriotic defender of the nation from decadent European liberal secularism.

PiS won the parliamentary elections by conducting a divisive populist campaign that mixed fear with hope: fear of terrorism ("Islamic invasion" in the face of "decadent Europe" and of Russian expansionism), and hope for a "good change" (rebuilding the allegedly ruined Polish economy, restoring full national sovereignty restricted by the EU, and boosting welfare handouts). Importantly, the campaign mobilized "politics of resentment". PiS

leaders and candidates used the toxic vocabulary of acrimony and condemnation. The emotionally loaded labels, such as “enemies and traitors” proliferated during campaign debates. The audiences of Radio Maryja compared the incumbent President, Komorowski, to Adolf Hitler and branded the PO parliamentarians as “murderers”. Jarosław Kaczyński labelled his opponents “communists and thieves”, “people of the lower sort” with “animalistic inclinations”. The liberal “establishment” was portrayed as EU- (and Germany-) directed, arrogant, corrupt and nepotistic, as an illegitimate “clique” sustained by secret deals with the communists and Putin-Tusk conspiracy. The “clique” was accused of corrupting politics, ruining the economy and undermining national sovereignty and culture. On the other end of the political divide, among the liberal PO supporters, the rhetoric was more restrained, but not free from abusive labels, such as “Talibans”. Moreover, the PiS campaigners chose an effective strategy of “hiding” the actual, but unpopular, party leaders (Jarosław Kaczyński and Antoni Macierewicz) behind the youthful and complacent “front” candidate, Beata Szydło, a previously unknown campaign leader for Duda.

The election campaigns not only further undermined the already tenuous elite consensus and “massified” the intra-elite rift. The acrimony of campaign debates, and the accompanying mobilization of fears and resentments, divided in a sectarian way not only the political elite, but also the whole nation. The entire Polish population started to split into two mutually suspicious and hostile nations. Moreover, it also helped to crystalize the “alternative” to the challenged “rules of the game” – a vision of Poland abandoning the pro-EU policies, strengthening its sovereignty and national-catholic identity, and ruled from a single executive center of power with little regards for the juridical-constitutional constraints and defenses. To this alternative vision will be examined below.

## **The alternative vision - Poles apart**

The substance of the challenge to the elite consensus articulated by the victorious PiS can be summarized in a handful of contrasting points:

- ✘ “Return to Europe” versus EU-skepticism, EU-criticism and EU-pessimism. PiS political leaders criticize and reject the “integrative EU”, which they portray as a “postmodern utopia” disintegrating under the burden of excessive bureaucratization and German domination.
- ✘ Civic nationalism supplemented by European identity versus ethno-nationalism and ethno-religious identity (Christian

values). The official program of PiS stresses “the [Catholic] Church remains today the generator and advocate of the generally accepted moral teaching in Poland... The only moral alternative to Church is nihilism.”

- ✘ Pluralistic society versus cohesive ethno-national society, opposed to “mixing cultures and races” and rejecting the liberal ideology of “multi-culti” (Waszczykowski 2015a).
- ✘ Liberal democracy based on rule of law versus national democracy with a single power center and a single national leader. This “mono-centric” and illiberal vision has emerged during the debates over the role of the Constitutional Tribunal (which PiS leaders want to weaken) and over the autonomy of the judiciary (which PiS wants to restrict).
- ✘ Western liberal capitalism, based on competitive market economy and close integration with the EU versus “Polish capitalism” and “national economy” with a domestic capital, national entrepreneurship and innovations (confronted with imitation). The Western European modernization path, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs claims, “will be the source of our demise as we shall really a backwater of the German market.” (Waszczykowski 2015b). Jarosław Kaczyński criticizes economic liberalization and privatization as errors, and describes the architect of the Polish liberal transformation, Leszek Balcerowicz, as a “vermin”.
- ✘ Close alliance with Germany (within the Weimar Triangle) versus regional alliances with the southern neighbors (Intermarium), as well as “strategic” alliances with EU-skeptic Britain and illiberal Hungary of Victor Orbán.
- ✘ The illiberal national-catholic counter-vision articulated by Jarosław Kaczyński and the PiS leadership combines social conservatism, EU-skepticism, ethno-nationalism and ethno-religious identity – all critical of, and opposed to, the old elite consensus. The election campaign helped in articulating the “alternative” vision as an action plan not only for an illiberal turn, but also for new “rules of political engagement”, and a renewed political elite to be formed through purging the liberal PO “clique”.

The election victory, in turn, opened the way for the implementation of this radical action plan.

### **Winners take it all: the illiberal turn and the elite replacement**

Five elements of this plan – and the key aspects of the illiberal

turn – are particularly important:

- ✘ Disabling of the Constitutional Tribunal (CT) in order to remove legal-constitutional constraints of executive power. This triggered a conflict with the legal establishment in Poland, the EU and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission;
- ✘ formation of a new highly centralized and semi-formal leadership and power structure with a single decisional center (party chairman);
- ✘ “elite replacement” conducted in all state-controlled sectors in a form of party patronage (appointments of PiS loyalists);
- ✘ political supervision, as well as muzzling, of the public media;
- ✘ systematic (“dignifying”) re-interpretation of Polish history combined with promotion of conspiratorial vision of the post-communist transformation portrayed as a corrupt deal, and the “Smoleńsk conspiracy”.

The elections were won by a small plurality of votes (38 per cent) with equally small (51 per cent) turnout. The electoral rules, however, transformed this small plurality into an outright majority of seats in the Lower House, but, importantly, not a “constitutional majority” (i.e. the control of 2/3 of seats in the Lower House) that would allow PiS to change the constitution. The winners seem to have ignored this fact and tried to alter both the constitution and the Tribunal's composition and functioning. Moreover, they refused to swear three legally appointed judges and to publish the Tribunal's judgments. These actions paralyzed the Tribunal in its key role as the safeguard of rule of law, thus triggering strong criticisms at home and worldwide. The “rule of law” has been defined as “binding the highest political authorities, including the top leaders, by legal-constitutional constraints” (Fukuyama 2014, 26). The conflict deepened when the new political leadership extended state/governmental control over the senior judicial appointments thus undermining the autonomy of the judiciary. The war with the Tribunal and the senior judiciary attracts criticism not only from the European Commission, the Council of Europe's Venice Commission and the most important allies, including Germany and the US. It also provokes mass protests now coordinated by the popular Committee for the Defense of Democracy (known under the acronym KOD). The Constitutional Tribunal was accused of “prolonging the rule of the former [PO-dominated] system”, which Jarosław Kaczyński describes as a [foreign] “quasi-occupation” (Kaczyński 2016).

The second controversy has emerged around the issues of transparency of power and responsibilities of political leadership. While political authority and responsibility formally rests in the

hands of the president, the PM, and the key ministers, the actual governmental power in post-2015 Poland concentrates in the hands of the party leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, who is merely the chair (Prezes) of the ruling PiS and an ordinary MP. This defies formal rules and creates an informal hyper-concentrated authority structure with a Leader unconstrained by responsibilities of office. Such a power configuration also results in what Savoie (2007) calls a “court government” led by a Leader ruling “from behind the stage” through informal influences. It lacks transparency and facilitates arbitrary ruling – something that is highly problematic in a modern Rechtsstaat. Needless to say, Jarosław Kaczyński and the PiS elite deny any impropriety and informality.

The constitutional crisis coincides with massive elite “replacements” (in fact, political purges) in all state-controlled areas: at the apex of the state bureaucracy (civil service), in the public media, diplomacy, at the top judiciary (judges and prosecutors), in the military and security forces, across the state-controlled education system, and in the major government-controlled corporations. Ironically, these “replacements” are justified as “anti-nepotistic” correctives removing the loyalists of old regime (PO), as well as injections of a “new blood.” In fact, they bear clear hallmarks of partisan patronage and “neo-patrimonialism”, because the meritocratic criteria of key appointments are either removed or bypassed.

These measures accompany the fourth and fifth aspects of political change – a sudden imposition of political supervision on all public media (renamed “national media”) combined with heavy-handed attempts to re-interpret recent Polish history, so it fits the partisan – nationalistic and conspiratorial – interpretation of historical developments promoted by the PiS leadership. The public media have been placed under a close supervision exercised by a PiS politician, purged of critics, and forced to adopt the pro-government angle in reporting – a move triggering criticism from the EU and the Council of Europe.

According to new officially promoted interpretation of recent history, the Roundtable agreements of 1989, and the entire post-communist transformation, were secretly controlled and engineered by “ex-communists and liberals”. In this new narrative, the Solidarity leaders, including Lech Walesa and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, were communist stooges, and the process of transformation had masked the continuation of communist domination and privilege (until 2015). The victims of the Smoleńsk plane crash have been treated as war victims and their names are added to the lists of heroes of wars and political persecutions. Needless to add, the real heroes of the transformation – in this new interpretation – had been the

Kaczyński brothers and their closest allies who constructed the “Fourth Republic”. Predictably, this coincides with coordinated attack on Lech Wałęsa. The symbol of the Solidarity movement is accused of being the communist security agent.

Such measures, as one could guess, deepen further the intra-elite rift, exclude some important segments of elites from decision-making, and divide the entire nation. Like Hungary, Poland turns into a divided nation ruled by a divided elite.

## **The consequences**

The illiberal turn in policies, elite purges, and “history wars” in Poland bear some hallmark of a national-conservative revolution understood as a sudden, wide and deep elite replacement. The scope of this revolutionary replacement is still unclear. It is also too early to judge whether the intra-elite rift constitutes a mere political-ideological polarization, or a more serious division which leads to exclusion. If it is just a polarization, its consequences will be limited and temporary. If, by contrast, political elite splits, abandons the established normative consensus, and if the winning segment of the elite excludes the rivals (labelling them as “enemies”), Polish politics faces growing instability and authoritarian rule.

There are some signs that the rift is bridgeable. For example, the new PiS leadership denies infringements of the constitution, stresses its democratic (though not liberal) commitments, defends its democratic credentials, and tolerates critical opposition. The new leaders also declare their continuous support for market capitalism (though now labeled “national”), stress their supports for the EU and NATO (though with qualifications), attempt to maintain good relations with Germany (without much success), and portray themselves as staunch defenders of “Western values” (though by adding a qualifying adjective “Christian” and stressing the “national” interpretation of these values). For all these reasons, the label “illiberal turn” seems more appropriate than “revolution” or “coup”.

The turn is sudden and sharp, nevertheless. It includes – to remind – not just a change in the political strategies and orientations, authority structure and foreign relations, but also a deep and extensive elite replacement, as well as a sudden change in the pattern of Poland’s international alliances and a re-interpretation of recent history. Such turns, as the example of Hungary demonstrates, have some serious consequences, even if they do not amount to a total breakdown of ruling consensus and a revolutionary elite purge-cum-replacement. Thus while the proverbial jury is still out on the issue of the emerging Polish elite configuration, one can list the

likely political consequences based on comparisons with an earlier case of elite split provoked by Viktor Orbán in Hungary. For the sake of brevity, these consequences are listed in dot-points each with a short commentary:

- ✘ **Increasingly divided/fragmented elites and society.** The ideological-political divisions are passed from elites to mass population. The rift is not only wide, but also “toxic” and “sectarian” in its nature – which points to its divisive potential. The accompanied elite purges herald “political decay” (Fukuyama 2014).
- ✘ **Arbitrary rule and political uncertainties.** The informalities in power arrangements combined with the loosening legal/judicial constraints, encourage arbitrariness of ruling. The Leader-centered “court governments” are freed not just from legal constraints, but also from political competition and democratic accountability. This reduces predictability and increases uncertainty. Moreover, the illiberal turn damages Poland’s reputation for stability and prudence, reduces the country’s risk ratings, and discourages foreign investment.
- ✘ **Wavering Western democracy.** The illiberal turn raises serious concerns about the commitment of the new ruling camp to Western values and political standards, including commitments to liberal democracy and respect for rule of law. Doubts about Poland’s democratic credentials diminish the country’s reputation. Poland’s overall scores in “the democratic index” of The Economist have been declining fast (from 7.47 in 2014 to 7.09 in 2015). It results in Poland dropping in the overall ranking of democracy to 48<sup>th</sup> position – the lowest position held in the last decade (The Economist 2016).
- ✘ **Political marginalization within the EU.** By embracing EU-skepticism and EU-pessimism, the new Polish leaders remove themselves from the formerly central position as a key player within the EU “core”. This not only reduces Poland’s influence within the EU, but also endangers the access to future EU funds.
- ✘ **Uncertain Eastern Partnership.** Poland’s security depends on solidarity, as well as unity within the EU and NATO. The illiberal turn endangers this unity and solidarity. Poland’s embrace of nationalism – and the new government’s criticism of the EU – put the Eastern Partnership under threat as to its future.
- ✘ **Crumbling V4.** The new Polish leaders give some contradictory signals to the V4 partners. On the one hand, the alliance is formally affirmed and supported. On the other hand, Poland’s new leaders declare an intention to transform V4 into an

EU-contesting (and anti-German) regional pressure group. Moreover, they suggest that V4 should gradually evolve into a wider Intermores Alliance (Miedzymorze). These visions scare and antagonize all Poland's neighbors (Bult 2016).

## Conclusions

The weakening of the ruling consensus combined with a deepening rift culminated in a sudden illiberal turn in Poland. It involves political and ideological re-orientation and a profound large-scale elite replacement. These amount to a crisis – a turning point, a time of intensifying difficulties and dangers. Poland is not unique in experiencing such a crisis. All four Visegrad countries, as argued in this book, suffer from strong political turbulences reflecting the broader European woes, as well as the country-specific conflicts. As a result, the V4 countries seem to be parting their ways. Poland and Hungary take a sharp illiberal turn, and this turn heralds the end of the joint liberal path of transformation, marginalizes both countries within the EU, undermines the relations with the remaining Visegrad partners, and. It is too early to judge whether this turn is temporary, reflecting some specific proclivities of the current leaders and elites, or more permanent change, reflecting the new global trends and tendencies.

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# Chapter 4

## Slovakia's Elite: Between Populism and Compliance with EU Elites

**B**efore we deal with specific aspects of the Slovakian elite in the time of the current European crises, let us outline a more general context for our analysis. In mid-2013 the V4 countries avoided the worst ravages of the economic crisis. As noted earlier (Frič et al. 2014), “many worried that entrance of the Visegrad countries into the EU would overstretch the EU financial resources and steering capacities. But during the European crisis that began in 2009, challenges to the EU came more from its southern members than from the eastern ones”. This robust performance of the European “new democracies” in the face of the transatlantic crisis, though, masked the widening differences in elite and mass configurations between the West and CEE. Those differences were revealed more recently, at the time of the migration/refugee crises, and were labelled vaguely as the “East– West divide” within the EU. The nature of this divide, as revealed by political developments in Slovakia, is the main subject of this chapter, while the consequences of the divide are discussed briefly in the concluding section.

According to most political observers, especially those embracing the institutional perspective, the democratic transition of the countries in the CEE region has been accomplished successfully. Twenty years after the fall of communism, the four leading countries of the region – Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia – have developed what appeared to be vibrant market economies and consolidated liberal democracy. However, some doubts about this conclusion started to appear in mid-2010 when Hungary, and five years later Poland, took a sharp “illiberal turn”. Suddenly, studies of democratic consolidation are replaced by much less sanguine analyses of “democratic deficit”, “decline of democracy” or even “illiberal consolidation” in the East Central Europe. (Krastev 2007, Dawson and Hanley 2016, Herman 2016, Eneydi 2016 )

The lesson we might learn from this sudden and unexpected turn is that democratic institutions seldom consolidate permanently. Rather, they remain fragile and vulnerable to reshaping by the key political actors – political leaders and elites. While formal democratic

### **Soňa Szomolányi**

Professor at the Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava. She writes on democratization, post-communism, and political elites.

### **Zsolt Gál**

Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Comenius University in Bratislava. He writes on economic policy, public finances, European integration, and migration.

institutions were established in all four V4 countries, and high level of political competition has been sufficient to fulfil political criteria for the EU membership, they prove unable to prevent the recent erosion of democracy.

This erosion provokes a critical re-appraisal of some analyses. The rational-institutional approach seems to overestimate the protective inasmuch as consolidating impact of well-designed institutions. And at the same time, the approach underestimates normative commitments of political elites to sustaining liberal democracy, and gives a distorted perception of the dynamics of public views and party programs. A corrective view proposed here is more actor-centred (elite-centred) and more realistic. It portrays the existing liberal democratic institutions in the region as insufficiently entrenched and embedded, thus easily subverted by determined political leaders and elite groups. Mass voters, subjected to populist demagogic rhetoric, do not protest against such subversions, and may support the populist leaders-actors in undertaking “illiberal turns” – as demonstrated by the examples of Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary and Kaczynski’s PiS in Poland. This prompts us to critically revise the institutional theories of democratic consolidation and take a critical look at elite conditions of liberal democratisation (based on rule of law and respect for constitutional regulations): the depth of commitment of the party elites to liberal-democratic norms, and the role of party strategies of citizen mobilization for sustaining liberal democratic practices (Herman 2016).

These conditions seem to be missing – or at least insufficiently developed – in V4 countries and in CEE in general. We observe there a wide variation in the strength of liberal-democratic commitments among political leaders, and a frequent use of illiberal strategies of mobilization. Populist-nationalist demagoguery has been employed by the mainstream party elites in all recent national elections. It is therefore possible to argue that the current national political elites are determined to shape popular attitudes – and win popular votes – by almost any means. They mobilize fear and hope, as well as sentiments formed by *longue durée*, the entrenched legacies of authoritarianism in the region (see Eckiert and Ziblatt 2013). The Braudel’s concept of *longue durée* is useful in this context, because the roots of the West–East divide lie in the deeper past, including the pre-communist and pre-WWII one.

This chapter focuses on political development and political elites in Slovakia. It argues that there is a gap between the populist-nationalist, anti-immigration and pro-Russian rhetoric of the ruling Slovak elite, and the actual elite conduct and policies, with the latter largely compatible with democratic standards and EU policies. We attempt

to answer the following questions: How much unity/divergence exists within Slovak political elite over the issues of migration and security crises? How consistent are elite pronouncements and actions on these issues? How much correspondence exists between the stance of the political elite and the attitudes of the Slovakian citizens?

### **Anti-immigration mobilization and its results**

The impact of the populist mobilization strategy of the governing party elite is well documented in the campaign and reflected in the results of the national election in March 2016. Support for the PM Robert Fico's ruling party, Smer-SD, stalled in 2014-15. But since the refugee crisis erupted, support for Fico, his ruling coalition, and, paradoxically, also for his right-wing critics has been rising, especially after a conscious deployment by party leaders of anti-refugee rhetoric. Fico has been repeatedly emphasizing the dangers posed by refugees. His party's campaign slogan was "We Protect Slovakia" – a slogan containing an implicit criticism of the accommodative position towards immigrants and refugees adopted by Germany and the EU. The PM began to make international headlines with statements such as "we do not have mosques in Slovakia, so they cannot integrate" or "there will be no Muslim community in Slovakia" (Dubéci 2016). That tough position secured Fico and his ruling coalition of Smer-SD a strong electoral support, which, however, did not last long. When no refugees appeared at Slovakia's doors, the salience of the issue declined, and other unresolved social problems entered political agendas, especially on the home stretch of the 2016 election campaign. Strikes by teachers and walkouts by nurses were widely publicised by the media, and they helped to shift the focus of the campaign to issues where the incumbent Smer-SD performs poorly, namely, the low quality of both health service and education. These were also the areas where the government had not been sufficiently responsive to its voters.

The health and education issues have not dominated the agenda of public concerns, though. Publicity given to the issues of security threats and refugees has brought them to the fore and has created an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty. It has also fostered radicalization of public opinion and has ultimately strengthened Slovakia's extreme right, especially the People's Party of Our Slovakia, led by a populist right-wing extremist, Marian Kotleba. Kotleba has been raising public fears by identifying Middle Eastern refugees with Islamist terrorists – a strategy adopted by all populist demagogues in Europe.

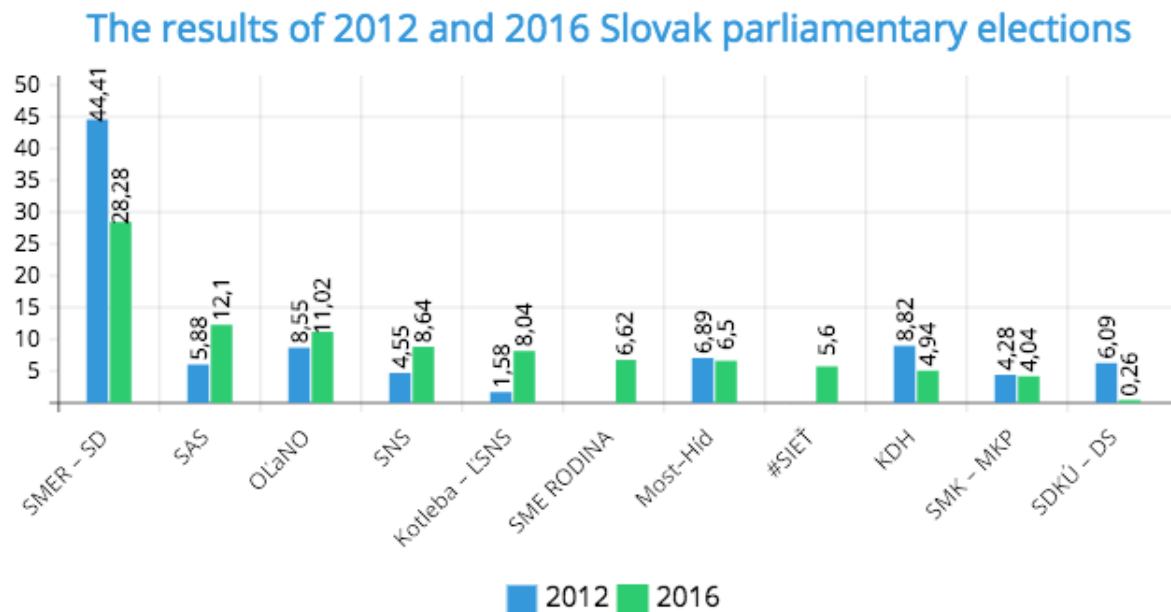
Very few political actors resisted the ruling Smer-SD rhetoric exploiting the fear of Muslim immigrants. This explains why Fico's legal challenge to the EU attempt at allocating refugee quotas to individual countries appeared initially very popular in the country and abroad. Opposition party's leaders were wary of challenging Fico's anti-migrant rhetoric as a large majority (89 percent) of Slovaks opposed the EU quotas. The rival party leaders did not risk opposing Fico as they feared losing support. Even the leaders of the libertarian Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) party abstained from criticism. The nationalist Slovak National Party (SNS), a populist group "We are Family - Boris Kolar" and far-right People's Party Our Slovakia (ĽS-NS) also took a radical populist stance on this issue by criticising Muslim religion and culture.

After the elections, when the SNS became a governing party, its leaders have abandoned the issue of immigration and refugees. The former opposition parties (KDH, Most-Híd, SDKÚ), have united (with reservations) against the quotas, but disagreed with the Fico's legal challenge to the EU. Their line of argumentation was based on the assumption that the challenge may damage the reputation of Slovakia as a loyal EU member, and they accuse the government was leading the country towards isolation in Europe. The moderate position on the issue was formulated by leaders of Most-Híd, a Hungarian civic minority party with strong representation of Slovak politicians. Its leaders advocated a common European policy on immigrants and refugees, and they openly rejected the populist discourse based on xenophobia and fear of terrorist acts. A similar position was held by the non-partisan President Andrej Kiska, who spoke repeatedly in favour of a more constructive approach to refugees and migrants.

The consequence of the populist election campaign was that People's Party, Our Slovakia (ĽS-NS) of Marian Kotleba, whose leaders and supporters admire Father Tiso's wartime Slovak pro-Nazi state, embrace anti-Semitism and racism, and imitate fascist symbols and uniforms, gained 8 per cent of the popular vote. For the first time since the war, the extreme right party has entered the Slovak parliament. All other parties, concerned about the disastrous image this development created for Slovakia, have agreed to isolate the newcomers in the parliament. Kotleba has become a vocal critic of refugees, though exit polls have indicated that Kotleba's supporters are most concerned with social inequality and corruption, and not refugees. The People's party appeals to the voters by presenting an anti-establishment profile, which promises to cope with all "problems": social injustice, corruption, and "disorderly" Roma people. In contrast to the slogan "People deserve social security" that

dominated the Smer-SD campaign in the 2012 election, the rising number of voters in 2016, frustrated by unfulfilled promises, turned to the extreme party ĽS-NS, as well as to nationalist “We are Family”. As a result, two radical populist parties replaced the traditional pro-reform democratic parties: the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and the Slovak Democratic and Christian Union (SDKÚ), neither of which made it to parliament.

Figure 1.



Source: Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2016: Štatistiky: Volby a referendá: Parlamentné voľby.

The lesson of Slovakia’s election is quite clear. When the mainstream governing elites employ mobilizing rhetoric imitating radical parties, they are not going to attract votes of the radical parties. Instead, they risk losing votes to the radical parties with which they compete. However, the electoral success of radical parties has paradoxically prevented one party rule, as was the case in Hungary and Poland. The winner of the elections (Smer-SD) had to form a coalition with other three minor parties – a development that may have prevented an illiberal turn in Slovakia.

### **Double-faced Fico or the so-called “balanced politics”**

In order to maintain their power and popular support, Smer-SD party and its leader, Robert Fico, have been floating between compliance with the EU rules and responsiveness to fearful and unhappy Slovak voters. Quite often, though, this balancing act fails. The best example is the security crisis triggered by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and her military involvement in the Donbas secession. The Western institutions (EU, NATO) responded to it by

imposing sanctions on Russia and supporting Ukrainian reforms. However, the Slovak public, especially the Smer-SD's electorate, is largely pro-Russian and anti-West, the western responses trigger Janus-faced reactions of the Fico-led Slovak government. On one hand, Fico has repeatedly criticised the sanctions, questioned the very existence of the security threat from Russia, and rejected the increases in military spending – and this was the message for domestic consumption. On the other hand, Slovakia has never voted against the sanctions, has consistently supported the EU's association agreement with Ukraine (the Eastern Partnership), and continues aiding Ukraine with ensuring the “reverse flow” of natural gas to Ukraine through Slovak territory. This responsible behaviour, clearly at odds with the domestic political rhetoric, goes hand in hand with cautious communication to Western partners that Slovakia maintains a moderate, EU-consensual and pro-Western stand. This doublespeak is the best illustration of Fico's two-faced balancing act.

In May 2016, Fico gave a long interview for the state news agency (TASR). Some of his statements are worth quoting extensively (Aktuality.sk 2016):

- ✘ “There is No Room for Islam in Slovakia...”. He repeated his previous statement that he doesn't wish to see the emergence of a “unified Islamic community” in Slovakia and added: “I don't want a few tens of thousands of Muslims in Slovakia gradually promoting their own agenda.” He also confirmed that Slovakia under his leadership will maintain its strong opposition to the refugee relocation quotas.
- ✘ Fico questioned once again the very existence of the security threat from Russia and the need for higher investments to defence. “I think it is a sovereign opinion to tell that for God's sake, against whom we are going to arm ourselves? What we are talking about? Who is threatening us?”
- ✘ He portrayed the NGOs, the media and some foreign powers (notably the United States – although not naming it directly) as the main critics of his party and government.

## **Reactions to the security crisis**

The clearest evidence of a disparity between the compliant pro-Western politics (as a responsible EU and NATO member) and the pro-Russian rhetoric for domestic consumption (where Fico often criticises the EU Eastern Partnership) can be found in the Slovakian PM's reactions to the Russian-Ukrainian security crisis (Duleba 2015). During the security crisis:

- ✘ the Slovak government has approved all measures adopted by the EU and NATO, including the economic sanctions on Russia for its aggression against Ukraine and never contested officially the prolongation of the sanctions in the European Council;
- ✘ Slovakia ensured a “reverse flow” of natural gas to Ukraine upgrading the previously unused Vojany-Uzhhorod pipeline. This enabled Ukraine to secure a sufficient amount of natural gas at a much better price than that offered by the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom;
- ✘ one of the main achievements of Slovakia’s Visegrad Group presidency (July 2014 – June 2015) was an agreement reached on coordination of the Group’s assistance to Ukraine. It helped Ukraine implementing the Association Agreement with the EU (which was always supported by Slovak governments). Slovakia took a leading role in the implementation of the energy security policies and security sector reform.

These actions stand in stark contrast with statements for the domestic consumption. In these statements Fico interprets the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as Russia’s internal affair (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov 2015: 148-149):

- ✘ by using “soft” characterisations of Russian policy (e.g., he has never talked about “aggression” or “occupation”, and he usually describes Russia’s annexation of Crimea as a “violation of principles of international law”),
- ✘ by disputing the scope and nature of Russia’s direct political and military involvement in Ukraine,
- ✘ by insisting that Slovakia should not in any way participate in economic sanctions, and
- ✘ by speaking more critically about Ukraine than about Russia.

It is also important to note that Fico’s pro-Russian statements are frequent, and that they reverberate strongly in the Slovak society (Duleba 2015). Robert Fico already took on pro-Russian stances in conflict with Slovakia’s official line during the Russian-Georgian War (2008), the Russian-Ukrainian gas dispute (2008–2009), and the planned deployment of a US missile defence system in Europe (2007–2008) (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov 2015: 148; Duleba 2015: 167). In his pro-Russian rhetoric the PM has been very much responsive to his electorate’s mind-set.

## **Doublespeak and the European issues**

The doublespeak is also frequently present in Fico's statements on immigrants and refugees. After the March 2016 elections the Islamophobic and populist language almost entirely disappeared from the party leaders' rhetoric. As Slovakia took over the Presidency of the EU on 1 July 2016, Fico changed his language. When presenting the priorities of the Slovak Presidency at the European Parliament's sitting in Strasbourg (July 6 2016), he showed a totally different face from the one he manifested during the election campaign. Suddenly the MEPs saw a responsible statesman ready to engage in a constructive debate. He claimed that leaders of the member states have to respond to the loss of confidence in the EU by European citizens. Otherwise, he warned, Europe risked a rise of populism. It is necessary to overcome the fear exhibited by political leaders and by the people. Such fears triggered separatist forces, contributed to fragmentation, and undermined the EU's institutional bases, as well as Europe's values and ideals, Fico added. "People demand a new kind of trust," he said. "The EU cannot only focus on crisis management." He also suggested that during the informal summit of 27 leaders in Bratislava, which was scheduled for 16 September, the leaders would have to discuss the long-term vision for the EU. He warned against a "business-as-usual" attitude coming out of the summit, as it would only prove the Eurosceptics right (Zalan 2016).

Yet Fico himself regularly employs populist rhetoric and props up far-right political forces in the Slovak parliament at the expense of his and other "standard (that is, mainstream) parties." A kind interpretation of the "double-faced attitude" of Fico is that he learns a lesson from his own experience. A less kind – but perhaps more realistic – one assumes he engages in an opportunistic doublespeak typical of Slovakia's "balanced politics".

Attempts to show Slovakia's humanitarian concerns have been illustrated by the Foreign Minister, Miroslav Lajčák, who has also been an official candidate put forward by Slovakia for the post of the UN Secretary General. In his vision statement, Lajčák "urgently calls for comprehensive joint approach in ensuring humane treatment, above all safety, dignity and respect of human rights of all refugees and migrants" (MFEA 2016: 4). While Fico makes clearly Islamophobic statements, Lajčák condemns (in the UN headquarters in New York) Islamophobia as unacceptable discrimination forbidden under the UN Charter (Krčmárik 2016). The official manifesto of the third Fico government promises a "predictable, credible and transparent foreign policy in line with Slovakia's membership of the European Union and NATO". It

stresses that “[T]he national and state interest of the country is to ensure clear continuity of Slovakia’s pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation based on a broad political consensus... The Government sees the EU member states and NATO allies as the closest partners of Slovakia” (Úrad vlády 2016: 4). Russian policy (not named explicitly but easy to identify) is portrayed here as one of the most acute external challenges.

The Slovak Republic considers the following external challenges as most acute: a belt of persisting instabilities along the EU border, armed conflicts in the EU neighbourhood that are giving rise to mass migration and international terrorism, violation of/departure from the basic standards of international law and the principles of the post-war European architecture, traditional and new hybrid forms of threats, as well as efforts to weaken the national and state identity of countries. (Úrad vlády 2016: 4)

These statements are not only clearly at odds with Fico’s electoral rhetoric, but they also exemplify his doublespeak.

### It's all about responsiveness to voters

Pro-Russian statements, as well as rhetorical attacks on immigrants, refugees and Muslims are very much in line with the sentiments of the general public opinion in Slovakia, especially with the mindset of the majority of Smer-SD voters. Comparisons with other V4 countries show (Figure 2) that Slovakia is the only country in the region where the public trusts Russians more than they do Americans. This finding is confirmed by most opinion polls (Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov 2015: 156-157).

Figure 2.



Source: Gyárfášová and Mesežnikov 2016: 20-21.

Another poll, commissioned by the Central European Policy Institute (CEPI) in February 2016, also shows what could be labelled a “civilizational confusion” among the Slovak population. More than half of respondents states that rather than being part of the West or the East, Slovakia should stand somewhere in-between (Mikušovič 2016, Šuplata 2016). Older age groups and supporters of extreme right (ĽS-NS), nationalist (SNS) and Smer-SD party oppose pro-Western orientations and are critical of NATO and the EU (Figures 3 and 4). Although the outright support for Russia is quite low, even within these groups, and although a hard-core opposition against the EU and NATO is also weak (generally 13.8 per cent and 20 per cent respectively), the societal popularity of the idea of “standing between the West and the East” is quite alarming. Moreover, there is no viable political position between the West and the East. There is no real geopolitical alternative to taking sides, no feasible political and economic system between the West’s liberal democracy and open market economy on one hand, and Putin’s autocracy and state capitalism on the other. In this sense, locating oneself “between” is a complete nonsense. But this is a position majority of Slovaks aspire to assume, and which Fico panders to.

The hesitant identity is a sign of Slovaks being weakly embedded in Western values and institutions. It poses a serious security risk and offers a fertile soil for Kremlin’s anti-Western propaganda. Such propaganda is gaining ground in Slovakia and elsewhere, spread mainly through the so-called alternative media

Figure 3.

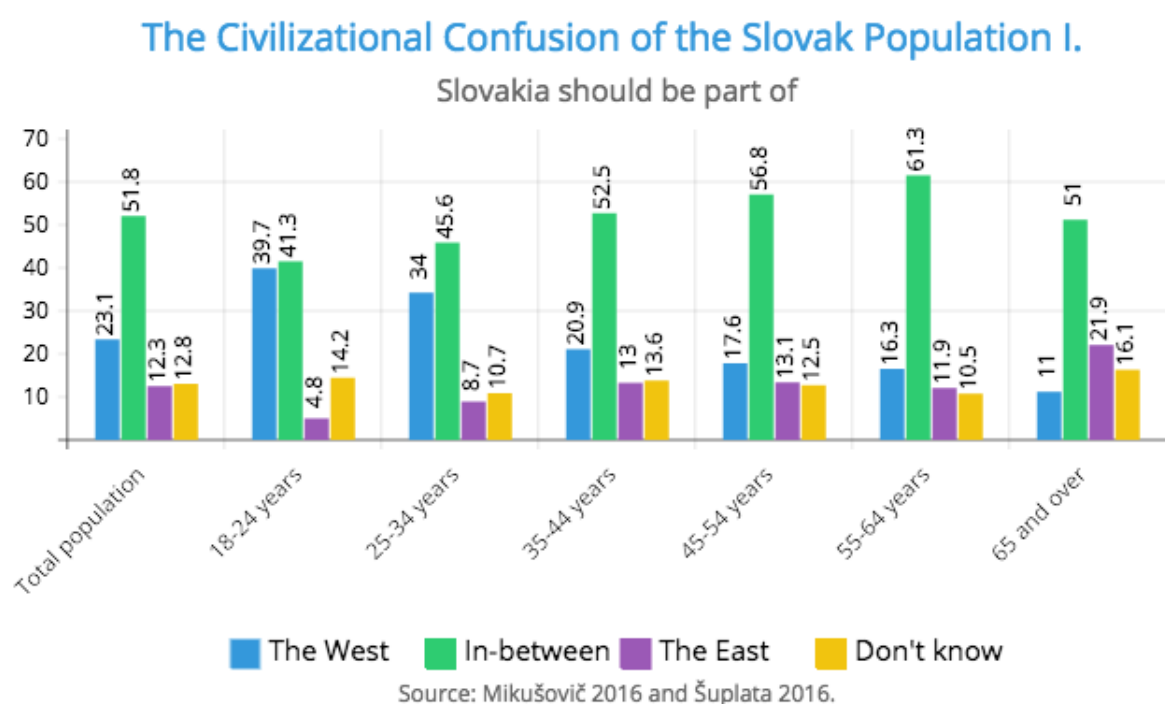
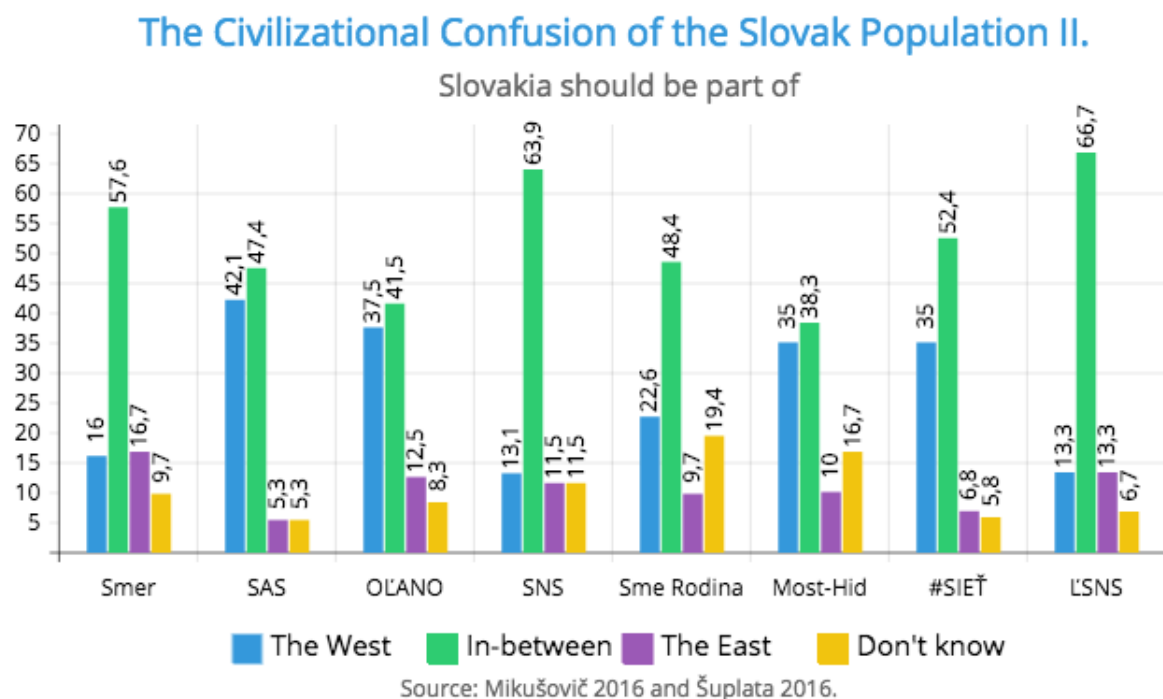


Figure 4.

outlets and social networks.



Two preliminary stipulations are necessary here. First, one cannot attribute a confused state of the Slovak public opinion solely to elite demagoguery, especially to Fico's doublespeak. However, it is possible to argue that Fico's campaign rhetoric critically reinforces the popular geopolitical identification and feeds into anti-Americanism in Slovakia. Second, it remains an open question as to what extent Fico's doublespeak is sincere, rather than opportunistic and calculative. Some believe that it actually reflects his genuine (though inconsistent) beliefs.

The inconsistency between the "internal" and "external" positions is even starker on the thorny issue of acceptance of immigrants in the Slovak society. While Fico oscillates between the acceptance and opposition to immigration/refugee intake, most Slovaks oppose the "quota allocation" of refugees by the EU Commission. This opposition is the strongest in relation to Muslim refugees. According to various polls, 70 to 89 per cent of Slovak respondents reject the quota relocation mechanism and over 63 per cent are of the opinion that refugees represent a security threat to Slovak citizens (Cunningham 2016 and Aktuality.sk 2015). Large majority of Slovaks also refuse to accept that the intra EU-migration is beneficial for their country, and that their economy needs migrant labour in "certain sectors" (European Parliament 2015). Only 19 per cent of Slovak respondents agreed with the statement that "(our country) needs legal migrants to work in certain sectors of the economy". Such a low score makes Slovakia rank last within the

EU (the average for EU-28 was 51 per cent).

Here we encounter a seemingly paradoxical situation: Slovaks' strong opposition to all forms of immigration and refugee intake runs parallel to a very low degree of actual immigration. Slovakia has not experienced mass immigration and the share of migrants in the total population is one of the lowest among the EU member states (Dubéci 2016). Needless to add, Slovakia has not experienced any migrant- or refugee-perpetrated violence, save for petty criminality. In spite of that, the PM Fico has claimed that "[T]he only way to eliminate risks [of terrorism], like those occurring in Paris and Germany, is to prevent the creation of a concentrated Muslim community in Slovakia." He has been reassuring the Slovak people that his government monitors "every single Muslim" in the country and that "Slovak citizens' security is of higher priority than the rights of migrants" (quoted after Cunningham 2016). He has also visited with the Interior Minister the Macedonian-Greek border hundreds of kilometre away from the country. Dramatic pictures taken during this visit have been publicised in Slovakia thus contributing to the fear of refugees.

### **The unique role of president Kiska**

One can speak of an "anti-refugee consensus" among the leaders and mass publics among all Visegrad societies. Those political leaders who oppose mass immigration and refugee allocation can claim that they speak on behalf of majority of their citizens. They can also argue that Angela Merkel made her decision about pursuing the "welcome policy" without any consultation with other partners in the EU, and that other Western member states are also opposed to the mandatory reallocation of refugees. There is some congruence between the stance of the political leaders and the attitudes of the citizens on the issues of migration and security. But the strength of this congruence is difficult to gauge. One may ask whether the "West-East divide" is present mostly on the level of the governing elites, or within the mass dimension as well. One can also ask whether Fico is alone in capitalising on this consensus.

In the eyes of many Slovaks Fico is right to say that "[T]here are policies of the EU that need to be labelled as failed ones" and "[T]he vast majority of EU citizens fully disagree with the current state of migration policies in the EU" (Baczyńska 2016). However, the Slovak people also exhibit support for a more nuanced position articulated by Slovak President, Andrej Kiska. He had been directly elected with large majority (almost 60 per cent) and maintains high levels of popularity, despite the fact that his views are incompatible

with the popular anti-refugee consensus.

Kiska takes a pro-Western stance on most of the key issues. At the Warsaw NATO Summit, for example, he labelled Russia's propaganda a real security threat for the region and particularly for Slovakia. According to Kiska, neither Europe nor Slovakia can efficiently counter it, and it is necessary to address this threat in a systematic manner. The President has also recalled the NATO summit and the consensus about the strengthening of security, peace and mutual assurances among the Alliance members. He has pointed to the presence of several thousands of Russian soldiers near the Baltic states' borders and the widespread fear of Russia there. "Our greatest support to our Allies in that respect is the fulfilment of our commitments." When recently PM Fico again claimed that Slovakia is threatened by terrorist attacks, the President immediately and publicly dismissed these claims as not justified (Kiska 2016).

It is fair to say that Kiska is a unique politician. The current Slovakian head of state is the only leader among the top politicians of the country who takes a pro-Western position, adopts a humanitarian stance on refugees and immigrants, and openly questions the majoritarian views manifested by the public opinion on those issues. Interestingly, this position is respected (perhaps just tolerated) by other political leaders and the Slovak public.

### **How likely is the illiberal turn in Slovakia?**

Recently, the countries of the Visegrad region are experiencing an anti-liberal backlash, in many ways similar to illiberal populism spreading across the EU. The common concerns underlying this backlash bear relevance to the refugee allocation quotas. It fuels anti-liberal mobilisations in Hungary and Poland, and forms an ideological support for the illiberal turns (see Chapters 2 and 3). Until now, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have been resisting such turns, though far-right parties and populist politicians fare well both in the Slovak and Czech elections. Undoubtedly the strong pragmatism of the Slovak (and Czech) leaders is one of the most important factors responsible for this difference. This pragmatism, both with regard to its sources and forms it manifests itself in, deserve a short comment.

Robert Fico has emerged victorious, but also significantly weakened from the recent electoral contest. He is less ideological, and more pragmatic than Poland's Jarosław Kaczyński or Hungary's Viktor Orbán. Above all, the crucial difference lies in Fico's relations with his party. Smer-SD has suffered a high electoral loss, but (largely due to the fragmented opposition) it can still govern in coalition with

two minor parties. The three-member coalition, though, is politically constrained. It has not achieved the constitutional majority and therefore cannot promote illiberal changes in the Constitution or push such changes through a compliant parliament, as the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland does. This is partly due to the fact that the Slovak Minister of Justice is a nominee of the civic party, Most-Híd, and she is strongly committed to liberal-democratic principles.

The Slovak PM himself portrays the current coalition as a 'historic compromise'. This is a correct portrayal because the Slovak National Party (SNS) and Most-Híd crossed over the ethnic cleavage (Slovak/Hungarian) and ignored the left-right divide to form, together with a new party Siet' (Net), a wide but fragile ruling coalition (Szomolányi, 2015). It is the first case of a government comprised of incumbent and opposition parties in Slovakia. It indicates that divisions within the Slovak national elite diagnosed in the 1990s have narrowed down. Slovakia has avoided an illiberal turn mainly because these divisions are not widening, and because there is no elite group capable of taking over the state and ushering in such illiberal turn.

The major factors that prevent an illiberal turn in Slovakia can be encapsulated in four points:

1. The Slovak elite follows a pragmatic-opportunistic two-faced politics, and there is a directly elected president (who defeated Robert Fico), committed to liberal-democracy.
2. The electoral system (proportional) is conducive to coalition governments that are unlikely to be single-party governments, let alone winning an outright constitutional majority.
3. Slovak Republic is most strongly integrated with the EU in the institutional dimension. There are several independent institutions (National Bank, for instance, given Slovakia's eurozone membership, Budget Responsibility Council and constitutional debt-break law) that would resist attempts at distancing the country from Brussels.
4. The structure of the Slovak economy (export oriented, dependent on the EU single market and EU funds) also inhibits any EU-sceptical illiberal turn.

Though an illiberal turn is unlikely in Slovakia, some risks for liberal democracy are clearly present. Elite fragmentation – as seen in recent elections – indicates the absence of a pro-European political force that could potentially challenge the Smer-SD coalition. The leader of the strongest opposition party, SaS, Richard Sulík, is a euroskeptical libertarian lacking geopolitical literacy. Currently,

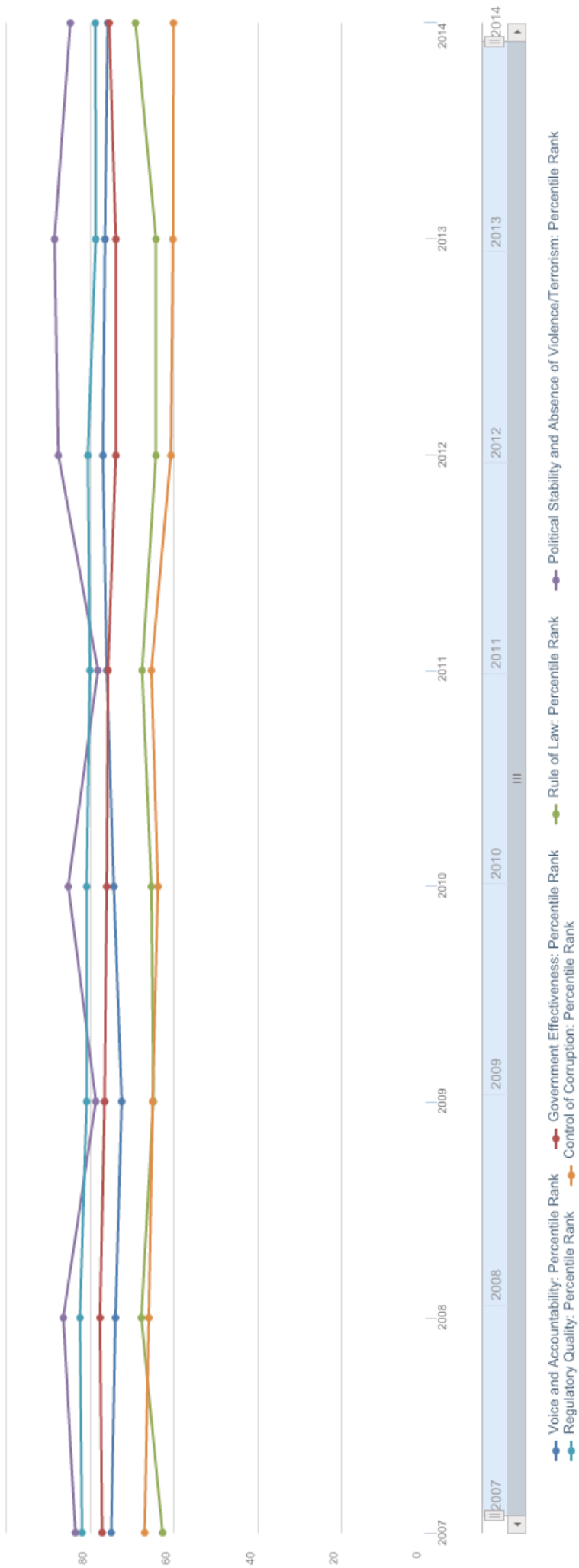
public support for his party has been increasing (SaS ranks second in polls, losing only to the Smer-SD), mainly as a result of publicity given to alleged tax fraud involving Fico and his interior minister.

In Slovakia, it is possible to observe a growing public disenchantment with the configuration that is often referred to as “really existing democracy”, (a reference to the discredited “really existing socialism”). Such a form of democracy is characterised by declining trust in the major political institutions. It may well be rooted in a phenomenon of “captured state” whereby public power is exercised primarily for private gains. In “captured states” the governing elite functions as power brokers between the state and its “captors”, typically some oligarchic-plutocratic groups (e.g., Innes 2013). Such interpretations run contrary to more optimistic expectations of “political development” and democratic consolidation. They are also compatible with our arguments about the limits of the rational-institutional analysis (Szomolanyi and Karvai 2015).

As the captured states facilitate systemic corruption, confidence of voters in state institutions, political elites and parties declines. This, in turn, fosters populism and extremism, both proposing some alluring “easy solutions”. Ultimately, captured states experience a gradual “political decay” (Fukuyama 2014). As the World Bank governance indicators show, Slovakia shows some signs of such decay, though these signs are not nearly as strong as in Hungary and Poland (Figure 5). Slovakia’s performance is particularly bad regarding the dimensions “rule of law” and “control of corruption.” But the strongest risk factor, as argued earlier, is a persistence of elite orientations sceptical of, if not hostile to the pro-Western and pro-liberal consensus.

### **The utilitarian understanding of the EU’s membership**

Slovakia has traditionally belonged to the “EU-friendly” category of countries. In spring 2008, 57 per cent of Slovaks shared positive and approving views of the EU – a full 5 points above the EU27 average. Moreover, more than three-quarters of Slovaks (76 per cent) thought that their country has benefited from being a member of the EU, while in the EU27 only slightly more than half the population (54 per cent) expressed such a sanguine view (European Commission 2008). According to the (standard) Eurobarometer (EB 84) poll, conducted in November 2015, Slovaks saw “the free movement of people, goods and services” as the most valuable aspect of the EU membership. About 75 per cent of Slovak respondents evaluated positively the common currency (well above the average of 49 per cent in the EU), while “peace among the member states”



Country : Slovak Republic  
Source: Worldwide Governance Indicators

Figure 5.

was most appreciated by 41 per cent (TNS 2016). A picture that emerges from the cited data is that of a primary utilitarian approval of the European Union. By contrast, the attempts at “deeper (that is, identity-based, value-ideological and political) integration” with the EU are treated with deep scepticism. Another survey (2015) that focused on what elements make up the European identity showed that only 27 per cent of the Slovaks indicated “the values of democracy and freedom.” as their answer. It is worth stressing that the average for the EU28 was 49 per cent, and that Slovakia took the very last place in this ranking (European Parliament 2015. Part II: 42). This utilitarian form of attachment, observable both at the elite and mass levels, means that Slovakia’s ties to the EU are weak, and that the sense of solidarity with other member states is tenuous, lacking the identity-value dimension.

## **Conclusions**

Our analysis proves that the Slovak ruling elite has been rather selective in its responsiveness to mass voters. The elite endorses and reinforces public sentiments on immigration and security crisis, though it acts pragmatically, avoiding the risk of conflicts with the EU. Despite the populist anti-immigration and pro-Russian rhetoric, in line with the attitudes of the “median voter,” the actual conduct of national leaders seems compatible with the EU policies, except for the refusal to accept the refugee reallocation quota. Paradoxically, this elite pragmatism prevents the dominant party Smer-SD turning illiberal, though the risks of erosion of liberal democracy are clearly present in today’s Slovakia.

## **Appendix: Abbreviations of the relevant political parties in Slovakia**

- ✠ KDĽ – Kresťansko demokratické hnutie – “Christian Democratic Movement”
- ✠ ĽSNS – Ľudová strana Naše Slovensko – “People’s Party– Our Slovakia”
- ✠ Most-Híd – “Bridge”
- ✠ OĽaNO – Obyčajní ľudia a nezávislé osobnosti – “Ordinary People and Independent Personalities”
- ✠ SaS – Sloboda a Solidarita – “Freedom and Solidarity”
- ✠ SDKÚ – Slovenská demokratická a kresťanská únia – “Slovak Democratic and Christian Union”
- ✠ Sme Rodina-Boris Kolár – “We are Family - Boris Kolar”

- ✘ SNS – Slovenská národná strana – “Slovak National Party”
- ✘ Smer – Sociálna demokracia – “Direction-Social Democracy”
- ✘ Sieť – “Net”

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# Chapter 5

## Populism and Czech Military Elite Under the Democratic Radar

### Pavol Frič

is Associate Professor at the Department of Public and Social Policy at Charles University in Prague. His most recent relevant publication „Civil Sector in Jeopardy?“ was published in 2016 by Czech Sociological Publishing House SLON.

**A**t times when people feel their way of life and collective security fall under threat, the importance of the military elite – the so-called top brass of the armed forces – is usually rising. The current security threats, such as terrorism (both ushered by right wing extremism and by those pledging allegiance to Islamic State), refugee crisis, and the “hybrid” war in eastern Ukraine, certainly generate such a sense of increasing importance of the military. The Czech general public feels that people’s daily lives, national sovereignty, democracy and values of our civilisation are threatened. They link these threats to the external missions in which members of the Czech Army are involved, and they see armed conflicts in which the western world is taking part as predominantly conflicts over values, and not over territory. Both the general public and the national elite expect that the Czech military is ready and well-prepared to defend these values. They assume that the military leaders are loyal to democratic values, and that the army has enough resources to defend these values whenever and wherever necessary.

The annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine and the emergence of the Islamic State which exports terrorism to Europe have drastically altered the Czech security environment and intensified concerns about the readiness of the Czech military to counter the new threats. They also raised questions over the Czech territorial defence, the reliability of NATO, and defence coordination with the neighbouring countries. As surveys demonstrate, every second Czech citizen believes that the Czech Republic faces a threat of war, and they react by demonstrating growing support for the military and NATO (CVVM 2016). The majority of Czech citizens oppose reductions in the army budget (Focus 2013: 28). In fact, there are pressures (mainly external) to increase this budget and boost defense spending. Yet, the standing of the Czech military is poor, the bargaining position of the military elite is weak, and the share of army budget on GDP remains far below that recommended by NATO and among the smallest in Europe (1.4 per cent in 2016 -

Marrone et al. 2016).

How would it therefore be possible that at a time of rising defence and security concerns the army and the military elite remained at a periphery of politics? To explain this paradoxical situation, we have to look at the recent political developments, both within the Czech military and in the political elite as a whole. In short, this paper argues that the Czech political elite is weakened by populism (presidential, party and military ones) and poorly integrated, with the military segment of the elite suffering from political marginalisation.

## **Populism**

The Czech political debates over the last 25 years were dominated by economic issues: economic reforms, GDP growth, and financial crises. Recently, the situation has evolved and the dominant problems tackled by political elites are those related to the very nature of politics: the impact of the EU crises on Czech domestic politics, the erosion of parliamentary democracy, and the sudden appearance of populist leaders on the national political scene.

It is widely known that populism frequently appears parallel to situations of economic crisis, and that populist leaders manipulate fear and hope, use deception, and offer simplistic answers for complex political questions. Populists are also anti-elitist and anti-establishment in their public attitudes. They contrast the exclusive and corrupt “elite” with the “forgotten”, “ignored” and “politically abandoned” “common people”, whom they claim to represent. Therefore populism is defined as a superficial “thin-centred ideology” which co-exists with a more elaborate ideology (Mudde 2004). It also shows a chameleon-like character: “it can be left wing as well as right wing, and it can be organized in both top-down and bottom-up fashion” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2011: 7). All versions of populism, though, pitch criticised “elites” against the glorified “people”. Populism denies the principle that elites and citizens can form communities of shared values. At the core of populism there is an anti-elite orientation: a denial of legitimacy of the ruling groups, and a strong condemnation of these groups as the key perpetrators-causes of social and political ills (Barr, 2009; Canovan 2004; Laclau 2005; Mudde 2004; Weyland 2001).

Due to its anti-elitist character, populism plays a role of a political “doping drug”. It helps political outsiders, even those lacking political skills and elite qualities, to undermine established democratic elites. Therefore populist mobilisations are often confused with democratisation. The anti-democratic character of populism is

revealed already when damage is done and when democratic political order is undermined.

### **The new presidential populism**

While the history of the contemporary Czech populism starts well before the Velvet Revolution, it was the post-1989 transformation that formed the breeding grounds for new forms of demagogic populism. What we label “new presidential populism” has afflicted Czech politics for the first time during free presidential campaigns. The office of the President of the Republic has traditionally been seen by Czech citizens as very prestigious, despite the fact that in line with the Czech Constitution, the presidential executive power is very limited. But the informal authority of the presidents, as well as the capacity to influence other politicians and general public, has always been considerable.

The new presidential populism started to grow under the rule of the last two presidents, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman, both of whom changed the style of political persuasion and embraced the “populism of irresponsibility” (Nekvapil 2007). This approach is „based on the clever presentation of the president himself as a passionate fighter against matters over which he has not the slightest influence.“ (2007: 140). This “irresponsibility” has become a characteristic feature of campaigns by Klaus and Zeman.

Both politicians experienced notable frustrations in their careers. Klaus, known as “the father of the Czech economic reform” and the founder of the Civic Democratic Party (ODS), started his political career as the finance minister in the first Czechoslovak democratic government in the years 1990-1992. After losing the 2002 election – which he blamed on disloyalty of his partisan colleagues – he stepped down as ODS Chairman. He won the presidential contest in 2003 after his rival, Miloš Zeman, the former chairman of Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), failed to secure endorsement from his own party. Zeman regarded this as a betrayal and retired temporarily from political life. The anti-elitist streak in both presidents originated from the sense of what they saw as betrayal and rejection by the political class. Both of them were initially removed from office as a result of conflicts with new party leaders. Since then, they have been using populist appeals as an effective tool for sustaining their power and punishing the “traitors.”

Nonetheless, there are some differences between their populist “politics of resentment”. Klaus has been playing a role of a machiavellian strong man, who stands between ordinary people and the political elite, and protects the former from oppressive

or amoral practices of the latter. He has perfected the anti-elitist rhetoric. According to him, the political elites are always conspiring against the ordinary people; they “do not want freedom for all, they want freedom and exceptional positions for themselves”. “Elites have been more dangerous foes of the Czech recovery from the Hayekian communist slavery than the defeated communists and their friends” (Klaus 2005). He also wears a mantle of “the Father of the Nation” (a label usually attributed to the first Czechoslovak President, highly respected Tomáš G. Masaryk).

Zeman’s populism has a “leftist-plebeian” bent. He started his political career in the 1990s as the chairman of the main opposition party (ČSSD), and he shocked Czech public by strong critical rhetoric, using terms like “burnt country” and “robbery” to describe the liberal-democratic economic transformation. He was elected president in a popular plebiscite in 2013, capitalising on a strong public dissatisfaction which he himself helped to generate by pointing to the Czech political elite’s moral decay and incompetence.

Since then, Zeman has been presenting himself as a left-leaning people’s advocate, an ally of Czech citizens in their fight against corrupt politicians and rich entrepreneurs (labelled “godfathers”). Recently, he has been attacking the intellectual metropolitan cultural elite (the “Prague Cafe”) for their arrogant “elitist” politics of exclusion. This distinction closely resembles the one which Cas Mudde described as “classic populist distinction between the corrupt, metropolitan, urban elite and the pure, indigenous, rural people” (Mudde 2004: 550).

## **The new party populism**

What we label here as “the new party populism” had its beginnings during the period of political ascendancy of the two largest democratic parties – ČSSD and ODS. Both were tainted by corruption scandals almost from the date they came into being. This made citizens feel that the Czech party politicians devalue democracy, damage the Czech economy, and undermine national solidarity. Surveys and opinion polls showed a rapidly declining trust in political parties and falling confidence in, and satisfaction with, politicians, parliament and democracy (Havlík 2015).

This disenchantment continues today. Corruption issues have dominated the most recent election campaigns and a protest, anti-establishment party, Public Affairs (VV), marching under a strong anti-corruption and anti-elite agenda, has been winning large shares (recently 11 per cent) of votes. The party attacks all the mainstream parties and their leaders as corrupt “political dinosaurs”.

Its chairman, Radek John, defined them as: those “who have been in politics for more than ten years, are unable to do anything other than politics, understand politics as their trade and start to make deals (...), lost touch with the reality and cease to be useful.” (Havlík 2015). Its leaders target “the parasitic old political elite”, demand unspecific reforms, but above all, call for a greater involvement of people in politics through the channels of direct democracy (such as referenda). Despite its anti-establishment image, the party has entered the governing coalition with one of the criticised “political dinosaurs” (ODS), and develops a reputation of a corrupt “entrepreneurial party”. VV’s management style resembles one of a profitable business. Its anti-corruption façade, though, was “quickly tarnished when it transpired that the party had been conceived and financed by the founder of the ABL security firm as a part of a strategy to gain political influence and secure municipal contracts in Prague” (Hanley 2013). The party’s election campaign, focused on fighting corruption, was chiefly designed as a way to increase business opportunities for the private security firm through public procurement (Kmenta 2011). While its popularity shrinks, the cynicism increases, and so do the mutual accusations, muck-raking and corruption scandals forcing one government resignation. The government, led by PM Peter Nečas, consists now of representatives of three parties: ODS, VV and TOP 09 (the right wing party).

The corruption issues – raised in the context of populist politics – have dominated the Czech political debates over the last few years. The long-lasting stable political architecture based on the two-party rule (ČSSD and ODS) has been collapsing. ODS has been marginalised by a centrist and populist Action of Dissatisfied Citizens (ANO 2011). Together with ANO, another populist party, the Dawn of Direct Democracy (UPD) has entered the Czech parliament (receiving more than a quarter of votes).

ANO was founded in 2011 by a Slovak billionaire Andrej Babiš, the owner of a large conglomerate of firms operating in agriculture, food and chemical industry (Agrofert). It is also worth noting the word play used in the party’s name - in Czech “ANO” means “Yes”. The party soon entered a governing coalition with ČSSD and Christian Democrats (KDU-ČSL). ANO won 47 seats in parliament, ČSSD, which scored an electoral victory, won 50 and KDU-ČSL only 14 out of 200. As a result, Babiš was appointed deputy PM and minister of finance in the new coalition government. He used this political leverage to start an anti-establishment campaign criticizing “the corrupt system of major political parties” (ANO 2013) and accusing rivals of recycling old and incompetent party politicians (Bútora 2013).

Babiš's main enemy is the established political elite, which he accuses of corruption, self-interest and incompetence. As the ANO election platform states, "Politicians do not work to make things better for everybody, but to satisfy their own hunger for power, and [to promote] the interests of the influential groups that placed them into office and at the top of their candidate lists" (ANO 2013). Babiš presents himself as an anti-elitist, a hard-working successful businessman who has enough courage and resolve to attack the establishment, and enough experience to run the state effectively. He depicts his politics as non-ideological, pragmatic and managerial, which is to resemble running a business. His popularity remains high. He is still able to maintain a public image of a hard-working, honest man – an anti-thesis of a corrupt professional politician. His ANO party took the lead in the current (2016) public opinion polls.

Unlike ANO, the UPD is not part of governing coalition and represents what one may call "populism of an outsider party". It targets not just the other parties, but the entire political system. The UPD's main solution aiming to avert the crisis is the introduction of direct democracy – that is, ruling through referenda.

The UPD was formed by Tomio Okamura, whose populism has always been rougher and more xenophobic than the one exhibited by Babiš. He is a Czech-Japanese businessman, owner of a firm importing Japanese food products; he also runs a travel agency (Havlík 2015). His party has a strongly anti-elitist, anti-establishment bent, attacking the "parasitic population" of established parties and elites who "looted our country" (Rovenský 2013: 4). "After twenty years we see a plundered country led by selected elite of godfathers who run the country without regard ... to its citizens." (Úsvit 2013). Okamura blames not only the "parasitic political elite", but also of "ill-adjusted citizens", that is, namely the Roma people and refugees. He even suggests that the Roma people are expelled from Czech Republic (Dražan 2013: 10). Okamura has recently founded a new political movement "Liberty and Direct Democracy" (SPD) with an even more xenophobic, anti-refugee and anti-European orientation. He opposes the allocation of refugees and promotes heavy handed nationalistic politics – an obvious irony considering Okamura's own foreign origins.

All these Czech populist leaders advocate a new division of power. They demand more presidential autonomy and support leader-centred democracy, where elected political officials gain prominence, especially vis-à-vis party machines and parliamentary cliques (Pakulski and Körösi 2012: 32). Even Okamura and his UPD demanded political system with the central position of plebiscitary elected president (Mladá fronta DNES 2013). Populist

leaders also portray themselves and their parties as champions of “simple”, “forgotten”, “ignored” and underprivileged people, and as relentless fighters against the despised “elites” and corrupt “establishments”. They see themselves as absolved from legal constraints and accountability (Weyland 1999). Their invasion on Czech politics weakens the moderate political forces and subverts liberal democracy.

### **Populism, political leadership and democracy**

It is worth noting that the Czech new populism is not overtly anti-democratic in its very nature. It does, however, weaken the liberal form of democracy based on rule of law and public accountability of rulers. Populism mimics some elements of democracy – such as responsiveness to popular demands – but contains some authoritarian elements, anti-liberal orientation, and irresponsible anti-elitist rhetoric.

Political leaders entering the post-communist Czech politics illustrate very well the subversive and illiberal features of new populism. For example, both presidents analysed in this paper, Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman, have been criticised for their authoritarianism, for ignoring the rule of law and the constitution, for their efforts to restrict judicial power, and for their criticism of free media and civil society. The upper house of the Czech parliament has even filed a lawsuit to Constitutional Court against Václav Klaus for breaching the constitution. Similarly, Miloš Zeman has often disregarded the constitution. In 2013, he publicly announced that “the constitutional conventions are idiotic concept” (iDNES 2013), and he refused to appoint a representative of ODS as the new PM, even though the candidate had the necessary support of a majority in the Chamber of Deputies. Instead, he appointed his close acolyte, the leftist economic expert Jiří Rusnok, a former finance minister in Zeman’s government in the early 2000s, who did not received support of parliament (Havlík 2015).

The same disregard for constitution and liberal conventions characterises Andrej Babiš. His slogan: “Steer the state as an enterprise!” can be read as an attempt to replace liberal-democratic legalism by authoritarian managerialism. As finance minister, Babiš has entered an obvious conflict of interests. The companies he owns conduct business activities in Slovakia and Germany as well as in the Czech Republic, where his conglomerate ranks as the country’s fourth-largest business. Also, Babiš himself is the country’s second-wealthiest man. His Agrofert has received state subsidies and EU grants that Babiš himself controls. Recently he has acquired several

nationwide Czech media companies and is seen as a Czech imitation of Italy's Silvio Berlusconi.

Václav Klaus condemns the established elites for their exclusivism, but he also opposes any participation of NGO leaders in shaping public policy. In his opinion, leaders of NGOs are undemocratic non-elected persons and NGOs are “nothing less than one version of post-Marxist collectivism.” They represent “a new form of danger to human liberty” - Klaus often joins president Zeman in criticising refugees and the “Prague Café pseudo-elite.”

These strategies prove effective. The old and experienced parliamentarians have been replaced by populist newcomers. Moderate and mainstream party leaders gradually lose their ability to mobilise citizens against corruption. A belief that only great charismatic leaders can ward off corruption is spreading fast – both in the political elite and among voters. To make matters worse, the Czech branch of Transparency International and others anti-corruption NGOs endorse Babiš's anti-corruption program, and involve themselves in fruitless collaboration with him (Frič 2016).

## **Military populism**

Czech populist leaders and parties not only show little respect for the constitution, but they also question the traditionally pro-Western foreign policy and security orientation of the moderate political mainstream. President Václav Klaus is an illustrative example of this orientation shift. He is seen as an eccentric in the euro-elite circles, and he calls himself a “euro-dissident” (Frič et al. 2014). Recently Zeman joined Klaus in criticising the US, NATO and the EU. His anti-Americanism and anti-EU rhetoric raise concerns among the neighbours. President Zeman stated in one interview (delivered to China's nationwide CCTV channel) that now (that is, following the fall of the Nečas government) the Czech Republic became a truly independent country and is not subject to American or EU dominance (Svobodné fórum 2016). Similarly, he has dismissed criticisms of his journey to Moscow, and declares his support for a referendum on Cexit and NATO membership, though he also supports Czech membership in the EU (Aktuálně.cz 2016). These statements, though, reverberate strongly among the top brass of the military and pose a serious security threat. Zeman appears to be contesting Czech membership in NATO thus breaking the long-standing commitment of all post-communist Czech governments.

The Czech “military populism” feeds on these statements and spreads within the civilian-political and the military elite.

This type of populism can be seen as a simplistic response to the new security threats. Populist leaders question the wisdom of all military-security involvements, even the defensive ones, and portray them as unnecessary, dangerous, expensive and politically irrelevant. They refuse to increase defence capabilities, are critical of the current military alliances, and call for arming citizens – not as a national defence measure, but as a deterrent against terrorism. Military populists agree that the new security threats are real, but they portray them as misunderstood and misrepresented by the established elites. They promote “simple solutions” coated in quasi-emancipatory visions of ordinary man whose virtues are “forgotten” and “devalued” by mainstream political elites. The “solutions” usually involve boosting “civil defence” and strengthening the ideological-patriotic propaganda. Strengthening the military potential, by contrast, is seldom considered as a top priority. After the Czech entry to NATO the Czech military was built as an expeditionary force with special tasks in the Alliance and now is almost totally useless for the territorial defence purposes (Štefěc 2016).

In general, all main Czech political leaders see themselves as Westerners, and they are aware of the dangers coming from the East. But they are also worried about potential “collateral damage” to the country in potential superpower conflicts. Above all, they are skeptical about the capabilities of the Czech military – even when aided by its NATO allies – to defend the country’s territory (Focus 2013). The military is perceived less as an effective defence force, and more as a deterrent, a defence symbol and a formal fulfilment of commitments to NATO. Therefore the majority of Czechs do not pay much attention to the military and its capability problems. They leave these problems to political and military leaders, even though these leaders are seen as a part of a corrupt political-military establishment (CVVM 2016). In order to explain these attitudes, we need a short digression about the Czech military tradition.

### **The impact of populism on the Czech elite**

The origin of the modern Czech or Czechoslovak state is closely connected with the history of the Czechoslovak Legion’s long trek across Siberia at the end of the First World War. The Legions consisted of Czech and Slovak volunteers, political émigrés and PoWs held in Russia during World War I. About seventy thousands Czechoslovak legionaries undertook a three year (1917–1919) trek from Ukraine to Siberia. The Legion’s successful military campaign in Siberia instigated the western statesmen to support the establishment of independent and democratic Czechoslovak state in 1918.

This tradition was almost forgotten during the era of communist rule when the military was under the direct control of communist party, and its elite was dominated by party apparatchiks. Since then, many Czech leaders perceive the military with some suspicion as only partly reformed, though prestige of military service has been increasing, mainly due to the successful deployment of Czech soldiers in the external missions. Yet, the media coverage of the military focuses on “problems”, rather than “achievements”: on wasteful public procurements, corruption and bureaucratic rigidity (Focus 2013: 42). The military has no lobbying power, and no backing of defense industry, the latter weakened after the Velvet Revolution. The downturn of the domestic defense industry in Czechoslovakia started even before the Velvet Revolution. According the expert estimations, between the years 1987 - 1992 it was as high as 80% in Czech Republic (Ivánek 2002). This downturn was tightly connected with drastic cuts in defence budget. According the Army Internal Quantitative Research, in 2013 83% of Czech soldiers were concerned about corruption and bureaucracy, and the military was ranked by the public among the most corrupt institutions in the Czech Republic.

It is oftentimes suggested that the Czech military has been “captured” by the businesses-political sector, and that the financial manipulations of business-party “godfathers” are to be seen as sources of corruption scandals in the ministry of defence. The military leaders play only a minor role in these manipulations. Corrupt transactions are made by politicians, state officials and business entrepreneurs. “It is true ... that in crucial matters of weaponry procurements, the military did not succeed in pushing through its professional approach and did not prevent corrupt acquisitions conducted by politicians and public officials” (Gabal 2011). As alleged by the former PM Peter Nečas, corruption in the Czech military is pervasive and systemic. Because of this entrenched corruption, many politicians and members of the military elite are reluctant to lobby for increases in the army budget – a fear that contributes to further marginalisation of the military within the national elite. “Distrust towards the leverage of the MOD in parliament is really the other serious barrier for increasing of defense budget.” (Gabal 2015). A similar opinion has been expressed by the speaker of the parliament, Jan Hamáček: “To increase expenses on defence is not panacea. Army had to know how to spend the money effectively and usefully.” (Hamáček 2015).

Such political instances of weakness and marginalisation have many consequences:

- ✘ the public backing for military elite and defense spendings is weak, in spite of the rising security threats;
- ✘ the average length of service in the ministry of defence is very short (1.4 year);
- ✘ early departures of experienced top professionals are very frequent;
- ✘ the political clout of the defence and security community (consisting of security experts, think-tanks, academics, defense industry leaders) is weak;
- ✘ communication between the military elite and the general public is weak – there is only one spokesperson operating jointly for all military entities. The top brass of the military remains unknown to the public;
- ✘ only a handful of high-rank military officials gain important posts in business or in politics having left the military service.

It is therefore possible to put forward a conclusion that the military elite is the least integrated segment of the Czech ruling elite. The informal contacts between the top military officials and members of other elite segments are very rare. The military leaders are the least trusted, and their influence is seen as low. Their dependence on other parts of elite, especially the political and business segments, is very high (Frič, Nekola 2010).

This poor integration is reflected in the attitudes of Czech soldiers (Kříž 2009: 3-6). More than half of them do not see themselves as guardians of any ideals. Most do not consider themselves as followers of any military tradition, and the majority lack military “vocation” – they serve in the military because of money and social status. According to one study, 13 per cent of general staff employees held extreme opinions which were in conflict with the democratic values. 25 per cent of the top military officials occupying managerial positions do not agree with the official Czech foreign policy direction and government military strategies. The third most frequently mentioned country perceived as a threat for the Czech Republic has been the USA (Učňová 2015). Such composition has been described as a weak “professionalism without democratic values”, and it has been detected among both rank-and-file, as well as senior officers of the military (Mannitz 2011: 4). The results of a survey conducted among 816 members of the Czech general staff bureau – the top brass in the Czech military – appear to confirm these findings. The authors of the report conclude that many employees of general staff pose security risk for the Czech Army and for the whole Czech Republic. “Neither the schools, nor military forces offer to prospective soldiers, let alone to professional

ones, a sufficient degree of education which can teach them values and ethics of the military service.“ (Dobrovský 2015).

Moreover, a large part of military elite despise the high-rank politicians. “They accuse politicians of being corrupt, incompetent, selfish, arrogant and prejudiced against the military“ (Kříž 2009: 3). The alienation of the military elite from the political one is obvious and strong. This raises a question of political reliability of the Czech military as an executor of tasks formulated by democratic political elite.

## **Conclusion**

Similarly to its V4 neighbours, the Czech political elite is experiencing a resurgence of populism (of presidential, party and military varieties) that weakens elite integration, especially at a junction between political and military leadership, and undermines the liberal-democratic institutions, especially rule of law. The top political establishment is fragmented, and the top brass of the Czech military not only weakly integrated with the rest of the country's elite, but also weak in its professionalism and democratic commitments. A large segment of military leaders question these commitments and the accompanied government policies – a configuration seen as a reverse image of the American power elites as described by C.W. Mills (1956). While Mills was concerned with the impact of the robust and well-integrated military elite on the American national power circle, the observers of the Czech military elite are concerned about its marginalisation and ill-suited integration with the political leadership. The military segment of the Czech national elite is described as a “closed, isolated military elite community which bothers only about its own internal problems” (Pezl 2004).

One should not, however, exaggerate the risks associated with such fragmentation. The Czech elite may be poorly integrated, but there are no sign of fundamental “procedural” divisions, similar to those appearing in Hungary and Poland. The upsurge of populism in the country has made politics there more chaotic and less predictable, but it has not yet derailed the liberal-democratic game, which still remains “the only game in town.” One factor that prevents such derailment seems to be persistence within the top Czech leadership of sober economic-political pragmatism. This pragmatism, a tendency to play down political-ideological concerns and focus on practical political-economic considerations, seems to dominate the outlooks and actions of Czech political leaders, regardless of their ideological or factional leanings. Another moderating factor – also absent in

other V4 political realms – is a non-populist head of Cabinet. The current Czech PM, Bohuslav Sobotka, is a moderate and pragmatic liberal democrat. He does not share Zeman's resentment politics and he rejects the populist radical/critical views on the EU and NATO. Thus while the Republic has a populist president, populist parties in the governing coalition, and some populist outsider-parties (KSČM and Úsvit) in the parliament, the Czech government policies, including foreign policies, remain stable, democratic, pragmatic and sober. Such “stabilising pragmatism” is occasionally undermined by populist flare-ups and moral-political panics, but it proves effective in preventing any “political turns” or cultural “counter-revolutions” that would resemble the ones of Kaczyński and Orbán.

What are the consequences of this unique (within V4) elite configuration for the Czech politics? One may expect that the advocacy of such ideals as human rights, liberal democracy and pro-EU integration and solidarity is likely to be overshadowed by more pragmatic-realistic considerations of the country's economic interests. This also means that the Czech elite, conscious of its weakening internal structure and the increasingly fractious EU – is likely to back moderate EU reforms. But it is also less likely to join their Hungarian and Polish neighbours in claims of radical EU contestation. This may put the Czech elite and politics if not on a collision course (which they typically avoid), then at least at odds, with politics of its much more radical V4 neighbours.

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# Chapter 6

## Economic Cooperation Among the Visegrad Countries

**Krzysztof Jasiński**

Professor of Sociology at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences. His recent publications include "Polish Capitalism. Between Modernization and the European Union's Periphery" (Kapitalizm po polsku. Między modernizacją a peryferiami Unii Europejskiej) published by the Polish Academy of Sciences in 2014 and chapters in "Business Leaders and New Varieties of Capitalism in Post-Communist Europe" published by Routledge in 2014.

### Functions of the V4 prior to the EU accession in 2004

**T**he Visegrad Group is one of the few extant legacies of the dissident movements that brought democracy to the CEE region after the collapse of communism. Since the very beginning, the V4 has been a symbol of successful political cooperation among the states which were the most involved in the transition to democracy and market reforms within the cluster of post-communist European states undergoing the systemic transformation. On the international forum, the group was associated with such historical figures of former dissident and opposition movements as Lech Wałęsa and Vaclav Havel. After the breakup of Czechoslovakia, Slovakia joined the group of the founding members - Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic.

In the group's early days, the member countries had the following common goals: to implement democratic and market reforms and to join NATO and the EU. After the collapse of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact, heads of the states in the region were eager to promptly find new forms of political and economic cooperation in order to acquire membership in the Common Market and other Euro-Atlantic institutions. In the economic dimension, their aim was also to create conditions for attracting foreign investors and Western financial assistance and expertise needed to carry out the necessary reforms following the collapse of command economy and the loss of the Eastern market, resulting from the collapse of the USSR and the downfall of long-term economic ties with this area.

The V4 have several specific features: 1) lack of formal organisational and political structures of cooperation; 2) Atlantic orientation; 3) more pro-free market than the European mainstream and 4) pro-enlargement and engagement with the Eastern neighbourhood. Some skepticism about the creation of strong regional cooperation structures was reported by Czech politicians, including, first of all, PM Vaclav Klaus. The strong Atlantic orientation stemmed from the historical experience of the countries in the region and a

lingering suspicion that the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the weakening of the imperial ambitions of Russia may only be a temporary phenomenon. In the mind of the V4 leaders, avoiding being left in a gray zone of security between the East and the West required these countries to be anew embedded in a stable military alliance, which in practice was associated with NATO membership. The strongly liberal orientation of the reformers in the V4 countries reflected a broad consensus about the necessity of a swift move towards open market economy and broad trade relations. In accordance with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, such a move, involving building modern economic institutions, would help in securing stable economic growth. The main obstacle was, of course, the historical legacies of backwardness and the centrally managed economy. Overcoming these legacies, all V4 leaders agreed, required more radical reforms than those undertaken by the “old” EU member states, all of which had been accustomed to the market economy for many generations. Leszek Balcerowicz and Vaclav Klaus became at the symbols of such radical market-liberal reforms, and they became role models for other V4 economic reformers.

For the outside world, the V4 soon became an exemplary model of regional cooperation that enhances stability and good neighbourly relations within the entire CEE (Gyartasova and Meseznikov 2016, Rupnik 2014). The Group was promoted in other regions, such as the Balkans, as a role model of successful integration. Some even hoped that it would be a nucleus for even broader regional alliance, similar to the Nordic countries and the Benelux. The initial successes in boosting regional cooperation within V4 facilitated the accession to NATO and the European Union – both negotiated jointly and in a “team spirit”. Above all, it had been regarded, until recently, as an essential part of the “success story” of the post-communist CEE.

### **The role of the V4 after the EU accession**

This gloss started to fade after the V4 countries joined the EU in 2004. The successful accession revealed some weaknesses and tensions amidst a very successful economic growth.

According to the most optimistic assessments, the V4 as a whole has made a successful shift from the periphery towards the core of the EU with real influence on European policies, such as building coalitions in the negotiations about the EU 2014-2020 budgetary perspective. Such assessments are most frequently formulated in Slovakia, where the public opinion views the cooperation of the Visegrad Group in the most positive way. Due to their shared history,

the V4 countries supported the Eastern Partnership initiative. They are close neighbours sharing experiences in implementing reforms and participating in the process of European integration. All CEE countries have always supported the principle of the EU's open door policy.

According to less sanguine observers, though, the V4's achievements are modest and fragile. This is due to the limitations of resources, conflicts of interests, and differences in strategies of development, especially different responses to the 2008 economic crises, different responses to the Ukrainian crisis, and, last but not least different attitudes to, and relations with, the USA and Russia.<sup>1</sup> The example of the Eastern Partnership (that involve also Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus) is a good illustration of the emerging problems and tensions. The Partnership has proven weak and timid – supported with rhetorical figures and verbal declarations, but with very few practical consequences. This weakness reflects political and ideological differences that emerge among the leaders and elites of V4 countries, as well as divergent economic interests. It also reflects widening differences in elite and public opinion. Recent research on the mental map of the Visegrad Group shows that Czechs and Slovaks see themselves as close to each other, but not to other members of the Group. Hungarians see Germans as the closest nation and the most significant partners.<sup>2</sup>

The most sceptical view, exhibited most often by economists – is that the V4 is a merely a fictional institution. It is a group of countries with vastly different cultures, expectations and interests, and with

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1 An example of the first position is the statement of the former Slovak Prime Minister Iveta Radicova, an example of the second – statement of Jacques Rupnik (McDonagh 2014).

2 The indicator of relations among V4 countries employed here is the measure of mutual trust and the belief of the public that they can rely on the other country or nation. In a long term, the above-average level of trust are observed between the Czechs and Slovaks – almost four fifths of respondents in the two republics trust the other country. As for the trustworthiness, in the eyes of the Slovak public the most trustworthy are the Czechs (78%), Austrians (49%), and Poles (40%), while Hungarians ranked only ninth (30%). The strongest level of trust towards other V4 countries can be observed in Poland, where they occupied top three positions on the scale of trustworthiness: Slovaks ranked first with 69%, followed by the Czechs (61%), and Hungarians (61%). In the eyes of the Czech public, the most trustworthy were the Slovaks (79%) and the French (59%), followed by Poles, Brits, and Austrians (58% each), while the Hungarians with 36% took the ninth place. Hungary is the only V4 country where the public shows the highest level of trust towards the country outside the Visegrad Group – that is Germany (62%). Poland ranks second (58%), while the Czech Republic and Slovakia (40% both) share the fourth and the fifth places. (Gyarfasova and Meseznikov 2016:5)

fractious political leaders and elites, and it needs a radical overhaul in order to form a stronger and more effective alliance. This view has an interesting “programmatic appendix”. Its advocates claim that it is necessary to create a new alliance – political and economic – and to expand the Group to cover the Baltic states and the Balkan countries. Such a view seems to dominate among the new Polish right-wing leaders, including Jarosław Kaczyński and Andrzej Duda (Kędzierski 2014). However, it has very few advocates outside Poland, except perhaps for Victor Orbán in Hungary. The notion that the Visegrad Group could evolve into a broader alliance (and later encompass even as unlikely – and often unwilling – partners as Serbia and Bulgaria), and that it could contest the policies of the “core EU,” looks rather unrealistic. Yet, it seems to be pursued by the Polish leaders who suggest various “V4+” models involving “dialogue with neighbouring countries from Central and South-Eastern Europe on EU agenda as well as security policy issues, but also on the framework of a broader and more pragmatic cooperation in the region. The proposal also includes a “dialogue with Baltic and Nordic countries (V4+NB8), in particular in the fields of security, energy, Eastern policy and migration”, as well as a “dialogue with the Benelux countries (V4+Benelux), in particular in the field of economic and investment cooperation, including the sector of new technologies and innovation.” (Polish Presidency 2016: 23).

### **The refugee crisis and the political rebirth of the Visegrad Group**

These diverse visions in the Group reflect widening differences of views within the V4 leadership. This widening divergence encompasses also leaders’ views of the Group itself. A very low budget assigned to V4 (the Visegrad Fund has approximately € 7-8 million annually at its disposal) may be interpreted as further reflection of scepticism as to the strength, utility and future viability of the Group. Some believe that the Group – in its past-present form – has been approaching its “due by date” moment.

The 2015 migration crisis became a catalyst for the revival of the V4 based on a joint protest against the EU proposal to impose compulsory quotas and opposition to German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Willkommenskultur policy. Lack of consultations on this issue with the states of CEE reinforced a suspicion that the “old EU” ignores its “new members”. This suspicion re-united (albeit temporarily) the V4 leaders (Schopflin 2016). In some countries of Central Europe, especially in Hungary and Poland, the migration crisis has been used as pretext to manifest more assertiveness in

their relations with the EU. It is also indicative of internal political changes related to the takeover of power by conservative parties with the anti-liberal programs. Leaders such as Viktor Orbán and Jarosław Kaczyński treat the V4 as a tool of their radical, nationalist-conservative ideology and policy. This, in turn, triggers a widespread backlash against the liberal West and its institutions, including the EU (and, in case of Hungary, NATO and USA).

In Poland, the renewed interest in the Visegrad cooperation becomes part of a new eurosceptic foreign policy. V4 is seen as a potential “EU-contesting” interest group, a kind of “regional interest alliance” and a springboard for creating a wider independent area between Russia and Germany (Intermarium or Międzymorze). [This idea follows Marshal Józef Piłsudski’s plan for an alliance, under the Polish leadership, of all new countries established in Central and Eastern Europe after World War I. This was meant to strengthen their position in vis-a-vis major European powers and improve their geopolitical situation.] Such idea, while realistic after WWI, is hopelessly anachronistic today. According to public opinion polls, the Visegrad populations differ in their attitude towards the United States, Russia, NATO and the EU. The highest degree of trust toward the United States, for example, exists in Poland (50 percent), the lowest in Slovakia (27 percent). Poles feel the highest level of distrust towards Russia. Slovaks, in turn show the highest level of trust with regard to Russia (Gyarfassova and Mesnikov 2016:6).

### **Economic resources and relations**

In spite of political grandstanding by Polish and Hungarian leaders, V4 is economically weak – a minor partner of the EU. According to Eurostat (2014), the V4 countries contributed only 5.3 per cent of the total EU GDP. In comparison, Germany accounted for 21 per cent of EU GDP and Great Britain contributed 16 per cent of the GDP. The total population of the V4 countries represents ca. 18 per cent of the total EU population (with Great Britain excluded). These data reveal a relatively low level of economic development, especially in Hungary and Poland. Germany, whose share of the EU population is approximately 16 per cent, produces four times as big GDP share as all the V4 countries comprised.

However, the gap is narrowing down. The V4 countries have been developing faster than the eurozone since 2001, and have become an important manufacturing centre for the EU market. Since the 1990s, they have also been attracting foreign investments more rapidly than the EU as a whole. In the period 1999-2014, the average GDP per person in the V4 rose from 60 per cent to 75

per cent of the EU average. The current period of global instability increases the importance of CEE for the EU in its entirety, especially for Germany. The economic role of the Visegrad Group countries has grown as a result of Brexit. They boost production, growth and competitiveness of the European Union, in particular in Germany. And they illustrate the principle of reciprocity by becoming increasingly dependent on German and EU partners. According to one recent report, "Since 1989 Germany has become the most important trading and investment partner for the V4 states, which has had a significant impact on the evolution of the economic model of Central Europe, and helps in modernizing the region. (...) The Visegrad Group states have become Germany's most important global partner both in exports and imports." (Popławski 2016:5)

### **Economic cooperation in the V4**

One conclusion from these data is that V4 countries are successfully integrated with the EU, especially Germany, but not necessarily with each other. As a Group, they play an important role in boosting the EU's economy and growth, especially after the Brexit. For example, during the 2016 Presidency of the Czech Republic the V4 developed new avenues of cooperation with the EU in energy policy, regional defence and security, the digital economy (for instance e-commerce, digitalization of the industry, cyber-security, e-skills, development of e-government) and in the fight against tax evasion. In the longer run, the V4 prepares joint cooperative proposals in regional funding, cohesion policy, defending the common market (including services and free movement of labour), transport and energy infrastructure, security and defence industries collaboration, the oil sector, the electricity market, nuclear power, the climate policy and environment protection, the Multiannual Financial Framework (negotiations on the EU's budget after 2020) and, last but not least, the new migration policy, including strengthening, supporting and maintaining the Schengen area. The range of cooperative initiatives is widening, thus indicating deepening integration between the V4 and "the rest" of the EU.

Yet, within the Group, the economic/trade/investment relations are weak, and there are no signs of their strengthening. The V4 is based mainly on political, rather than economic cooperation, and it does not implement its own common economic projects. The fact that the "Program of Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2016-2017" does not contain any economic and/or financial data is quite telling. The program is vague, and does not go beyond regular and ad hoc consultations between high level politicians, meetings

and video-conferences, and drafting common non-papers on issues of key importance for the V4.

Among the key reasons for this weakness are the differences among the V4 leaders. The Visegrad Group has been described recently as “four states with at least three different positions.” Poland and Hungary seem to be taking a development path that differs from that followed by the Czech Republic and Slovakia. These differences seem to be growing. The V4 states have been proclaiming different goals and preferences regarding foreign policy, the common currency, defence, security, economic policy, energy policy etc.

Some of these differences are clearly stated; other are implicit in the increasingly divergent strategies. The Polish leaders, for example, emphasize the importance of reducing energy dependence on Russia. The Hungarian leaders, in contrast, declare their willingness towards pursuing nuclear energy collaboration with Russia (the nuclear power plant in Paks). Poland is vigorously lobbying for the location of NATO military bases on its territory, which alienates other Visegrad leaders. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, by contrast, show strong pro-Russian sentiments and oppose increases in defense spendings. Poland's leaders manifest their ambitions of developing a major European gas hub. Hungary's leaders, in turn, delay the construction of the interconnector with Slovakia, thus causing a significant delay in the entire North-South gas project, which is vital for supplying gas to Ukraine. The issues of minority rights also cause political tensions among the Visegrad elites. The government in Budapest supports Hungarians living in Slovakia (for example, by launching the concept of dual citizenship), thus generating tensions in bilateral relations with Bratislava.

These examples help explaining the tenuous economic relations inside V4. Joint economic projects – similar to the Swedish-Danish road-and-rail bridge over Øresund connecting Malmö with Copenhagen – have little chances of success in a climate of increasingly divergent political views and strategies.

### **The weaknesses of economic cooperation**

The list of causal factors influencing the weak economic relations is depressingly long. It includes not only divergent policies and strategies, but also:

- ✘ limited economic resources in relatively small European countries,
- ✘ high costs of systemic changes after the collapse of communism and market reforms (the bankruptcy of large state-owned

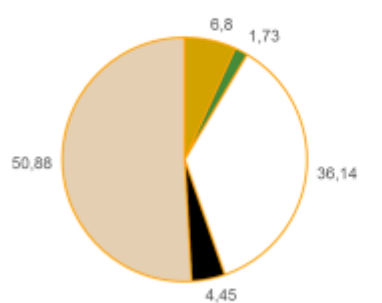
enterprises, the loss of markets in the east),

- ❑ high costs of new methods of capital accumulation,
- ❑ complex laws regulating ownership rights and organizational requirements (privatization, creation of new businesses, competition with better developed and more powerful Western and international corporations).

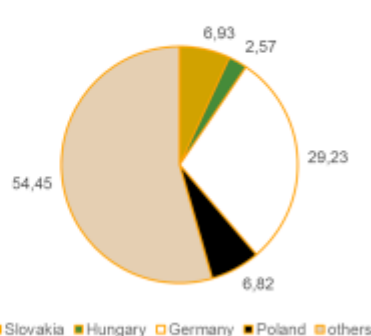
Behind these factors lurks one big problem; the weakness of the “capitalist class”. The CEE market institutions have developed much more rapidly than their agents – the entrepreneurs and business people. In their renowned book *Making capitalism without capitalist* (1998) Eyal, Szelenyi and Townsley point out that the market economy in the region was created by dissident intellectuals, communist technocrats, petty entrepreneurs, foreign investors, technocrats of multinational financial and business organizations and liberal-populist-ex-communist politicians – but seldom the indigenous business people. This is why during the rapid systemic changes, all the governments of the V4 countries were in need of new capitalists as well as new capital and technology. Some came from the highly developed Western states, others developed the entrepreneurial skills and orientations while working abroad. Either way, the indigenous business-entrepreneurial agency remains weak. This fact also explains why economic relations with Western European countries, mainly with Germany, are stronger and more significant than the inter-V4 economic links and ties.

#### Czech Republic

Structure of turnover in foreign trade in 2000



Structure of turnover in foreign trade in 2014



Source: Eurostat

Figure 1.

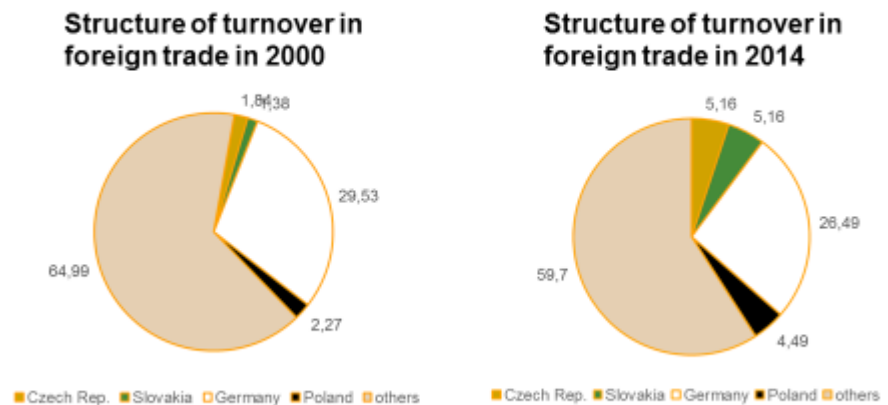
The low level of economic integration within the V4 countries is illustrated by data on trade balance, main export and import partners (see Figures 1-2). The data show the share of mutual trade between the Czech Republic and the V4 countries, Germany and the rest of the world. Between 2000 and 2014 the economic cooperation

between the Czech Republic and the countries of the Visegrad Group was growing. The V4 share in foreign trade of the Czech Republic reached 16 percent, which was significantly more than in 2000. Germany, however, remained the main trading partner, despite a fall in the share from 36 percent to 29 percent.

Poland and Hungary show a similar pattern of trade and investment. In the case of Hungary, we deal with the industrial

Figure 2.

### Hungary



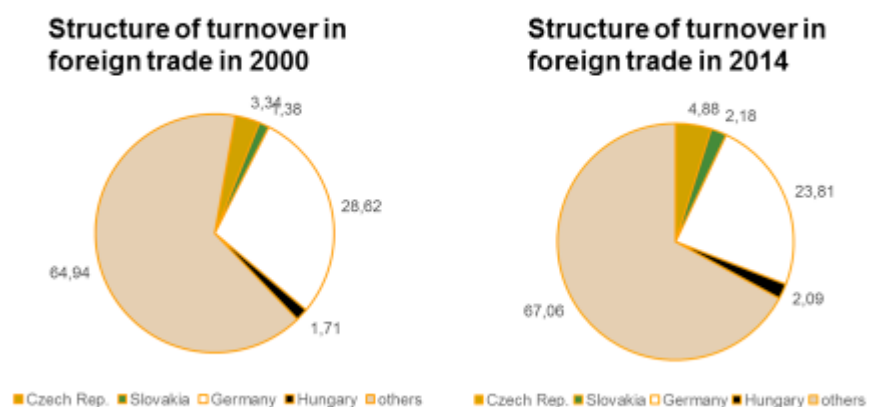
Source: Eurostat

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economy geared for export to an even greater extent than in the case of the Czech Republic. Hungary's links with the Balkan states (with the exception of exports to Romania) are weak, which is mainly due to the weakness of the local economies. Cooperation with Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic is growing in importance, but very slowly.

Figure 3.

### Poland



Source: Eurostat

In the case of Poland, it is also possible to observe a growing share of the Visegrad Group countries' participation in foreign trade – from 6.4 percent in 2000 to 9.1 percent in 2014. However, just as

in the other V4 countries, the dominant place is still occupied by Germany (23.8 percent) which is also the largest foreign investor and main export destination (the second one is the United Kingdom) as well as the main origin of imports.

Figure 3., Source: Eurostat

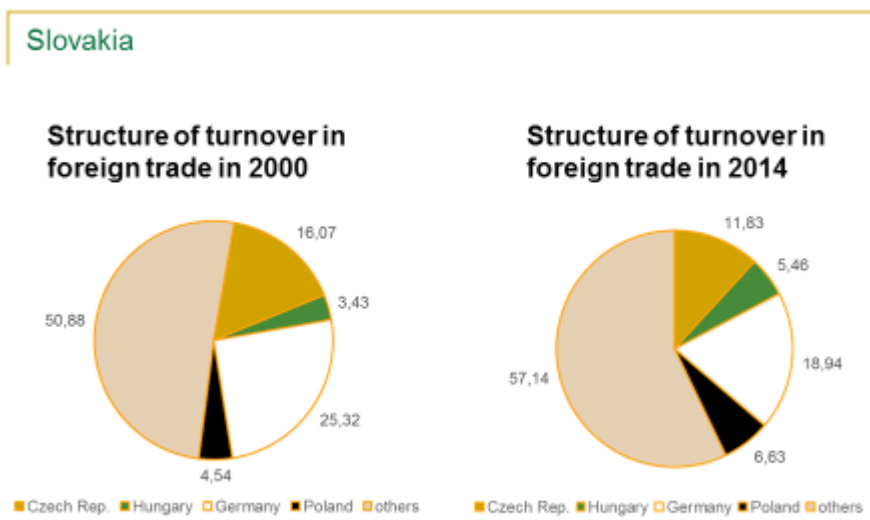


Figure 4.

Source: Eurostat

Slovakia's pattern is slightly different. Its main trading partners are Germany and the Czech Republic. The share of mutual trade with V4 in the overall foreign trade hovers at around 24 percent. However, the geographical structure of these relations has changed a little. The graphs indicate that the importance of mutual trade between Slovakia and the Czech Republic continued to decline. Other Visegrad countries, Poland and Hungary, seem to be taking advantage of that tendency. Just like in the hierarchy of all trading partners in the region, Germany is the leader.

Germany continues to play a prominent role as the trade hub in the region. It is also the main trading partner of the Czech Republic. It is an interesting, though little known fact that trade per capita shows the intensity of the multilateral trading in the region. The V4 states are characterised by higher trade with Germany per capita, especially after 2009, than countries such as France or the United Kingdom. In 2014 the Czech Republic's trade per capita with Germany was only slightly lower than with Belgium. Hungary's and Slovakia's trade with Germany was running ahead of Britain and approaching the level of trade with France. (Popławski 2016:18) This clearly indicates strong economic integration of the V4 economies with the German economy.

It is also worth noting that in the pattern of trade of all of the Visegrad Group countries (both in exports and imports), machinery and transport equipment are the most important segments. Again,

Germany continues to play the key role in foreign trade. The largest economic superpower of Europe also occupies the top spot in both exports and imports of all countries of the Group. This is due to the concentration of the automotive industry there.

The most important challenge for the Visegrad Group economies is, therefore, diversification of trade partners in order to reduce the economic dependence on Western Europe (their main export destinations), especially Germany. Otherwise, they remain dependent on Germany and vulnerable to slowdowns there. There are precious few signs of reducing this dependence, though. Some attempts have been made to boost trade and investment relations with Asian partners, such as China, where imports still dominate. But these attempts do not bring any visible fruits as yet.

Table 1.

Leading export and import partners of the V4 countries (2012)

	Czech Republic (Czechia)		Hungary		Poland		Slovakia	
		%		%		%		%
Main export destination	<b>Germany</b>	<b>31.4</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>25.1</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>25.2</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>21.4</b>
	Slovakia	9.0	Romania	6.0	UK	6.8	Czechia	14.1
	Poland	6.1	Slovakia	6.0	Czechia	6.3	Poland	8.4
	France	5.1	Austria	5.8	France	5.9	Hungary	7.3
Main origins of imports	<b>Germany</b>	<b>29.3</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>24.8</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>26.2</b>	<b>Germany</b>	<b>17.8</b>
	Poland	7.7	Russia	8.8	Russia	11.5	Czechia	17.1
	Slovakia	7.4	China	7.4	Netherlands	5.7	Russia	9.7
	China	6.3	Austria	7.2	Italy	5.1	Hungary	7.6

Source: Author, based on Economist Intelligence Unit

The global economic crisis has revealed the limitations of the model of economic development of European post-communist countries. All these countries (with the exception of Poland) experienced sharp declines in their GDP (Latvia -17.0, Lithuania -15.8, Estonia -12.3, Slovenia -7.3, Romania -7.0, Hungary - 6.7, Slovakia - 5.5, Czech Republic -4.3, Bulgaria - 4.2). By the end of 2009 Poland appeared to be the only country in the group that did not suffer a recession. In fact, the Polish economy managed to achieve a growth of 1.7 percent - an outcome attributed to the success of Polish economic reforms, conservatism of Polish banks, prudence of the Polish government, and good luck (Gorzelać and Goh 2010: 238-9).

### Peripheral development?

The eurozone crisis once again drew attention to the different paths and paces of development of various groups of EU countries.

The states of highly developed core (France, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Benelux, Scandinavia) weathered the storm better than the peripheral countries of CEE and Southern Europe. Nölke

Market share of different types of banks in the V4 countries (2014)

Banks controlled by capital (in %)		
Country	Foreign-owned	State-owned
Czech Republic	83	2.6
Hungary	88	5.8
Poland	62	21.0
Slovakia	99	0.8

Table 2.

Source: Author, based on CEE Banking Sector Report, Raiffeisen Research, May 2014

and Vliegenthart (2009) argued that the CEE economies show some features of the dependent market economy (DME). Such economies are dependent on foreign investors and foreign-owned banks and controlled by headquarters of transnational enterprises. This is particularly strong in various key institutional dimensions, such as the distinctive coordination mechanism, primary means of raising investment, corporate governance, industrial relations, education and training system, the transfer of innovations and comparative advantages. The economic indicators of the V4 economic dependence on foreign investors is illustrated by the data on ownership in such strategic sectors as automotive, manufacturing, electronics and banking (Nölke and Vliegenthart 2009, Orenstein 2013).

The ownership structure of the 500 largest enterprises in the V4 (2014)

Companies controlled by capital (in %)			
Country	Foreign	Domestic private	State-owned
Czech Republic	65.8	16.5	17.0
Hungary	87.3	1.6	11.1
Poland	56.8	19.0	23.5
Slovakia	75.0	0.0	25.0

Table 3.

Source: Author, based on Deloitte CE TOP 500 Ranking in *Rzeczpospolita*, 3 September 2014

A similar argument was presented by Marxist world system theorists. They see Central Europe as semi-peripheries of the world capitalist system. The V4 countries are economically dependent on Germany and politically and militarily reliant on the United States (Myant and Lane 2009). Partial confirmation of these interpretations, explaining the “peripheral difficulties” in development, is provided by the data on ownership in the banking sector and the largest enterprises (see Tables 3 and 4). These tables reflect shortages of capital investment and negligible opportunities for cooperation among the countries in which the largest enterprises are controlled by foreign capital. Sceptics argue, though, that such interpretations confuse causes with effects.

## **Conclusions**

The Visegrad Group countries developed as a forum of political cooperation. Its economic integration remains weak, and the Group as a whole has a relatively small economic importance (the Visegrad countries create 5 percent of the total GDP of the EU28). Moreover, this configuration has not changed over the last 25 years, thus leaving the Group vulnerable to economic turbulences in the EU. The essential causes of this weakness and vulnerability are:

- different political goals of the V4 countries,

- low level of economic integration (since the early 90s Germany has become the most important investor and trade partner for each of the V4), and

- key position of foreign capital in the V4; it has consequences for their economic models as “dependent market economies” (Nolke and Vliegenhart 2009) or “semi-peripheral capitalism in the EU” (Lane and Myant 2007).

These factors also limit the options for further transformation. The recent attempts to change V4 into an instrument for defending the common interests of all Central European countries may fail due to this economic vulnerability (itself reflecting the weak economic integration). Moreover, the entire Group remains vulnerable to economic marginalisation, especially if EU leaders adopt a “two-speed” path of development.

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# Conclusions

**T**he countries of the Visegrad Group stand firm in their common anchoring in the European Union as a natural, secure and forward-looking framework for our common future based on mutual cooperation. In a Union, we are stronger together. We are stronger together because our Union is based on a consensus on key values, principles and priorities. The challenge for the upcoming months will be to translate this consensus as effectively as possible into the everyday life of the Union. To achieve this medium-term objective, we have the necessary legislative and institutional framework at hand. (Visegrad Group PMs' Joint Statement 2016)

The above quote from the opening part of a joint statement by the V4 Prime Ministers creates an impression of consensus and continuity in the Visegrad alliance. Alas, this is more a wishful declaration than a reality. The two major factors motivating the alliance and holding the Group together – a desire to “join in the European integration process” and “the proximity of ideas of the then ruling political elites” – have weakened (Visegrad Group 2016). All four members of the Visegrad Group experience some serious political turbulences – to a large extent reflecting the EU and global crises – that undermine the “proximity of ideas” among their leaders and elites. Also, they complicate the relations between the V4 countries and the EU. The vanishing liberal elite consensus, the “populist invasions”, and the sharp illiberal turns, mark the end of the shared, or at least “parallel”, liberal paths of transformation (“joining the European integration process”) embraced by the founders of the Visegrad Group. In spite of the declarations of unity and strength, the leaders look divided, the development paths they choose look divergent, and the alliance looks fragile. The only issue unifying the current (2016) leaders is an opposition to the EU refugee allocation mechanism.

The departures from the parallel liberal path are most conspicuous in Hungary and Poland. Under new political leadership, and with the deepening divisions within their political elites, both Hungary (since 2010) and Poland (since 2015) have been turning away from the liberal development paths. These turns, as argued above, divide

their political elites, bring about a threat of political decay, and expose both countries to criticisms by the EU leaders. The relations between V4 countries – especially Hungary and Poland – and the EU look increasingly strained. Hungary's democratic reputation has been badly tarnished by Viktor Orbán's constitutional "adjustments"; Poland's reputation suffers following attacks by the new PiS government on the Constitutional Tribunal. Some of this critical odium rubs onto the Czech and Slovak regimes, at least partly due to their common front on the refugee issue and the shared EU-skepticism. As a senior analyst from the Central European Policy Institute notes (*The Economist* 2016), "Nowadays, Visegrad is like a bad word."

These departures from the common European values and development paths also weaken the cohesion of the Group as a whole. Now the leaders of V4 seem to be entering quite divergent paths – though the nature and direction of these paths is not yet clear. Their relations with each other, as well as their relations with the EU, NATO and with Russia, have also diversified and complicated, in spite of declared commitments to the EU membership, allied defense and the Eastern Partnership program.

The divergence is revealed in the above-quoted declaration, though in a vague form. The leaders voice their constantly restrained criticisms of the EU policies, and offer some vague and nebulous suggestions of change: "convergent" "Union of trust" and "better Europe":

However, we can never succeed unless we create a genuine Union of Trust. Trust needs to be revived on all levels. The genuine concerns of our citizens need to be better reflected. National parliaments have to be heard. The institutions of the European Union need to stick to their missions and mandates. Trust also needs to be fostered among Member States, starting with overcoming the artificial and unnecessary dividing lines we have seen emerging in past few months.... Instead of endless theoretical debates on "more Europe" or "less Europe" we need to focus on "better Europe". The Union should focus on practical restart of convergence. We should, therefore, make sure the Union uses the key instruments to this end: cohesion, boosting investment, supporting innovation, completing the digital and energy single market, promoting free trade and free movement, and strengthening a resilient labour market bringing sustainable jobs. (Visegrad Group PMs' Joint Statement 2016)

The pleas for more "unity," "convergence" and "cohesion", as well as calls for increasing "investment" in the countries whose leaders are championing diversification and "nationalization" of their economic and political strategies, must sound naïve and hollow in a fractious

and crisis-ridden Europe. More a vague rhetorical posture than a genuine intention, one could say. They are made in a situation that resembles a schism, rather than a “convergence,” both inside V4 and the EU.

Within the Group there are widening disagreements among the leaders concerning the direction of further transformation. Governments of Hungary and Poland are taking a radical and nationalistic right turn, while the Czech Republic and Slovakia look like continuing their pragmatic, though not always consistent, policies. The formerly shared security and defense policies – an important element of the V4 “political convergence” in the past – seem to weaken, in spite of attempts to bolster the new V4 defense initiatives, such as a formation of the V4 “battlegroup”, as announced in 2011 by the then Polish Defense Minister, Bogdan Klich, approved by all V4 Defense Ministers, and confirmed by the V4 leaders at the 2016 NATO Summit in Warsaw. The battlegroup includes members from all V4 countries and Ukraine.

The Czech PM now openly opposes the increases in military spending, requested by the US and NATO, and suggests a national referendum over the country’s EU and NATO membership, with the leaders of the large Hungarian and Slovak right-wing parties following suit. This happens at the same time as Poland’s new leaders reiterate their anti-Russian stand, accuse Putin of participation in the “Smolensk conspiracy”, and lobby for US forces on the eastern flank. That weakens Poland’s leadership position in the Group and its influence on the EU arena (Balcer et al. 2016).

The personal ties among the V4 leaders (except, perhaps, for what looks like an opportunistic “alliance” between Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán) also look fragile. Moreover, public support for the alliance, as well as public perceptions of relevance and importance of the Group, seem to weaken. The poll conducted in the spring of 2015 revealed that the level of public awareness of V4 has decreased considerably in Hungary and Poland, though not in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The highest level of awareness of V4 cooperation (54 per cent) is found in Slovakia – a country whose leaders embrace a pragmatic “double-faced” strategy (see Chapter 5). The percentage is much lower (37 per cent) in Czechia, Hungary (26 per cent) and Poland (17 per cent). Similarly, the attitudes of the V4 publics towards Russia, NATO and the United States reflect the widening divergence in leaders’ views (Gyarfášová and Mesežnikov 2016).

This appears to be a turning point – an end of the “old alliance” based on the leadership proximity, commonality of elite views

and shared liberal and pro-EU strategies of post-communist transformation, and possibly a beginning of a “new alliance”, a “V4 Mk 2”. Such “new alliance” looks looser, less value-based, more pragmatic-instrumental, and more critical-contesting in relations with the EU “core” countries than the original V4.

This point, admittedly controversial, deserves a comment. The widening divergence within the Visegrad Group (parallel to the centrifugal trends in the EU) does not necessarily mean the V4 is falling apart. Alliances like that – even when devoid of their original purpose, leadership and a unifying political will – often survive as useful consultative, collaborative and cooperative forums. They resemble, to use the old analogy, old bottles filled in with a new content. They allow the leaders to consult regularly, even if only to signal differences, to look for common interests, even if only short- and medium-term, to issue largely ceremonial “joint statements” of good intentions, even if these intentions are vague, and to seek new identities while “re-thinking common goals” (Visegrad Group PMs Joint Statement 2016). They are seen as serving some general “good and useful” purposes, and therefore are sustained – more because they have no enemies than in recognition of their continuous relevance. Sometimes they form springboards for new groupings and evolve into new alliances.

If this is the case with the Visegrad Group – and we leave this possibility open – the current crises may herald an elite-driven re-formation and re-modeling of the Group. Politically, such re-modeling resembles pouring a new content into an old bottle. It is only possible to speculate about this new content. The recent Joint Statements of V4 PMs and Presidents, for example, signal a move towards a stronger economic and defense focus. They also articulate a clear preference for a more limited EU, a kind of “EU ltd”, with wider national political/policy autonomy, as well as a move towards more pragmatic partnerships within such “EU ltd”. In fact, the recent Joint Statements could be seen as manifestos of a “new V4 Mk2”, the latter falling under a new illiberal management and championing a new relationship with the crisis-ridden EU.

Is such a new alliance, a “V4 Mk2”, likely to eventuate and succeed? It depends on the changes within the EU itself, especially within its leadership circles. It is too early to say where the crisis-afflicted EU is heading: whether the leaders of the “core” EU will move towards a “EU ltd”, restricting its integrative/regulative aspirations, or whether they will embrace a “further integration” (“more Europe”) strategy, perhaps forming a two-tier structure

and two-speed integration plan. The former would bolster the emergent V4 Mk2; the latter would further marginalize the Visegrad countries, especially those executing illiberal turns.

*Jan Pakulski*

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