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Slavkov trilateral meeting: No challenge to Visegrad

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The Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia recently initiated a new format of trilateral cooperation. On Wednesday, their prime ministers will have a tele-conference before the EU summit. Should anybody in the Visegrad Group get nervous about it?

Slavkov (Austerlitz) near Brno, is known as the place of the bloody 1805 battle, one of Napoleon's greatest victories over the Austrians. This small town in southern Moravia is also home of Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka's constituency and is roughly equidistant from Vienna, Prague and Bratislava.

This is where, on January 29, 2015, PM Sobotka hosted his Austrian and Slovak counterparts, Werner Faymann and Robert Fico, launching a new format of trilateral cooperation on cross-border issues and European affairs. Improving neighbourly relations with Austria is one of the foreign policy priorities of the current Czech government. Last year, the Czech Foreign Ministry devised a multilateral initiative designed to revive bilateral relations with Austria in a broader regional and cross-border context. The third partner invited to this initiative was Slovakia, mutual neighbour of both countries. In past few weeks, Czech diplomacy tried to assure Poland and Hungary – the two Visegrad partners left out - that the new trilateral cooperation would concern mainly the cross-border issues, and would not challenge the V4 or try to represent the region externally.

The ambitions, substance and motifs behind the new cooperation format was remains an open question. According to the Czech Foreign Ministry, the main goal was to engage Austria with the Visegrad region, to which it had been reluctant so far. In addition, it was supposed to provide Czech diplomacy with a complementary platform to the Visegrad Group, and supplement its activities in a similar way as cooperation with the Baltic region supplements the Central European vector of the Polish foreign policy.

Austria has been reluctant to engage with the region after 1990. Though it was expected that Vienna would navigate Budapest, Prague and Bratislava through economic transformation in 1990's, it took on a *'hic sunt leones'* approach. Quarrels about nuclear energy, historical issues, opening of the labour market after the EU accession or removal of the Schengen border made any long-lasting cooperation impossible. However, Austrian economic presence in the region is significant. Thus, the initial interest in a new opening of Czech-Austrian relations, expressed last summer during mutual visits of Faymann and Sobotka was understood as a grand promise. Nevertheless, just before the Slavkov meeting Austrian diplomacy again got cold feet and does not have long-term vision for the new *Nord-Trilaterale* format, as it is called in Vienna.

Slovakia agreed to get involved--after initial hesitation. The main motivation was to support a new channel for Czech – Austrian rapprochement, which is after all also in Slovakia's



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interest. On top of that, any new dynamic in the cross-border agenda (long neglected from the Austrian side) would be welcome.

In the end, what came out of the Slavkov meeting was a vague document in four points. [The Slavkov/Austerlitz Declaration](#) refers to a 2015 work plan for mutual cooperation in a number of areas, including tackling youth unemployment, improving cross-border transport links, developing regional gas networks, and joint absorption of the EU funds. The three signatories also agreed to meet on an annual basis in the future. At the press conference, Austrian chancellor and Slovak prime minister spoke against the extension of the EU sanctions on Russia and Robert Fico also announced that all three would hold a teleconference before the next EU summit (February 12-13) to coordinate their positions.

It seems that the new format of trilateral cooperation was hastily pushed to the top level, and the prime ministers meeting took place rather early in the whole process, before a more substantive agenda could be generated at lower levels, and before other partners could be properly consulted or informed. It is no big surprise that the prime ministers then hijacked the agenda to their political needs: all three are socialist leaders, they know each other from PES meetings and currently, faced with the German pressure for a unified EU position, their goal was to demonstrate their opposition to a new level of sanctions on Russia.

Also, the timing of this initiative was not good, for two reasons: first, the key issue for Central Europe these days is the security impact of the Ukraine crisis, in which Austria has very little to offer. Second, it was badly received in Warsaw. Polish diplomacy worried about how the new trilateral coordination format would influence the cohesiveness of the Visegrad Group. Interestingly, there was no reference in Slavkov to V4 plus Austria, which is being revived by the current Slovak presidency.

When one looks at the work plan released on the Czech government website there is no reference to V4. Our sources tell us it was there was such intention in Prague at the beginning, later omitted under Austrian insistence. However, there have been voices in Prague signalling that Austria may co-finance some projects of the International Visegrad Fund in Western Balkans or Eastern Partnership countries.

Challenge to V4?

As a result, the whole Slavkov meeting raised more questions than answers. Would this format be used as a regular platform for consultations before other EU summits? Does it undermine the regular V4 prime ministers meeting before the EU summits? Why such timing? What were the motivations of each partner involved?



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Though Poland first accepted the new Czech-Austrian-Slovak triangle as something what would complement, not hinder the V4, the outputs from Slavkov raised new concerns. They are well summarized in short analysis published last week by two leading Polish think tanks ([OSW](#), [PISM](#)). First, it is not understood, how (and if at all) will the trilateral format of coordination of prime ministers be merged into the regular V4 consultations. Second, Warsaw balked at the resulting message from Slavkov against intensifying EU sanctions on Russia. Third, as noted by some Polish experts, many initiatives from the working programme could have been discussed within the EU Strategy for Danube Region; one of the projects launched with sizeable support from Vienna and so far lacking visible results.

Coordination via tele-conference among the three prime ministers before European Council meetings was most likely an *impromptu arrangement* agreed on the spot. It remains to be seen if it is repeated: on Juncker's investment plan down the road, for instance, there is on-going coordination in the V4 format and Austria's ability to offer its Slavkov partners a better deal is questionable. There is no corresponding diplomatic infrastructure and inter-government consultative mechanism in place as in the case of Visegrad.

The right lessons Warsaw should take from this is not one of hurt feelings. On the contrary, Polish interest is to be engaged with its V4 partners even more, not less – and be aware of their sensitivities. For instance, to overcome the old habit of sending Polish deputy ministers to V4 ministerial meetings. At the same time, there was lack of visible reactions from Budapest – perhaps a sign that Hungarian diplomacy and foreign policy establishment is currently occupied with other issues.

So what could be some tangible result from the Slavkov format? Is there a pragmatic agenda behind the trilateral cooperation?

Integration of gas markets as low-hanging fruit?

The low hanging fruit is regional integration of gas markets and their regulatory frameworks. This has been a V4 goal for several years, with a hefty dossier produced since 2013 when Polish V4 presidency took it as its priority. As this process has slowed down, it opens door for piece-meal approach and 'smaller integration' of Czech, Austrian and Slovak gas markets which are easier to interconnect. Such integration of gas markers would be beneficial mainly for Austria, since it would enhance the role of the regional transition hub in Baumgarten and raise purchases on the Austrian spot market. On the other hand, Austria will protect its electricity market and will reject construction of still missing grids between Austria and Slovakia.



Conclusion

Overall, this initiative does not look likely to have a lasting effect. In the long-term, each of the three countries has their own set of core interests and partnerships. The Czechs would like to re-vive bilateral cooperation with Austrians starting with cross-border issues. That would also produce the first significant results of the new social-democratic foreign policy in Prague.

Austrians desperately need EU allies for a dovish policy vis-à-vis Moscow. Orbán's Hungary is a discredited partner, and Prague and Bratislava would prefer not be seen from Brussels as pro-Putin governments.

Slovaks are more than ever committed to the Visegrad Group, which cements regional stability and dilutes potential support for a revisionist agenda for Central Europe being more and more openly encouraged by Russia.

The main risk is that the Czech and Slovak might wish Austrian engagement more than the Austrians themselves. This would bring it all back to 1990's. Some elements hint to this already. The next meeting in 2016 is going to take place in Slovakia, not Austria. Fico is perhaps going to use the event during the campaign before the parliamentary elections.

Last but not least, the Russians were pleased with the Slavkov meeting. A new regional format which would counterbalance Poland or the Baltic states is something they wished to have in Central Europe. That would be a bad result for current Slovak and the upcoming Czech V4 presidency. Prague and Bratislava definitely do not want to worsen the quality of the Visegrad cooperation, which is questioned after all turbulences in 2014. On the contrary, the motto of the Czech V4 presidency is going to be "V4 Trust". Consolidation is the right slogan for the group at the moment. However, coming from the Prague's Czernin Palace (Foreign Ministry), it would better be accompanied with more consistency and dialogue with Warsaw.



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