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Understanding New Polish Intermarium:
Trap or Triumph for the Visegrad Group?

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Vít Dostál

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Introduction

The Polish Presidency in the Visegrad Group (PL V4 PRES) will start on 1 July 2016. With Warsaw's year at the helm of the Central-European grouping approaching, many questions arise. The new government led by the national-conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) redesigns the European policy of Poland. The domestic changes initiated by PiS have eventually led to an unintentional conflict with the European Commission and the European Parliament over the state of the rule of law in Poland. Moreover, Polish officials express their intention to focus on the regional cooperation and assert that the Visegrad Group is at the centre of their attention. This text deals with the new Polish policy vis-à-vis the Central Europe. It describes its ideological foundations and examines the content of expected sectoral initiatives. Finally, it analyses how much Warsaw could rely on its Central European partners.

Central Europe in the Law and Justice's Visions

Broader region of Central and Eastern Europe has gained special attention among (PiS) policy-makers. Polish foreign policy has been traditionally determined by the East-West axis. Post-1989 Poland regarded the West as a source of inspiration, whereas the East was perceived as a source of concern or even threat. Central European policy has existed somewhat in parallel. Poland has definitely made its contribution to the 25 years of development of the Visegrad Group and broader cooperation in the region played substantial role in the foreign-policy vision of President Lech Kaczyński (2005-2010). **The Visegrad Group has always occupied a secondary position in the Polish foreign policy thinking**, though.

The Law and Justice government centres on enhancing cooperation in the region. Firstly, special attention was paid to Central Europe at the PiS programme convention. The panel on foreign policy, which assembled most of the party's foreign-policy thinkers including current foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski, revolved around enhanced Central-European cooperation.¹ Later, Andrzej Duda, shortly after assuming the office of the President of Poland, spoke about **the idea of a bloc of countries stretching from the Baltic Sea on the north to the Adriatic and Black Seas on the south**.² As he presented the idea, it immediately reawakened the concept of Intermarium developed by the leader of interwar Poland Józef

¹ *Myśląc Polska: Konwencja Programowa Prawa i Sprawiedliwości oraz zjednoczonej prawicy*, p.78-87. <http://pis.org.pl/media/download/8ca7395d19e772c16152240faa6b437a9d62212d.pdf>.

² *Sojusz państw od Bałtyku po Morze Czarne? Duda chce odnowić międzywojenną ideę miedzymorza*. <http://forsal.pl/artykuly/886941,sojusz-panstw-od-baltyku-po-morze-czarne-duda-chce-odnowic-miedzywojenna-idee-miedzymorza.html>



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Piłsudski. At that time, the plan to resist German and Russian influence in the region did not work because of mutual mistrust among young nations.

In January 2016 in his annual foreign ministerial speech, Witold Waszczykowski underlined the need for a more active cooperation in the region and particularly within the Visegrad Group.³ In his article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, **Waszczykowski promised to bring new dynamics to the Visegrad Group cooperation** and again stressed the regional dimension of Polish foreign policy connecting the three seas – Black, Baltic and Adriatic.⁴

Still, it remains doubtful which countries should be covered by this format. The core would be comprised of the Visegrad Group (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary), Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) along with Romania and Bulgaria. The link to the Adriatic Sea should be provided by connection to Croatia and Slovenia. In fact, the group overlaps with the countries of EU eastern enlargements of 2004, 2007 and 2013.

The scope is more or less clear, yet not much has been said about the content of this new Central-European cooperation. Likewise, it is not known what Warsaw actually wants to achieve in the region and **what kind of offer it has for its partners, in particular in the EU and NATO context.**

Ideology

Most of the foreign policy of the new Polish government is marked by continuation of previous directions. Warsaw aims at enhancing forward presence of NATO in Eastern Europe, is suspicious of Russia, supports Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Ukraine and longs for close ties with Washington. **However, there is also an important aspect of discontinuity in the European policy.** PiS believes that deeper EU integration as well as further imitation and incorporation of West-European cultural patterns is harmful for country's development. In the view of the most influential PiS members including Jarosław Kaczyński himself, current EU trends endanger Polish sovereignty, national culture and economic modernization. Moreover, PiS perceives the European integration through the lens of neo-realist theory of

³ W. Waszczykowski. *Informacja Ministra Spraw Zagranicznych na temat polityki zagranicznej Rządu RP w 2016 r.* 29. 1. 2016. <http://www.rp.pl/Rzad-PiS/160129236-Pelna-tresc-expose-Witolda-Waszczykowskiego.html#ap-4>

⁴ W. Waszczykowski. *Dziś i jutro integracji europejskiej- spojrzenie z Warszawy.* 4. 4. 2016. <http://centrumprasowe.pap.pl/cp/pl/news/info/51532,33,msz-minister-witold-waszczykowski-w-faz-dzis-i-jutro-integracji-europejskiej-spojrzenie-z-warszawy->



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International Relations. EU institutions tend to be seen only as instruments and channels of influence of big and rich member states, which want to impose their rules over Poland.⁵

In order to get rid of the peripheral and subordinated position, Poland needs to counter Western Europe. **PiS's ideal model is a poly-centric EU where peripheries balance dominance of the Franco-German core.** For that sake, it needs allies in Central Europe among which it could build a strong and cohesive coalition, ideally also together with the United Kingdom.

Such an alliance is quite a new element in Polish national-conservative foreign policy. Manifestos of PiS or its predecessor – Kaczyński's led party Centre Agreement of the 1990's – were suspicious of far-reaching European integration and Germany, but they did not entail a vision of a broader cooperation in the region.

In that sense **the role of Central and Eastern Europe is mainly instrumental in enforcing Polish interests: balancing Western Europe, retarding the EU integration and retaining sovereignty.** In cultural terms, it is intended to protect the national identity and traditional, social conservative values from their further erosion under the pressure of globalization.

However, Warsaw's self-centred strategy for the broader region is based on false expectations. Almost nobody desires to be dragged into a clash with Brussels or Berlin rooted in Polish domestic politics. While current Poland and Hungary share the vision of national development based on a sharp cultural distinctiveness from Western Europe, other Central and Eastern European countries see the future in the continuation of the European integration and westernization of societies and economies. The East-West divide on the approach to migration which hit the EU in 2015 is perceived as an unwelcome issue, not as an unavoidable ideological battle to be won. **That is why the concept of Baltic-Adriatic-Black Sea alliance alarms many policy-makers in Prague or Bratislava.** They do not wish to be part of any consistent alliance against Chancellor Merkel.

Polish leaders will either realize that or they will find it out if their quarrel with the European Commission over the Constitutional Court is to continue and intensify. Czechs, together with Romanians, Bulgarians and the Baltic countries have to talk directly to Poles and make them understand that regional support for Warsaw has its limits. (Slovakia is now restrained due to the upcoming EU Council Presidency so it can play the role of a mediator and honest broker). If the Commission's investigation of the deterioration of the rule of law in Poland ends up with the voting according the Article 7 of the Treaty, only Hungary is likely to back Kaczyński's

⁵ A. Balcer, P. Buras, G. Gromadzki, E. Smolar. *Jaka zmiana? Założenia i perspektywy polityki zagranicznej rządu PiS.* 2016.

<http://www.batory.org.pl/upload/files/Programy%20operacyjne/Otwarta%20Europa/Jaka%20zmiana%20w%20polityce%20zagranicznej.pdf>



Poland. **All other countries will not want to damage their own credibility in front of Berlin, Brussels and other EU partners.**

Policy Goals

Nevertheless, the Polish plan for the broader region is not based only on false ideology and self-centred needs. **The current government wants to give a fresh impetus to several policy initiatives which are actually neither new nor controversial.** On the contrary, through non-ideological and much needed projects, they could bind the region together.

The first initiative concerns the coalition of the **NATO eastern flank countries which lobby for an enhanced and persistent presence of the Alliance in the region.** The group of countries was formed upon Polish-Romanian initiative and met on the heads of states level in November 2015 in Bucharest. The importance of such a grouping will culminate around the NATO Warsaw Summit, where the future direction of the Alliance will be determined. The initiative has been so far supported by all participating nations.

The second policy area is the EU's migration crisis. In this regard, several **Central and Eastern European countries already form a bloc against binding relocation quotas and emphasize the protection of Schengen borders.** The Visegrad Group in particular is unlikely to alter its hard-line policy so Polish initiatives might be expected to receive partners' support.

The third package involves several projects related to the infrastructural development. Poland will definitely argue for bettering of the energy infrastructure in the region. As the new LNG terminal in Polish Świnoujście was opened last year, Warsaw will lobby for new interconnections in Central Europe on the north-south axis. **Again, this is not a novel idea at all, since such initiatives have been part of the cooperation in the Visegrad Group and broader region since 2009.** Moreover, the whole region is suspicious of the Nord Stream II project, so Poland may count on full support in that regard as well.

Apart from energy infrastructure, **Poland is also concerned about poor north-south transport interconnectedness in Central and Eastern Europe.** Warsaw will therefore push forward the Via Carpathia project – a road interconnection stretching from Klaipeda in Lithuania through Eastern Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria down to Greek Thessaloniki. Polish aim is to get the road on the EU's TEN-T core network list to receive substantial EU funding.⁶ Although Via Carpathia omits the Czech Republic, the emphasis on infrastructural projects in the region should be welcomed in Prague as Czechs

⁶ *Iran zainteresowany Via Carpathią. Polska poszukuje unijnego finansowania.* 19. 5. 2016.
<https://biznesalert.pl/iran-zainteresowany-via-carpathia-polska-poszukuje-unijnego-finansowania/>



plan the second motorway connection between the Czech Republic and Poland. Via Carpathia initiative has to be seen as an opportunity to reinvigorate the Visegrad High Level Working Group on Transport connections, which should by March 2017 provide a joint list of projects to be realized in the next EU Budgetary Financial Framework.⁷

Poland will also push forward a new EU Macro-Regional Strategy for the Carpathian Region, which should deal with the cohesive development of this mountainy area. The pet-project of some Law and Justice politicians, including the Marshal of the Sejm (lower chamber of the Polish Parliament) Marek Kuchciński, has been debated over the past months and will lead to a formal proposal soon.⁸ Again, such an initiative will not harm the Visegrad Group, but Poland has to persuade partners about its added value. As much of the Carpathian Macro-Regional Strategy would overlap with the Carpathian Convention area, potential participating countries need to be aware of the benefits of the new project. Otherwise, it would make more sense to include south-eastern parts of Poland in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region which already covers all other estimated areas.

The above listed infrastructural and regional-development projects are closely connected to the **fourth expected priority area of the PL V4 PRES – the EU budget**. The mid-term budget review will start in the second half of the year and negotiations on the post-2020 shape of EU cohesion and agricultural policies will follow from 2017. The stakes are very high for the whole Central and Eastern Europe and a strong alliance of countries with well-defined interests will be needed.

The positive thing about sectoral initiatives is that **PL V4 PRES will be prompted to engage with the European Commission and the member states in the Council (especially Germany) if it wants to succeed**. Such proactive performance would contribute to balancing negative Polish approach towards the EU institutions and challenge some aspects of PiS' perception of the European integration.

The perspective of PiS on international, European and regional politics is the view of a party which has been isolated from the European mainstream thinking over the last eight years. Of course, regional partners have to tell the new Polish leadership that they object to its vision of Europe and the role Central Europe is supposed to play in it. But by the same token, they have to underline that important sectoral initiatives can only succeed if Poland tempers down its conflicting language vis-à-vis the European institutions.

⁷ *Memorandum of Understanding concerning the Roadmap for Determining the Future Development of the Transport Networks of the Visegrad Group Countries*. 24. 6. 2014.

<http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/memorandum-of>

⁸ *Konferencja „Europa Karpat”*. 27. 2. 2016.

<http://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=E3C18CD2285B078AC1257F640033137C>



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After all, **the grand project of Baltic-Adriatic-Black Sea cooperation has been always there.** The so-called V4+ meetings have expanded in the last years both in terms of sectors and countries involved. The table below demonstrates that the V4 has partnered up mainly with Romania, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia and the Baltic countries. Thus, imposing a new concept would mean to reinvent the wheel.

V4+ PMs, presidential and ministerial meetings in 2007-2015

Romania	34x
Bulgaria	32x
Slovenia	25x
Croatia	16x
Lithuania	15x
Latvia, Ukraine	14x
Estonia	13x
Moldova	10x
Austria, Germany	9x

Note: The table shows how many times the partner countries were involved in the V4+ meeting on the ministerial, presidential or Prime Minister's level starting with the Czech V4 Presidency in July 2007 and ending with the Slovak V4 Presidency in June 2015.

Conclusions

The European policy of the Law and Justice party has been marked by conflicts with the European institutions concerning its domestic rule. **Though this clash has not been planned, Polish behaviour reflects the ideological fundamentals of the party.** The PiS core ideologists do not see the deepening of the EU integration as beneficial for Polish development, as it would endanger the nation's distinctive identity and economic modernization.

Nevertheless, we **should not be afraid of PL V4 PRES. It will not bring anything revolutionary in its programme** which is to be approved by all four Prime Ministers during the summit in Prague on 8 June. Around 90% of all Visegrad Group presidency programmes are comprised of older initiatives which the upcoming presidency takes over. The main focus



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will remain on the coordination of EU policies, though infrastructure, security, migration and cohesion policy will be probably stressed as Polish pet-projects.

Since Warsaw views the EU primarily as an array of competing interests of the member states, it seeks allies in Central and Eastern Europe to counter West-European vision of integration. Still, Prague and Bratislava have to remind Warsaw that they do not share the fundamentals of Polish European policy. This fact does not make the Visegrad cooperation impossible but places additional political burden on it. **Leaders in Warsaw need to be informed that the Visegrad Group – a unique cooperation format being built over 25-years – must not be hijacked by the quarrel between Poland and the European Commission over the Constitutional Court bill.**



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