

**Meeting of the working group Europe CERI-Sciences Po /CAPS –
Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères**

Meeting of April, 3rd 2019

“Central Europe in the Next Seven Years. Five Scenarios”, with Joerg Forbrig and Wojciech Przybyiski, authors of the report “Central European Futures 2025”

On April 3rd 2019, the working group “Europe” organized by both the Centre for Analysis, Planning and Strategy (CAPS) of the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Centre for International Research (CERI) at Sciences Po, met to discuss the different scenarios underpinning the future of Central Europe.

Joerg Forbrig and Wojciech Przybyiski are the authors of report “Central European Futures 2025”. The former is a senior transatlantic fellow for Central and Eastern Europe at the German Marshall Fund, based at the Berlin office, and director of the Fund for Belarus Democracy. Holding a PhD from the European University Institute in Florence, Joerg Forbrig has published widely on democracy, civil society and Central and Eastern European affairs. Prior to joining the German Marshall Fund, he worked as a Robert Bosch Foundation fellow at the Centre for International Relations in Warsaw. Wojciech Przybyiski, is since 2007 the chairman of the Res Publica foundation based in Warsaw and the editor-in-chief of Visegrad Insight, platform for debate and analysis on Central Europe, founded in 2012 by Res Publica, in which the discussed report is published. His new book “Understanding Central Europe” (co-edited with Marcin Moskalewicz) was published in 2017.

I. Joerg Forbrig and Wojciech Przybyiski’s presentations

Wojciech Przybyiski opens the presentation by reflecting upon the historical shift for Central and Eastern European societies that constituted the early post-USSR period, from 1989 to 1991. He underlines that Central and Eastern European political elites faced a choice between remaining backward and under the influence of the former Soviet Union and joining the project of European integration and developing transatlantic relations with the United States. While this retrospectively seems a very “predefined” historical development, leading to the 2004 European Union so-called “Eastern enlargement”, the region now faces strong uncertainties. What is the direction for Central Europe? The Report discusses the four countries of the

Visegrad Group¹, namely Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia². Yet, Wojciech Przybylski emphasised how there can be alternative definitions of Central Europe. Joerg Forbrig argued that former East Germany still shares many similarities with the Visegrad countries, politically and economically. The Baltic States and Romania could also be potentially included in the comparative sample. Moreover, he insisted on the idea that the five scenarios presented in the Report are “not a scientific study”, but a mental exercise of imagining the future.

The Report explores five scenarios that Central Europe could face within the next seven years in a changing context, both regionally and domestically, that vouches for the following dynamics:

- The decrease of the liberal certainty that the post-Soviet context had originally spawned, reflected in a spread of illiberalism, especially amongst young individuals.
- A worldwide resurgence of nationalism that calls into question the European project.
- As Central European economies develop, a challenge is posed the economic model originally based on a dynamic reflecting cheap labour costs.
- The “return of geopolitics” induced by Russia’s enhances foreign policy, military and rhetorical activism and aggressiveness.
- Fluctuating American foreign policy calls for a reflexion upon Central European security guarantees linked to NATO.
- Central European countries, especially Poland, face demographic decline.

1) **Scenario 1: The triumph of illiberalism**

Joerg Forbrig and Wojciech Przybylski present the scenario testifying to the triumph of sovereigntist tendencies. What if the political practices associated with Viktor Orbán, the PiS Party in Poland, and European extreme-right parties as AFD in Germany would be mainstreamed? Both speakers emphasise how the will to eliminate checks-and-balances and to use scapegoats for political purposes has further developed in Central Europe. They precise that the upcoming European elections will help understanding these developments. If this scenario further develops, we could witness Central Europe claiming competences back to the national scale. We would thus observe a setback of democracy and rule of law, further fragmenting the European Union. Finally, authors insist that this process does not happen in a linear way, as usually regarding the development of illiberal politics.

2) **Scenario 2: Central Europe fractured**

Scenario 2 hinges on similar symptoms than scenario 1, namely increasing sovereigntist and illiberal trends in Central Europe. Scenario 2 implies that the latter does not gain momentum in the rest of the continent. Conversely, the rest of the European Union would remain faithful to democracy and rule of law standards. This two-speed dynamic between Central Europe states and other EU members in fact divides Central Europe. Both Joerg Forbrig and Wojciech

¹ The group emerged following a meeting in February 1991 in the Hungarian city of Visegrad, in order to foster military, cultural, economic and energy cooperation with the aim of furthering their integration within the European Union. See the Bratislava Declaration of the four prime ministers on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group in 2001:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140824082057/http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava>

The choice of Visegrad intentionally alluded to the Congress of Visegrad, held in 1335, during which Charles I of Hungary, Casimir III of Poland and John I of Bohemia formed an anti-Hasbourg alliance, notably aiming at better accessing European markets and trade routes.

² The group expanded the number of its members as Czechoslovakia dissolved in January 1993. It is now often referred to as the V4.

Przybyiski emphasise a lack of cohesiveness amongst Central European countries, although we often do not realise it at first glance, notably when thinking of their cohesive opposition to the refugee quotas in 2016. This case was an exception. Visegrad states are in reality far more diverse. Joerg Forbrigg and Wojciech Przybyiski examine what potential directions could take the four Central European countries. First, Slovakia would be the country most involved in the European integration process. Slovakia is already within the Euro-zone³, and its recent elections have vouched for an “internal resilience” of the Slovak society against issues as corruption and social conservatism. Second, Hungary may try to go in the opposite direction. Orban’s ambition is currently to be a strong European actor within the European system. He might be disappointed and withdraw into domestic politics, potentially willing to leave EU and NATO and associate with strong powers as China or Russia. Third, authors hope that Polish politics can be moderated by European action, as the country has witnessed a tension between conservatism and pro-European stance for the past two decades. They insist on potential security concerns that the European Union might facilitate. Fourth, the authors underline that Czech Republic might show “enough ingredients to suffer an accidental exit from the European Union”. As the political centre is currently very fragile, the political right and left gaining strength, the latter might push the centre towards questioning Czech Republic’s membership to the EU. The Czech society is currently one of the most Eurosceptic of the European Union⁴. Overall, these divisions can lead to the marginalisation of Central Europe.

3) Scenario 3: the “Shotgut Wedding”

This third scenario postulates that strong pressures exogenous to European states and societies will push individual countries to wish a substantial deepening of the European integration process in order to deal with challenges as globalised finance, migration flows, climate change or an increasingly insecure European neighbourhood. This scenario notably unveils that the European project generally tends to be romanticized through the rhetorical emphasis on shared common values. Yet, there are material grounds that should keep states and societies in the European projects. As Central European countries’ economic model of development is “running out of steel”, requiring policy shifts and reforms (notably regarding technology or labour), an economic recession would impact Central Europe very badly. Vulnerable Visegrad countries would hence strongly benefit from a deepened and strengthened European integration, that would assist them. A second factor of vulnerability is related to security. Guests assume that Russia is likely to remain quite aggressive. Heightened security concerns in Central Europe would again lead to remain close to strong European states. In this scenario, European Union countries’ display of willingness to support Central European states may lead the latter to strongly support the European project and focus on the idea of Europe as a collective entity. This dynamic would induce a European Union “more integrated than ever”.

4) Scenario 4: Central Europe Spring 2.0

This fourth scenario sees the emergence of a new generational dynamic led by young central Europeans, forming a new political elite, calling into question the political class who emerged at the beginning of the post-Soviet era. The trend of contestation led by this generational movement would be supported by technological tools, a “technological 1968”. The

³ Since January 1st, 2009.

⁴ See European Commission’s Eurobarometer :

<http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/26/groupKy/314>

assumption here is that this large-scale mobilisation is pro-democratic and pro-European, opposing political extremism, social injustice and global trends threatening prosperity and peace. Yet, we cannot take for granted that this mobilisation will certainly be pro-European and democratic. This scenario is envisaged “for the sake of idealism”.

5) Scenario 5: Security vacuum

In a context of an American retreat from Europe and ever-increasing Russian military capabilities and hybrid warfare activities, scenario 5 translates a situation in which the transatlantic security system breaks apart. NATO’s article 5 would cease to exist as a security guarantee and the EU would fail the commitment to provide its members with collective security. As a response to an enhanced insecurity of Central European countries, the latter might wish to diversify their security guarantees through building bilateral arrangements with non-European states. Would Poland draw closer bilateral relations to the US? Could other Central European states build ties with Russia or China? The current policy of Belarussian President Lukashenko encouraging China to invest in his country to counter both pressures from Russia and the EU is an example that goes in this direction. Central European countries may also decide to leave NATO, to be safer, reflecting a broader process of “bilateralizing security guarantees”. As a consequence, Central European states would securitize their respective countries from within. Joerg Forbrig and Wojciech Przybylski here draw a comparison with inter-War period in Central Europe, a context that vouched for both failing democracies and enhanced bilateral links with external powers. The situation of dependence towards different external powers for security would greatly destabilise the region and lead to potential regional conflicts.

II. The debate

1) Central European or European issues?

The working group firstly unanimously agree that although these issues seem to be confined within the Central European region, all EU member-states held the responsibility to first, feel concerned and second, take action. Indeed, as well as Mediterranean challenges should be addressed from Central Europe, Central European challenges should be translated into the European debate, as it has strong impacts at the European level, regarding the fear of democratic backsliding and securitization processes. The issue of European sovereignty is emphasized. A securitization process would indeed make European states more easily vulnerable to external influences, as its civil society would be far less vocal. Conversely, the need of resilient civil societies was stressed during the debate. The European Union as well as individual member-states at bilateral levels should be vocal in the promotion of this agenda. The role that embassies should play in this process is notably emphasised.

A member of the working group mentions a large survey recently published by the French think-tank FONDAPOL (*Fondation pour l’Innovation Politique*)⁵, showing that the trends observed in Central Europe are similarly observed in the rest of the European Union. Yet, these trends are far more pronounced in Central Europe. This reinforces the idea of the need to address trends that may be more visible in Central Europe. Therefore, Joerg Forbrig adds that we should take Central Europe more seriously, as the region gives early indications of developments that could take place in all European societies.

Increasing distrust in parliaments, seen as inefficient, and of democracy in general, is therefore a pattern that is witnessed within the Visegrad countries. Yet, these concerns are

⁵ See <http://www.fondapol.org/etude/lopinion-europeenne-en-2018/>

shared in Western Europe too. The possibility that illiberal forces team up with Eurosceptic forces in the West are well resumed by the project embodied by Orbán and previously by former President of Poland Lech Kaczyński of an “illiberal counter-revolution in Europe”.

2) Tensions between Central European countries and European Institutions.

A question is raised concerning tough measures recently taken against the Hungarian Fidesz party⁶ and Poland⁷, as to whether such European measures are indeed efficient or are in fact counter-productive, strengthening a process of stigmatization and alienation.

The exclusion of the Fidesz from the EPP is first described as an “electoral calculus” from the EP’s larger political group, needing to “manage its fringes” for its own good before European elections. It is also only described as a “weak form of suspension”. A guest affirms that “he [Orbán] has been given so much time”, which would be exactly the reason why this trend has intensified. Another member of the working group states that “Orbán enjoyed EPP protection all the way”, as he had previously secured a deal with EPP members. This would explain why the EPP decision came “so late”. While many European actors have been vocal in the need to boycott and sanction Fidesz’s policies and Orbán himself, the working group insists on the “super protection shield” that Orbán enjoyed within the EPP, that has come from Vienna and the German CSU party – the Christian Social Union of Bavaria. The position of Manfred Weber, CSU-member and EPP’s *spitzenkandidat* for 2019 elections, being supported by Orbán, is then discussed.

A worrying trend in Central Europe is the tendency of States to “take European institutions to Court”, as did Slovakia and Hungary to contest the 2015’s decision of the Council to relocate asylum seekers from Greece and Italy to EU member states. While the ECJ ultimately ruled out Slovakia and Hungary’s claims, it only took decision in 2017⁸. The impact of this decision was in the end “absolutely zero”, as the Council of the EU had decided by then that the quota mechanism was irrelevant⁹. Here, the issue of the saving the credibility of EU institutions appears absolutely relevant.

3) The issue of the European youth

Are young European generations so likely to drive a generational movement to impel a new European dynamic? This is the question raised by a member of the working group. The 1990s vouched for a strong rhetoric putting to the fore the idea of “democratic ethos” that would be “almost biologically” embodied by young generations. This European youth had “democracy in their jeans”. The new younger generation is indeed more vulnerable to authoritarian ideas, not only in Central Europe but in Western Europe too. In this respect, civic education is seen as an investment in future generations. After the 2004 so-called Eastern enlargement, few investment in terms of education to European integration was made in Central and Eastern European countries. It should be done.

⁶ In March 2019, the European People’s Party (EPP), main political group of the European Parliament, has launched the expulsion procedure of Orbán’s party Fidesz, member of the EPP. This notably follows the campaign led by the Fidesz against Jean-Claude Juncker in February 2019.

⁷ On December 2017, the European Commission triggered article 7 of the TEU for the first time, the first step of a process towards depriving Poland of its voting rights at the European level, following Polish judiciary reforms threatening the separation of power between the judiciary and the executive.

Although non-binding, the European Parliament also voted in September 2018 for action against, this time, Hungary, for breaching core EU values.

⁸ See : <https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2017-09/cp170091en.pdf>

⁹ The decision to abandon the quota policy was announced by the European Commission in December 2016.

4) Poland: essentially pro-liberal democracy or conservative?

Within the working group, a debate on Poland is set on whether post-Communist Poland was a strong advocator of liberal democracy (what is often portrayed in broad historical accounts) or whether the country has always and inherently reflected socially conservative stances. A member of the working group affirms that post-1989 Poland has not become a liberal democracy.

This led to a reflection on liberalism and nationalism, mechanisms that historically went hand-in-hand in the region, except in Czechoslovakia.

Wojciech Przybylski adds that Norway has long invested in democracy in Poland through using the tools of open market exchanges. Open market exchanges were often conditioned with a civil society dimension, and Norway made sure to check where its money was going in Poland.

5) On the possibility for European Union countries to converge

The issue of European cohesion is then addressed as part of the working group discussion. It is first argued that while Eastern Germany had been given very strong possibilities to converge with West Germany, this convergence has not been observed. Although it was expected in the 1990s that convergence would happen quickly, current political expressions result from the fact that these expectations of convergence have not been fulfilled. It is argued that we should accept that convergence is hardly reachable, hence we should focus on managing European cohesion without aiming at fully converging all political, economic and social dimensions. Conversely, some members of the working group argue that we can witness strong examples of convergence, notably citing Slovenia as a forerunner. These observations are followed by remarks pointing to the strong disparities observed in wealth distribution within countries, notably between capital cities and the hinterlands. It is argued to we should move away from state-centered figures, not relevant enough to grasp to broader picture.

6) On the impact of Brexit debate

A discussion revolves around the impact of the debate about Brexit on Central European countries. It is indeed interesting to examine the position of Central European states, as the UK had played a role in being the “ideological sponsor” of the narrative of Central European countries, through emphasizing the need to rebalance the Franco-German hegemony. Nonetheless, the Visegrad countries have, as all 27 EU member-states, agreed on the common position regarding Brexit and the integrity of the single market. Despite Central European states try to “step into the UK’s boots”, willing to play Britain’s former role in Europe, economic interests play a predominant role with continental member states, especially Germany. In this regard, we can observe a discrepancy between Central Europe’s narrative and interests. The “hard time” that the almost one million of Polish citizens are currently having in the UK is also mentioned. Furthering the reflection on Visegrad states’ preferences to play a new role in the EU, the working group agree that states groupings will be the future, citing the formation of the so-called New Hanseatic League in February 2018¹⁰.

¹⁰ Established in February 2018 by European Union finance ministers from Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Sweden, the New Hanseatic League prone a more integrated European single market, in particular in the services sector and wish to develop the European Stability Mechanism into a European monetary fund redistributing trade surplus to deficit EU member states.