The Other Europe? How Central Europe Views the Continent’s Security Concerns and Aspirations

Jonathan Eyal

The results of public opinion surveys in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary indicate that perceptions among these Central European countries towards European cooperation and collective identity are complex. Countries in the region cannot all be painted with the same brush.

It is now over fourteen years since the first batch of former communist countries, from what used to be called the ‘Eastern bloc’, joined the EU as full member states, and almost two decades since the same states joined NATO; it will not be long before a new generation of Europeans will reach adulthood without any notion or personal reference to Europe as a divided continent.

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But at least when it comes to our knowledge of the political and security aspirations of the nations that languished behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, Europe remains divided. For although there is plenty of commercially-related polling among the states of Central Europe, statistical agencies such as Eurostat that collect large amounts of data from the new EU member states, and some think-tanks, such as, notably, the Pew Research Center in the US, which sometimes polls politically-relevant questions, there is still a lack of a systematic analysis of public perceptions about security and international affairs matters in Central Europe. Just as importantly, there are no long-term data sets. So, if one does see an opinion poll on, say, perceptions of NATO in Central Europe, one usually ends up with just one set of figures, a snapshot of today that cannot be easily compared with previous figures, and most certainly not dissected across the entire region, mainly because polling times, sizes and methods continue to be both patchy and varied.

This is the knowledge gap that the Globsec Trends 2018 report, compiled by the Globsec Policy Institute in Bratislava in cooperation with the National Endowment for Democracy headquartered in the US, seeks to fill. The Globsec Trends 2018 report is based on public opinion surveys carried out in February and March of this year in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary, known together as the Visegrad Four. The bottom line is that in some respects, the Visegrad countries are not so different from the rest of Europe, but that in others, they remain very distinct.

More ‘European’ than Commonly Perceived

To judge by the frequent commentaries in the Western media, the Central Europeans – or at least the leaders they elect to run their countries – are all confirmed Eurosceptics intent on derailing the unity and purpose of the EU. But as far as the Visegrad Four are concerned, the Trends report confirms that this is simply untrue. In the Czech Republic for example, the proportion of those who believe that the EU is ‘a good thing’ now stands at 51%, in Slovakia it is 53%, in Hungary 58% and in Poland support for the EU stands at a very respectable 62%. These figures are all better than the overall EU average recorded by the latest issue of Eurobarometer, the periodic survey of attitudes on the continent compiled on behalf of the European Commission, which has found that only 42% of all EU citizens tend to express trust in the EU. Although this is not a directly comparable poll, it is still a relatively good benchmark to show that, when it comes to commitment to the EU, the Visegrad Four are not doing badly at all, and Poland, the country that used to be considered as the most recalcitrant in the EU, is actually the most pro-EU in the region.

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More significantly, the figures of support for the EU have registered an increase in two out of the four Visegrad states in comparison with the surveys compiled by Globsec last year. Approval for the EU has gone up by a full 16% in the case of the Czech Republic – hitherto the most
Euro-sceptic of the lot – and by 3% in Hungary. But in the case of Poland, there has been a drop from 78% last year to only 62% now, a trend that may be attributed to the rising chorus of criticism of Poland in many European capitals, the sort of criticism that the Polish government has been quite adept at highlighting.

Still, it is worth noting that the number of those who see the European Union as a bad thing is never very large in the Visegrad region: it stands at 16% among the Czechs, 13% among Slovaks and only 6% in Poland, in comparison with the 51 and 55% of Italians and French, respectively, who claim not to trust the EU according to the latest Eurobarometer poll. Therefore, the image of Central Europe as a bastion of EU-criticism is simply wrong. The region’s citizens believe in the EU slightly more than their counterparts in the old Western Europe and oppose the EU in smaller numbers than their continental counterparts further west.

This conclusion is reinforced by another question put to the sample of the Visegrad countries by Globsec Trends 2018: how they would vote in a referendum on continued membership in the EU. Over two-thirds of the Czechs and Slovaks say that they would vote to stay in the EU; the figure rises to 75% in Hungary and an astonishing 80% in Poland. And, interestingly, these figures are unchanged in Hungary and Poland in comparison with those recorded in a similar survey last year, while the number of those who would vote for continued membership in the EU should they face a theoretical referendum are substantially up in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. In short, the ongoing controversy over the behaviour of the Central Europeans and the supposed lack of ‘EU solidarity’ of the rulers of the Visegrad Four, which has only gotten worse over the past twelve months, has done absolutely nothing to dent the region’s support for continued EU membership.

Similar trends are observable on the question of NATO membership, although curiously – and, again, perhaps counter-intuitively – the share of Central Europeans supporting NATO membership is smaller than those supporting EU membership. Around two thirds of Czechs and Poles consider NATO a ‘good thing’, and the figure stands at 56% in Hungary, but at only 37% in Slovakia, the most NATO-sceptic country in the region. On the whole, these are disappointing figures for the Alliance, in a region where NATO remains central to security and stability. Still, as the authors of the Trends report point out, at least some of this could be explained by generational factors; the share of young Slovaks (those aged between 18 and 24) who support NATO has gone up by 16% in one year, perhaps an indication that NATO’s publicity campaign ‘We Are NATO’, which emphasises the human resources and contributions of nations to the Alliance, may be working as intended by connecting a
new generation to Europe’s premier military organisation.

Furthermore, NATO membership is not a politically-polarising issue; again, with the exception of Slovakia, in all other Visegrad countries the number of those who consider the Alliance a ‘bad thing’ is counted in single figure, with a statistically-insignificant 2% negative score in Poland.

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More interestingly still, when asked whether they would approve their countries’ continued membership in NATO should they be allowed to express their opinion in a referendum, 79% of Czechs, 76% of Hungarians and 82% of Poles say that they would; only in Slovakia, where barely half of the population intended to vote ‘yes’ in a theoretical NATO referendum, would the outcome be in doubt. And, while support for continued NATO membership has remained constant in Hungary and Poland in comparison to similar surveys conducted last year, it has gone up in Slovakia by a healthy 7 percentage points overall and jumped in the Czech Republic by a whopping 26%; ‘support for staying in NATO can be observed across all age groups in the Czech Republic’, note the authors of *Trends*.

**And Yet Different**

But, while clearly more ‘European’ that commonly perceived – at least in comparison with the clichés circulated in most Western media commentaries – the Visegrad Four do feel that they have a distinct identity. When the compilers to the *Trends* report asked respondents in the region where they think they belong, only tiny and often single-digit minorities answered that they felt their nations belonged to the ‘East’: 3% in the Czech Republic and Hungary, 5% in Poland and 13% in Slovakia. But when the question was whether their nations belonged to the ‘West’, only a fifth of Slovaks and barely a third of Czechs answered in the affirmative; the comparable figures for Poland are 42% and 45% for the Hungarians. So, where do the Visegrad nations believe they actually belong? ‘Somewhere in-between’, say a majority of 55% in the Czech Republic and 56% in Slovakia, as well as 47% of Hungarians. Only in Poland was the share of those who believe that their country belongs to neither West or East inferior to those who believed that their nation stood in the West; 31% for the ‘in-betweeners’, compared to 42% for the ‘Westerners’.

Perhaps even more significantly, support for the in-betweeners increased by 14% among the two countries of the former Czechoslovakia. And when young people aged 18–24 are polled on the matter, the figures yield an even more interesting trend. Support for the idea that their nations belong to the West is a full one fifth higher among young Czechs and Hungarians – 57% and 69%, respectively – than the national average for their countries, but 15% lower among Poles; ‘this makes young Poles the weakest supporters of the West in the whole Visegrad region’, comment the *Trends* report authors.

What is the significance of all this? The fact that very few people in the Visegrad group believe they belong to the East is unsurprising and easily explainable: since the ‘East’ very often stood for Russia or the Soviet Union and invariably evoked economic backwardness and political oppression, it is hardly surprising that virtually nobody wants to be associated with that geographic notion. With only a few exceptions, the nationalist movements that led to the independence of the countries in the region that vaguely used to be called Eastern Europe looked to the West – not the East – for inspiration and, when they established their independent states, tried to mimic Western political structures and institutions, rather than the Eastern ones. So, as the old adage in the region used to go, the ‘East’ always begins at one’s eastern borders, namely that almost every nation in the region claimed to be further west.

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But clear indications provided by the *Trends* report, that trying to escape from the embrace of the East does not equate to embracing the West as a totem of national identity, are surprising, since the assumption from the end of the Cold War onwards was that total immersion in the West was precisely what the former communist nations wanted. So, when the authors of the survey presented their findings at the Globsec conference this May, there was quite a bit of anguish and soul-searching among the audience as to what these figures meant. Did they mean that Europe’s post-Cold War integration effort had failed? Do the figures identify a rising isolationist trend or a ‘go-it-alone’ attitude in Central Europe? The explanation might encompass all these things, but also nothing in particular. For the fact that the Central Europeans have their own sense of identity may not be as important as one assumes; the southern Europeans and the countries of the Balkans also have a regional identity, as do the Scandinavians, but that does not necessarily make them either isolationists or ‘separatist’, if one can use the term to characterise an opposition to a Europe-wide concept of identity.
The peculiar fact that younger Poles are less inclined towards the West may just be a passing fad – related to the political cycle in the country – a reaction to the growing feeling in Poland that the country is not considered as an equal member of the EU or, perhaps, a simple technical outcome of the fact that millions of young Poles have immigrated to other European countries, and those left behind to be counted and polled are perhaps more cautious about their Western identity than their expatriate peers.

Either way, the uniqueness of the region is reinforced by the reaction of its electorates to some key Western leaders. Unsurprisingly, Russia’s Vladimir Putin is not the flavour of any month in Poland; only 13% of Poles have a favourable opinion of him. Equally unsurprisingly, however, Putin does rather well in Slovakia – 41% of the population agrees with him – and in the Czech Republic and Hungary, where a third of the population has a favourable opinion about the man in the Kremlin, who considers the end of the Soviet empire – which acted as the prison of nations for all the Visegrad countries – as one of the twentieth century’s ‘worst calamities’. Predictably, US President Donald Trump scores very well in Poland, where almost half of the electorate appears to have a favourable opinion of him, but miserably elsewhere in the region. France’s Emmanuel Macron may have electrified the western half of the continent with his dynamism and electoral zeal in the past year, but receives only a lukewarm reception in the Visegrad; with the exception of the Czechs, barely a third and often just a quarter of the locals agree with him. And if you thought that, due to history and current political frictions, Angela Merkel may be unpopular in Poland, think again; the German chancellor earns the best personal score of any leader in any Visegrad country from the Poles, where precisely half of the population agrees with her, but only a mediocre score of 34% among the Czechs and a 27% approval rating among Hungarians and Slovaks.

Russia, Dark Conspiracies and the Dark Past

One of the most interesting revelations provided by the Trends report is that although views of Russia are not especially positive, the people of the Visegrad are not instinctively anti-Russian either, nor do they buy into the idea that Russians must be behind any dastardly act. For instance, with the predictable exception of Poland, simple majorities in each state in the region disagree with the accusation that Russia influenced the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election. Even larger numbers reject the contention that Russia tried to influence elections in European countries during the past two years.

The Visegrad states’ integration into European structures are strong and sometimes even more durable than those of Western European states

But one of the most depressing findings provided by the Trends report is the traction of conspiracy theories in the region. While a majority of people in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland rejected the contention that ‘Jews have too much power and secretly control governments and institutions around the world’ – the usual anti-Semitic trope professed throughout the ages – a majority of Slovaks, astonishing 52%, agreed with the proposition. And in both Hungary and Poland, although a simple majority of respondents rejected this conspiracy theory, about 40% of the population appears to consider suspicions of the Jews’ alleged power and control as acceptable.

Equally disturbing is the study’s finding that 40% of Slovaks also agreed with the pollsters’ proposition that it was not Al-Qaeda’s, but the US government that allegedly planned and conducted the 9/11 terrorist attacks, although those figures hover around 13–17% in the other Visegrad countries.

And there are some lingering wounds from the region’s dark past. Huge majorities – 81% of people in the Czech Republic and 74% in Poland, for instance – believe that the fall of communism in 1989 was a positive event. And over two thirds of Czech and Polish respondents also believe that their lives improved after 1989. But barely a third of Hungarians and Slovaks appear to share that view, despite the fact that, statistically, their lives are incomparably better today than they were during the Cold War. And an astonishing – because such figures are not encountered elsewhere in the former communist half of Europe – 41% of the Slovaks believe that their lives not only failed to improve after 1989, but that they were actually better off before communism’s fall.

What is one to make of these findings? First, that Central Europeans are still troubled by their history, still burdened by their past and still anguished by their place on the continent. Their political reactions and attitudes are also likely to be different from those of many Western-based electorates. But that, at the same time, their integration into European structures are strong and sometimes even more durable than those of Western European states. And their aspirations – for security, prosperity, the rule of law and a government that is incorrupt and discharges powers fairly – are indistinguishable from those elsewhere on the continent. Perhaps not that remarkable after all, but still worth saying at a time when officials in the EU Commission are dreaming up schemes of how to ‘punish’ Visegrad countries for their supposed ‘ill-behaviour’.

Jonathan Eyal

Jonathan is the Associate Director, Strategic Research Partnerships, and International Director at RUSI. He is also the Editor of Newsbrief.

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