

Visegrad's Role in EU Foreign Policy and Global Strategy

“European Foreign Policy Scorecard 2016” Public Launch

The Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) of the Central European University organized the conference [“Visegrad's Role in EU Foreign Policy and Global Strategy”](#) in cooperation with the European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) on March 30, 2016. The conference served as the official launch of ECFR's latest edition of the [European Foreign Policy Scorecard](#), an annual assessment of the European Union's external action published every year since 2011. The discussions also provided an opportunity to channel expert input into the expert outreach and coordination process organized along with the development of the EU's Global Strategy, a new strategic document elaborating on the future of the EU's external action. The outreach process, which included about 40 events all across the European Union, is coordinated by the EU Institute for Strategic Studies (EUISS).

European Global Strategy: State of Play and Expectations

Opening the first panel of the event, **Péter Balázs**, director of CENS, highlighted that several major changes have taken place in the past 13 years since the adoption of the European Security Strategy (ESS) in 2003. Due to the big enlargement round of 2004 and 2007, the overall weight of the EU has increased both economically and in terms of population. The growth of the size rendered internal diplomacy even more significant than before, sometimes to the detriment of external diplomacy. The Lisbon Treaty introduced new devices to support the Union's external action, including the position of the High Representative, but quoting Nathalie Tocci, advisor to HR Federica Mogherini, Balázs underlined that we are still far from implementing the letter of the Treaty. Balázs called attention to the diversity of new conflict areas (in Syria and the wider Middle East, in the Eastern neighborhood), which are becoming increasingly interconnected and are close to Europe, unlike conflicts before. The goal of this meeting, he said, is to collect and develop ideas that can feed into the development of the Global Strategy, keeping in mind a more and more complex environment.

The development of the EUGS is not happening in a vacuum and much has changed even over the past one year, noted **Antonio Missiroli**, director of the EUISS. While in 2003 the ambitious document of the ESS envisioned “a secure Europe in a better world” marking the hay-day of the West, now the world is more connected, more contested and more complex, posing the need for a stronger Europe in a less secure world. Nevertheless, the EUGS will not be a second ESS. In light of the strategic assessment, published in June 2015, that reviewed the major threats faced by the EU and the overall environment the Union operates in, the High Representative now works on a document that will be global both in terms of geographic and thematic coverage. The developments of the past year have strongly underscored the general feeling of insecurity in Europe, but the drivers of this notion are

perceived very differently across the continent. According to Missiroli, reconciling these feelings is one of the key goals of the consultation process and the development of the EUGS in order to be able to construct a fresh, common narrative, a shared sense of direction and a credible action plan for the European Union as a whole. External challenges are coupled by internal ones as the strategy is being prepared in the shadow of the approaching British referendum about the UK leaving or staying in the EU. The referendum was even scheduled for the day when HR Mogherini was supposed to present the final strategy in front of the European Council.

It is especially challenging to strategize in this climate; nonetheless, the EUGS seeks to identify the common interests of the EU's 28 member states at the core of which should lay security, prosperity, defending democracy and the rule-based international order. While the values of the EU are set out in the Treaty, there is currently no document that would identify the interests of the Union in a long-lasting way. Some of the key elements Missiroli underlined as guiding principles of the strategy were *engagement* (both with all regions of the world and the occurring challenges), *responsibility* (both at home and worldwide) as well as *cooperation in multilateral formats*. The strategy will seek to build and foster state and social resilience and will seek the EU's contribution based on its own normative knowledge and experience to the development of regional, sub-regional and global governance structures, especially in areas where these should still be built, e.g. in cyber-security and space. Since resources are limited, the better usage of the EU institutions' and the member states' resources will be strongly supported. As Missiroli noted, at this point the expectation is that the discussions about the EU's strategic role will continue even beyond 2016, but if all goes well, the strategy will be *welcomed* at the end of June, possibly also coupled with a new mandate to continue the exercise toward the development of a second document with actionable points in the second half of this year.

Károly Grüber, head of the Department of Common Foreign and Security Policy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary called the meeting a timely exercise as the finalization of the EUGS is drawing near. As his first observation, he also highlighted the difference between the environment of 2003 and 2016. In 2003, when Hungary was not yet a member of the EU, the mood in Europe was optimistic, forward-looking and progressive, even despite 9/11 and the war in Iraq. Today, the overall situation is dark and defensive. We have a crisis in Syria and millions of refugees are seeking survival. There is a conflict in Ukraine the severity of which we have not seen in the neighborhood since Bosnia. There is also a migration crisis. And all this while the EU is not doing well economically, he noted. The above are circumstances any new European strategy needs to consider. While the ESS was an idealist project, now the term "pragmatic idealism" is in use. Grüber labeled this as cautious realism, which signifies a shift in the approach, and which, in his view, is recognized among policy makers.

Elaborating on the political calendar, Grüber added further elements to the earlier mentioned UK referendum, which will have major implications whatever the final decision may be. In June 2016, decision about the prolongation of the sanctions against is in order, which will define EU-Russia relations for the next 2-5 years. Furthermore, based on the Commission's blueprint about the future of the EU's migration and asylum system, crucial discussions are expected across the EU, which will touch upon all related issues of Schengen and security as well. These shorter-term matters of policy making have to be managed directly in parallel with a longer-term policy planning with a 5-7 year spectrum, which he considers a challenge for all actors.

Finally, he touched upon the question of ownership of the strategy, written by a team led by Nathalie Tocci, advisor to HR Mogherini, reminding that its predecessor, the ESS, was not endorsed and welcomed by the Council in 2003. While the post-Lisbon environment is different, and member states are involved through a variety of events, public and official consultations, he cautioned that

whether the strategy will be legitimized by all member states through an endorsement is still to be seen.

Visegrad and the Global Strategy

After introducing the current state of play in the development of the EU Global Strategy, the second panel of the conference sought to discuss the role of the four Visegrad countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) in European foreign affairs, especially in light of the events of the previous year, which has put the group in the center of attention in the EU. Presenting its [website](#), **Zsuzsanna Végh**, research fellow at CENS, draw up the main findings of the latest European Foreign Policy Scorecard. The year 2015 was characterized by continued crisis in the EU's immediate neighborhoods (in Ukraine, in the Middle East, due to the flight of masses of refugees and migrants to the EU). The European Union was incapable to solve or appropriately react to these challenges, which eventually led to reliance on its neighbors (Turkey and Russia), albeit on their terms. The latter put European values and principles under risk, and all in all, the crises rather divided than united the member states. As a result, the Scorecard assessed the EU's multilateral action to be at its worst ever since 2010. The lack of unity among the member states led to some of them taking the initiative individually. In this regard, Germany's activities are commendable: out of 12 surveyed issues, the Scorecard highlights German leadership on as many as 8. Behind the lack of EU drive stands the inadequacy of the post-Lisbon framework: with weak central institutions, no political and strategic vision, and insufficient capabilities, the EUGS is indeed timely. While the German leadership covers a wide spectrum, the Visegrad countries mostly acted as leaders on issues in the Eastern neighborhood (on sanctions against Russia or on supporting Ukraine), while in the Southern neighborhood and on the refugee crisis they were deemed slackers undermining joint action or due to their limited contributions. Concerning these categorizations, **Milan Nić**, director of the Central European Policy Institute, voiced that Central and Eastern Europeans seem to score more critically than their Western European counterparts, as illustrated by the fact that the countries of the wider region has lead the group of the slackers several times in the past years. He highlighted that on the two key portfolios which are important for the Visegrad countries (support for Ukraine and strengthening EU engagement in the Western Balkans) none of the Western European countries (not even the Netherlands, which was already in 2015 preparing for the referendum on the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement) are mentioned among the slackers, whereas when it comes to humanitarian support for the refugee crisis, there are 14 slackers altogether. The leader on this issue is of course Germany, but the UK's and Denmark's categorization as leaders raises questions, he noted.

Talking about the positions of the individual Visegrad countries, **Martin Michelot**, research director of EUROPEUM, argued that as also indicated by the Scorecard, on certain policy areas Prague was rather breaking away from the rest of the group. Its main priorities towards the EUGS (strong engagement in global governance, strengthening the regional architectures, rethinking the EU's role in security and crisis, and strengthening resilience) reflect a robust approach, which however lies on vulnerable principles. While this stance distances the Czech Republic from the Eastern flank, the strong normativity of the approach is somewhat problematic when it comes from this region, said Michelot, since it was the Visegrad Group that has broken down the walls of normative Europe over the past year and contributed to creating divisions.

Adam Balcer, project manager at WiseEuropa, highlighted that with the new government in Poland, the idea of the *Intermarium*, a regional alliance from Estonia to Greece between Russia and Germany, which of course includes the Visegrad countries, has become the center of attention. This

regional focus has been highlighted already in mid-2015 when after taking office the first visit of President Andrzej Duda took him to Tallinn on the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, sending a strong signal to partners in the region. With regards to the neighborhoods, Poland's natural focus is of course Ukraine. The Middle East is practically off the radar and tangible Polish support for the fight against ISIS is minimal (4 airplanes have been offered for reconnaissance missions though). In fact, after the terror attacks in Western Europe, now 85% of the Polish population is against direct engagement in the fight against ISIS, said Balcer. Beginning already in the end of 2015, however, internal politics and external relations have started to be intertwined due to the international criticism the new Polish government's actions concerning the constitutional court has provoked. This matter continues to dominate foreign relations well into 2016, as well.

The political landscape has been developing also in Slovakia over the previous few months, where after the recent election a grand coalition has been formed under the leadership of Robert Fico. The new government of Slovakia is now preparing for the country's first EU presidency, highlighted **Milan Nič**, however, with relations stained over the past year with Brussels when PM Fico played "second fiddle" to PM Orbán on the issue of the refugee crisis. Thus the emphasis currently is on normalizing the tone. Being the only Visegrad country in the Eurozone, the wider interest of the country was to keep the region close to the EU core, but with the responses to the refugee crisis, we now see the biggest rift between the East and the West in general, and between Germany and the region in particular. On other issues, however, Slovakia has played more constructive role in EU foreign affairs. The Western Balkans has been an important portfolio for the country, and thanks to the existing bipartisan support, Slovakia also provided significant support for Ukraine both on reforms and with the reverse energy flow at a time when the key EU actors were preoccupied elsewhere.

Being associated with illiberal backsliding by being part of the region is increasingly problematic for Slovak diplomacy. As Czechs are trying to protect their good relations with Berlin, Slovaks are trying to do something similar in the Eurozone, and there are strong ongoing consultations between Bratislava and Prague. In the future, the reform of economic governance in the EU will be of high importance for Slovakia, while global governance related matters are expected to be raised during the Presidency as well. This will also be the time when the results and consequences of the UK referendum will start to play out, having fundamental consequences for the EUGS.

Discussing what potential elements of a joint Visegrad position they consider strong and tangible, the panelists pointed to the incorporation of the transatlantic cooperation as a key partnership into the EUGS. According to **Martin Michelot**, the focus on transatlantic security in the joint Visegrad position says a lot about how the region views itself and what it thinks it can achieve jointly. There is, in this regard, some tension between the EU and NATO on security. In the case of the Czech Republic, however, it is clear that while there is an interest on the Czech side to take part in EU-led missions (e.g. in Mali), the country remains committed to the implementation of the assurance measures adopted in Wales, and continues to be a strong ally of NATO. The transatlantic relation is one of the strong parts of the Visegrad agreement which sometimes, however, faces some tensions due to the underlying divisions in the region. While the opinion expressed by Hungarian leaders states that the Visegrad Group has never been this strong, there is no such discourse in the Czech Republic, according to Michelot. There is an understanding that on short-term issue (i.e. how to answer to the refugee crisis) the countries see eye to eye, but on long-term matters (e.g. how to develop future relations with Russia) unity is hard to come by.

According to **Adam Balcer**, the current Polish government is also positioning its alliance with the US in terms of foreign policy and military cooperation as a strategic partnership, but while in terms of military expenditures the country is much ahead of the other Visegrad states, when it comes to deployment, it has adopted an over-cautious approach recently, according to Balcer. This goes counter

to the goal of portraying Poland as a middle power and weakens the country's position in the eyes of the US as a credible strategic partner, even though previously it has been active in Iraq and Afghanistan. Additionally, due to the internal developments in Poland, cracks have started to appear in these relations and criticism is on the rise from the side of the US. As Visegrad is an integral part of the wider region the current Polish government is interested in, it pays much attention to the cooperation, noted Balcer. The current PiS government, to some extent in opposition to the previous PO government, even constructs its own identity domestically around the idea that Central Europe is the natural environment of the country where it should engage in cooperation. While the program of the upcoming Polish presidency starting in July 2016 is not yet public, Balcer expects Warsaw to concentrate on infrastructure (especially on the Via Carpatia), on supporting reforms and maintaining a common stance on Ukraine, and since security is now a central topic, probably on the Visegrad Battle Group.

Underlining where the Visegrad countries feel their interests lie, **Milan Nić** pointed to the successful coalition building bringing together 9 states to jointly shape the agenda of the upcoming NATO summit in Warsaw, which will directly deal with problems (i.e. strengthening the Eastern flank) the Visegrad states consider their own. As opposed to this, the EUGS does not seem to be so close to them. Furthermore, including all actors in the Brussels-centered and very institutional process is difficult, argued Nić, and only those get engaged who have a strong stance on the issues central for the strategy. This is something the Visegrad countries do not have on most matters concerned. Apart from the transatlantic relations, Nić also called attention to building resilience against Russian propaganda, various forms of hybrid warfare, the rise of extremism and populism, which all should be on the agenda of the Visegrad states' diplomats in his view. Yet, they do not seem to be actively engaging on these topics in spite of the fact that there are already some EU initiatives where resources could be used to the benefit of the V4. The effects of the migration crisis and the implosion of states in the Middle East diverted attention away from the Eastern neighborhood, state-building in the East, and the enlargement policy, he continued. While enlargement is not on the agenda and will likely not be in the near future either, it matters for the region in the long-term. Therefore Visegrad states should make sure that they are in the room when decisions are made and contribute to a strategic rethink of the EU's approach to the Western Balkans.

*The conference was sponsored by the Central European University
and the European Council on Foreign Relations.*