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Security Challenges in the 21st Century:

The role of big power politics in Central Europe

Central Europe, if you define it as more or less the Visegrad Group of Poland, Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary, hasn't contained any great power itself since the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. It's been a battleground, however, metaphorically and during WW II quite literally, between other powers all the time since then. During the Cold War, any kind of agency for the countries of Central Europe was gone, and the one superpower controlling – de facto, occupying – the region was the Soviet Union while the other superpower, and its allies in Western Europe, were the seemingly unreachable reference point for the hopes of democrats there.

Once the Cold War ended and the Iron Curtain came down, the possibility of regaining agency seemed to go along with the end of power politics for good. Reintegrating with the West looked irreversible. For the first two decades after 1989, a Europe whole, free and at peace, secured through the two decisive Euroatlantic institutions, EU and NATO, paved the way for Central Europe's phenomenal economic growth and apparent firm anchoring in liberal democracy. Classical power politics seemed absent now from Central Europe.

Fast forward to the second decade of the 21st century, and the third of the hard-won freedom of Central Europe, and enter the global economic crisis, a resurgent Russian imperialism, the migration crisis, the growth of populism across the EU, the rise of a more aggressive China, the COVID-19 pandemic while, in Hungary and then Poland, illiberalism established itself as a purported systemic alternative to liberal democracy: a split opened up in the West itself. It dawned on at least on some in the West that democracy was now facing an existential global challenge by authoritarianism, internally as well as by external powers. And Central Europe was caught right in the middle of it.

I will tackle the question of big power politics in Central Europe in four steps: First, asking how exactly the patterns of power and politics have shifted in the generation since the end of the Cold War. Second, describing the threat of external powers to democracy and EU cohesion – focusing on Russia under Putin and China under Xi Jinping. Third, analysing illiberal 'small power politics' in the EU. Fourth, charting a roadmap for Central Europe as an integral part of the EU and for the EU to navigate the years ahead with the goal of saving democracy.

1. What politics? What power? From the End of History to permanent crisis mode

The first observation concerns the nature and content of politics: The end of the Cold War now being more than a generation ago, it is worthwhile to take a step back and look at the whole picture: What was the Cold War all about? More specifically, what did the 'dissidents', the anti-communist opposition movements in the Warsaw Pact countries of Central and Eastern Europe, stand and fight for? For which essential goal did they risk their personal liberty and often enough their lives?

Documents from the 1970s and 1980s give a clear answer: The Prague Charter 77 – in the language of the era – [advocated](#) liberal democracy and the rule of law. Poland's first democratic Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, [declared](#) in the Sejm 24 September 1989 that the rule of law and the

recognition of human and civic rights, as well as small government in order to guarantee maximal creativity of individual citizens, were now the priority. The founding declaration of the Visegrad Group of 1991 [said](#) the same.

The second observation refers to the character of power. If power is the ability to bring others to do something they originally did not intend to do, which traditionally worked via military or economic coercion, then soft power ([according](#) to Joseph S. Nye) is the ability to do so by means of incentives, cultural attraction, influence etc.. Describing the new authoritarians in Beijing and Moscow during the second decade of the 21st century, the term '[sharp power](#)' was coined, signifying an approach in between the classical distinction into hard and soft: an approach where both coercion and incentivisation were intricately combined but mostly hidden – in corruption, elite capture, media control and disinformation, to name but the most important instruments.

For 2 decades, Central Europe looked like it had collectively and irreversibly chosen the West and liberal democracy as its model of political and economic development. In the classical military sense, the security question of Central Europe has been answered. But it turned out that insecurity now came from a different direction: External powers, first and foremost Russia and China, whose ability to play power games in Central Europe was facilitated by an internal authoritarian threat. Often, hostile influence from those powers led to security threats which NATO and EU membership do not, or not sufficiently, address. This is also because they used innovative methods to achieve their goals: The 'end of history' gave way to systemic rivalry, and the dominance of soft power over hard power in Europe was replaced by the use of sharp power by external actors and the development of 'illiberal democracy' by authoritarians in Central Europe.

2. The new battleground for Russia and China

After the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the military withdrawals of the 1990s, Russia grudgingly agreed – actually, had to agree – to Central Europe joining NATO and the EU. That does not mean that networks and business ties equally disappeared, quite the contrary. As Russian foreign policy turned gradually more aggressive under Vladimir Putin and after 2005, Kremlin attempts to (re-)gain ground in Central Europe also intensified.

There is by now a rich literature about Russian influence in Central Europe. Especially after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and military aggression in Eastern Ukraine, Russia has used this influence to undermine the stability of democracy in the EU, and particularly in Central Europe, by sharp power methods such as elite capture, the support of extremist political parties, strategic corruption, disinformation and other tools. The Kremlin's rationale is clearly based on the idea that the very existence of [successful democracies](#) with the rule of law and functioning market economies in the neighbourhood are a direct threat to the kleptocratic authoritarianism that has developed under Putin in Russia. That is why weakening democracy in the V-4 and, if possible, teaming up with illiberals such as Viktor Orbán, are such important elements of the Kremlin's foreign strategy.

The most [extreme case](#) of Russian influence in Central Europe, and the one with the most obvious collusion by the ruling party Fidesz, is indeed Hungary. This concerns energy dependency from nuclear cooperation in Paks II to the dramatic growth of Russian [gas exports](#) in recent years. It concerns aiding and abetting Kremlin strategic corruption through admitting Russia's International Investment Bank (IIB) in Budapest and refusing to cooperate with US law enforcement against Kremlin stooges. Add to this the weakening of Ukraine in its struggle against Russian aggression (purportedly defending minority rights for ethnic Hungarian Ukrainians) and [very limited](#) V-4

solidarity with Czechia in the response to Russia's Vrbětice terror acts coming to light, and a toxic relationship to Russia is obvious. Poland is rather resilient to Russian influence for obvious historical reasons, but in Czechia and [Slovakia](#), there have been some Russian successes recently, including the vaccination diplomacy in the COVID-19 pandemic.

China's case in Central Europe is different from Russia's, although [in recent years](#), Chinese propaganda and disinformation has copied some Russian techniques. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), for three decades after 1982, seemed to slowly open up the country, and – while intensifying international trade and cooperation – gradually allow for more pluralism. Then came the global economic crisis of 2008 and the ascent to power of Xi Jinping as party leader in 2012 and President of China in 2013. He very quickly dispersed all hopes of a further opening. Domestic crackdowns on freedom of opinion were followed by a more and more aggressive foreign policy. But the spectacular economic growth continued at annual rates of 6-8 % while, in the CCP's eyes, the West went into irreversible decline. In Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative of massive transport and infrastructure investments, Central Europe already played an important role.

China's trade and investment volumes with Central Europe may still be low, compared to Western EU member states. But what makes Central Europe attractive to the CCP is its higher vulnerability to sharp power in comparison to Western Europe and the potential to split the EU by having a separate political dialogue with one part – the one that belongs to the '16+1 Group'¹ of mostly former communist countries in the EU and the Western Balkans. While Poland under PiS initially saw stronger cooperation with China and more Chinese investment as a tool to 'counterbalance' Brussels and Berlin, the increasingly sharp and increasingly public rivalry between China and the US under President Trump has brought Poland recently into the camp of the CCP critics among the EU member states. But Hungary remains committed to close cooperation with the CCP, to the point of repeatedly vetoing EU Council resolutions condemning China's crackdown in Hong Kong. There are many other examples, such as the classification of all details about the Chinese-built (and partly Chinese-financed) [Belgrade-Budapest railway](#), or granting the CCP-controlled Fudan University a big new campus in Budapest while the liberal Central European University (CEU) had to largely leave town in 2018.

Besides Hungary, Czechia and Slovakia have also been targets of Chinese influence operations but to a much lesser degree. In Czechia, there has been considerable [pushback](#) against CCP blackmail, although President Zeman continues to be an excellent [example](#) of both Chinese and Russian elite capture.

Ultimately, big power politics in Central Europe is a part of the global struggle of ideas: The conflict between democracy and authoritarianism which is likely to mark the decades ahead. Fortunately, after the Trump years, this idea has been closely embraced by the Biden administration. Contrary to the old administration which was generally withdrawing from the idea of using power to promote values, the new US government has already [made it clear](#) that it not only sees global democracy support as a formidable task, but has also criticized the governments in Warsaw and Budapest for weakening liberal democracy and undermining the rule of law.

3. Small power politics

Of course, the very concept of [illiberalism](#) in Hungary has significantly contributed both to the weakening of the rule of law but also to the vulnerability of the region to hostile big power

¹ After the exit of Lithuania on 23 May 2021.

influence. One element of Viktor Orbán's illiberalism is the attempt to transform the V-4 cooperation into a firm subgroup within the EU with an ideological spin. The Visegrad Group dates from the early 1990s when it served as first a mechanism to coordinate and manage the burying of the Warsaw Pact, and then enhance coordination and avoid competition in joining EU and NATO while taking practical steps in day-to-day political, economic and cultural cooperation. It was Viktor Orbán who tried to give the V-4 an illiberal ideological superstructure in the migration crisis of 2015 and especially after the election victory of Law and Justice (PiS) in Poland that year.

Nevertheless, while the governments of Poland and Hungary could [agree](#) on migration policy in 2016, railing against Brussels' interference on rule of law and waging the current culture war against political correctness and LGBTQI rights, they have always been at opposite ends when it comes to Russia and Ukraine policy. It is likely that this will also concern China which is becoming not only more important to all EU member states but also a topic of more and more 'domestic' relevance. Czechia and Slovakia have, in the past 6 years, not only differed in varying degrees from Hungary's Eastern policy, but their elites and public opinions share Orbán's ideology only in a few points, if at all.

Slovakia, for example, has a deeply ingrained political tradition of constructive engagement with the EU institutions and general belief in a strong EU with elements of supranationalism being positive for Slovakia's national interest. This latter Hungarian-Slovak difference is also the backdrop to the recent controversy between Viktor [Orbán](#), who [advocate](#)s the V-4 to become a strategic counterweight to France and Germany in the EU and Slovak former Prime Minister Mikuláš [Dzurinda](#) who argues for a much more constructive and cooperative definition of the Visegrad Group inside the EU.

To construct the V-4 as an ideologically charged illiberal societal alternative to Western Europe, and as a counterweight to Germany and France, will actually backfire because it weakens the cohesion of the EU as a whole. Moreover, the tendency in Poland and especially Hungary, to wage regular campaigns against 'Brussels', if followed by a larger number of member states, could easily bring the EU to collapse. If everyone behaved like Viktor Orban with his national consultations and referenda, EU integration would come to a grinding halt. In the sense of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, the majority of member states and the EU institutions have to develop strategies against the small power politics that leads to a weakening of the Union and successes to big power hostile influence in the EU.

4. Power, values and a strategy

So far, we have discussed the development and the effects of external and internal threats (and their mutual interaction) to the EU and its founding values. In the final part of this text, I will discuss the proper pushback.

First of all, the seriousness of the threat of big power hostile influence, especially in Central Europe, to the EU as a whole needs to be recognised. Most importantly, Russian and Chinese sharp power must be countered by a plethora of [strategies](#) by the EU and its member states, always encompassing EU institutions, national governments and/or civil society. Elite capture must be exposed, energy dependence reduced, direct investment screened, money laundering prevented and disinformation debunked. The EU will also have to 'learn the language of hard power', both by increasing its own military capabilities and improving sanction mechanisms but also by reinforcing cooperation with NATO, and particularly security cooperation with Britain after Brexit.

At the same time, the EU needs to better enforce its fundamental values, democracy and the rule of law, on the inside. This will not be possible overnight, but increasing the cost for undermining those values must become a major function of the EU institutions, and a worthwhile goal of the majority of member states. The rule of law mechanism in the instruments of financial solidarity introduced in 2020, while maybe not the final answer, is already of great importance.

The EU cannot become a global player and support international norms (i.e. 'export stability') without internal enforcement of values. It does not matter whether the weakening of the values is caused or promoted more by internal or external factors: It is the undermining of checks and balances in cases such as Hungary and Poland and a group of other member states which has disastrous effects on the Union as a whole.

In a nutshell: In order to ban hostile power politics from Central Europe, Central Europe has to reject power politics within the EU. In order to become resilient to hostile big power influence, the European Union has to become a normative power both inside and in the neighbourhood. In order to effectively become a normative power in the neighbourhood, the EU has to develop its power beyond soft power, and develop hard power tools.