



BULLETIN

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The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?

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The format and objectives of the so-called Slavkov Triangle, which was established at the end of January, have not yet been clearly defined by the signatory states, Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The initiative could evolve in the direction of a local platform aimed at improving energy and infrastructure relations, a project for the implementation of leftist economic doctrine in the EU, or a pro-Russian avant-garde. Regardless of the final alignment of the triangle, its creation is troublesome for the Visegrad Group. Its declared range of activities, including the idea consultations before the European Council, is so wide that it could duplicate some of the V4 projects.

On 29 January, at the Baroque palace in Slavkov (hist. Austerlitz) in southeastern Bohemia, the prime ministers of three countries—Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia—signed a declaration on establishing a new regional platform, the so-called Slavkov Triangle. Among the areas of interest mentioned for 2015 were transport infrastructure, energy security, youth employment, cross-border relations, the social dimension of European integration, and the neighbouring countries of the EU. It was decided that the heads of government will meet in such a format every year, with the next summit to be held in, 2016 in Slovakia. The daily work will be coordinated by a tripartite working group, probably at the level of deputy foreign ministers.

The declaration is the result of Czech–Austrian rapprochement, the symbolic beginnings of which were the visit by the Czech prime minister, Bohuslav Sobotka, to Vienna in June 2014, and the return visit of his Austrian counterpart, Werner Faymann, to Prague a month later. Their meetings gave rise to a series of intensive contacts between senior officials of the two countries, including ministers and heads of some central offices. In the second half of 2014, Sobotka also met regularly with Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico. It was the Czech side that proposed to Bratislava—mainly because of its interest in infrastructure and energy issues—the presence in this initiative.

The Intentions of the Czech Republic. The declaration was designed by the Czech deputy foreign minister and former director of the IIR think tank, Petr Drulák. Although in publications and interviews he has long pointed out the need for a “new start” in relations with the Czech Republic’s southern neighbour, his vision of the Austro-Czech alliance is more ambitious than that agreed upon in Slavkov. Drulák claimed that close cooperation between the two should become a starting point for the extension of the regional alliance to include other countries such as Slovenia and Croatia. It would allow Prague to increase its weight in the Western Balkans, a region that, due to its geopolitical importance, historical ties, and extensive economic and people to people contacts, is prioritised in Czech foreign policy.

To convince the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) to this idea was, indeed, an achievement on Drulák’s part, though it seems that the party’s motivation is different from that of the politically independent minister, and not necessarily associated with the need for creating a large regional front. ČSSD has, since the beginning of its tenure, been looking for its own path in foreign policy, in order to distinguish itself from its centre right predecessors; that is why the party’s recent actions have been aimed at both more energetic involvement in the EU, and broadening relations with China. An alliance with the leftist leaders of Austria and Slovakia may thus be a response to the failure of the Czech conservatives’ plans for a coalition with the United Kingdom, which was based on anti-EU sentiments.

Speaking at a press conference after the declaration was signed, Sobotka mentioned ideological identity and a shared commitment to pro-social reforms in the EU as one of the key reasons for the triangle's existence.

In addition to the coordinated efforts of the socialist governments at the EU forum, it is equally essential for Prague to improve bilateral relations with Vienna and Bratislava in the fields of energy and infrastructure. Of acute importance is the issue of travel between Prague and Vienna, cities only 300 kilometres apart yet which require a journey of almost five hours because there is no direct motorway connection. In Czech–Slovak dialogue, the issue of upgrading the D2 motorway between central and northern Moravia and neighbouring regions in Slovakia has been raised regularly. Prague is also interested in access to the Austrian gas hub in Baumgarten, which would not only increase the Czech Republic's own energy security but also allow it to sell gas to the West. However, construction of the interconnector between Lanžhot and Baumgarten, originally planned for 2017, has been delayed.

What Game Is Austria Playing? What may be surprising is not the Czech Republic's shift to its southern neighbour, but rather the positive response from Vienna. Despite intensive economic contacts (within the space of five years, Czech exports to Austria increased by almost 20%, and Austria remains the third largest investor in the country), political relations between the two since the beginning of the democratic transition have been markedly cold, even when the Czech Foreign Ministry was headed by Karel Schwarzenberg, a descendant of an Austrian noble family. Problems related to Czech labour, historical tensions arising from the Beneš decrees, and the construction of a nuclear power plant close to the border, were seen as difficult by governments in Vienna, and for the Austrian extreme right they became the guiding themes during election campaigns. Both countries have different approaches to NATO, too.

Rapprochement with Prague should be explained not only by a desire to improve neighbourly dialogue, but also in the geopolitical context. Austria under a socialist government has implemented a policy of "building bridges" between the EU and Russia, which in practice often meant defending Moscow's position. A number of common interests, from involvement in a gas transit pipeline from Russia to southern and central Europe, which would strengthen the role of Baumgarten as a continental gas hub, through the increasing level of investment exchanges (Russia has invested more than €10 billion in Austria, while Austria has put €8 billion into Russia), to the benevolent personal contacts between the elites of the two countries, have proved troublesome during the Ukrainian crisis. Austria not only put off the introduction of sanctions, but also showed a few gestures of support to Putin, among the most spectacular of which was the Russian president's working visit to Vienna in June 2014, during which he signed a contract for the construction a 50-kilometre section of the South Stream gas pipeline in Austria.

Thanks to Czech and Slovak resistance to the tightening of sanctions, Vienna has started to see in these two countries potential allies in the EU. This may be indicated by the Austrian initiative, also adopted by the other signatories, of coordinating the positions of the triangle before each European Council. However, it does not seem that creation of a pro-Russian platform within the EU was the main goal of the initiators in Prague. Faymann's rhetoric may have the support of Miloš Zeman, but the ČSSD leadership is much more divided on strategy towards Russia, and speaks less unequivocally than the Czech president, or even politicians of the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Slovakian SMER. Sobotka himself is rather a supporter of staying EU unity.

Isolation of Hungary, Trouble for Poland. Although it was the prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán, who spoke about creating an anti-sanction coalition in the EU, due to ideological differences and a restrictive economic policy that hits the Austrian companies and banks operating in Hungary, his participation in the declaration was unlikely to have been accepted by Faymann. In the short term, this means Budapest's deepening isolation in the international arena, which is all the more painful because, during the greatest tensions in its relations with the EU, the Central European countries promoted a gentle course towards Orbán. However, depending on the final alignment of the triangle, as a local platform aimed at improving energy and infrastructure relations, as a project for the implementation of leftist economic doctrine in the EU, or as a pro-Russian avant-garde, it is possible that Hungary will, in the long term, join the initiative.

Although the initiators claim that the project is not a rival for the Visegrad Group (V4), its appointment is still troublesome for V4. The need to improve relations with Austria, emphasised by Prague, could be achieved either through Visegrad Plus, or, without creating any new structure via intensification of bilateral relations. Among the triangle's weaknesses are its poorly defined agenda (the declared range of activities is far too broad, and duplicates some Visegrad and EU initiatives), and the interests of the signatory countries, which do not always coincide. Despite this, Poland should not ignore the initiative and instead aim to strengthen the crisis-mired Visegrad cooperation. Institutionalisation along the lines of the Nordic Council should be considered. As the development of dialogue with Austria is beneficial for all countries in the region, Warsaw may insist on convening a V4+Austria summit too. Poland should also encourage the Czech Republic to present an ambitious agenda for its presidency of the V4, which will begin in the second half of 2015.