Security Concepts of the Visegrad Countries

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There is no doubt that during recent years the ‘Visegrad Four’ (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) have been playing an important role in the development of the European security conditions and circumstances. From a geopolitical point of view the countries of the group are situated in the ‘grey zone’, between the stable West and unstable East. Their histories are very different, but in the early 1990s they found themselves in very similar situations.

The four countries faced some significant challenges immediately after the change in regime. Among those challenges and tasks were the move from a one-party system to a multi-party one, from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one, from a bloc-type military doctrine to a sovereign security concept.

There were several security options for the Central and Eastern European countries after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact in 1991: to create a new alliance with the Soviet Union (later on with Russia); to create a regional security organisation; to obtain neutral status; to establish a sovereign security policy; to join Euro-Atlantic and West European institutions (first of all NATO).

This article aims to provide a comparative analysis of the security policy (security concepts) of four Central European countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. It examines the subject primarily from the point of view of the countries' aims for economic and military integration, with special attention for NATO enlargement.

First steps

In 1989-90 the peoples of the region began seeking opportunities to exert national self-governments, to search for certain historical models, for historical identities. The slogan ‘return to Europe’ has been widely used. On the one hand it signifies the primary desire for the living standards of Western welfare societies, and on the other hand refers to the feverish search for the point of sea change when the countries of the region slipped from the path of normal development. This act of unreeling the thread of history naturally varies in length from country to country but the beginnings may be assumed to stretch back to at least the pre-Second World War period.

A new type of regional cooperation began to emerge in Central and Eastern Europe. It is necessary to mention that the regional concept of security has been connected with numerous fundamental theoretical and practical problems. The economic, political, religious and cultural demarcation of the region as well as tensions between the nations, ethnic minorities and states of Central and Eastern Europe make it practically impossible to create a reliable regional security structure. In spite of the above-mentioned problems, regional cooperation did have some progress after the changes in 1989-90. The first step took place in February 1991 when the then three Central European countries (Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland) signed the ‘Visegrad agreement’, establishing a special form of regional cooperation.

Bilateral military agreements were signed (the Czechoslovak-Hungarian in January, the Czechoslovak-Polish in February, and the Hungarian-Polish in March 1991). At a meeting of the defence ministers (Krakow in August 1991) an agreement was signed regarding defence cooperation, and the Krakow summit's joint statement (October 1991) expressed the common desire for formal integration into the European economic, political and security structure.

After the disintegration of the bipolar world order it became necessary for each of the countries in the region to formulate new security concepts and military doctrines, to establish civilian control of the armed forces, to execute armament and manpower reduction according
to the CFE treaty, and finally to plan - regardless of NATO integration - the process of restructuring and modernisation of armed forces.

In 1994-1995 almost all the experts in the field of security policy were of the opinion that the four countries of the ‘Visegrad group’ were the best (and probably the only) candidates to be invited to join Western institutions, first of all by NATO.

The real differentiation between the four countries began in 1995-1996. More and more politicians and researchers - while still speaking about four future candidates - nominated Slovenia instead of Slovakia. The real difference was shown by the NATO summit in July 1997, when only three of these countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland) were invited to start accession negotiations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation.

**The Czech Republic**

The predecessor of the Czech Republic, Czechoslovakia, openly declared the principles and aims of its security policy after the political changes of 1989-1990. The security policy documents of this period defined the priorities of the Czech and Slovak Republic as follows:

1. bilateral agreements, first of all with neighbouring countries;
2. cooperation with NATO, the WEU, the Council of Europe and the (then) European Community;
3. cooperation within the framework of the (then) CSCE.

It was at this time that the process finally leading to the establishment of the ‘Visegrad group’ also accelerated.

The Czech leadership considered the Czech-Slovak divorce to constitute good riddance from the Slovak ballast, geopolitical entry from ‘an unstable Eastern Europe into a stable Western Europe’, a relative move towards the West and a distancing from the crisis-zone. This new national self-definition inevitably led to the devaluation of regional cooperation.

The Military Strategy of the Czech Republic was approved by the government in 1994. This document determines the ways of development, preparation and use of the armed forces. It assumes that the Czech Republic is not a member of any alliance and therefore covers its defence using national resources.

The political statement of the Czech government of July 1996 acknowledges the importance of an all-round effort to maintain security and to defend state sovereignty, to preserve democracy and the rule of law and to protect the lives and property of citizens. It declares that the government will pay special attention to defence, to its legislative framework and to integration into NATO and cooperation with the Western European Union.

Future NATO membership and a clear set of criteria and requirements provided the much-needed vision and direction of the transformation process in the Czech armed forces and security policy-making institutions, and speeded up the legislative process. After more than five years of preparations, the Constitutional Law on Security was passed on 22 April 1998. It established the highest executive body in the realm of security and defence affairs, the National Security Council. During its first session, the Council adopted much-needed basic strategic documents: the National Security Strategy, the National Defence Strategy and the Military Strategy. Another eight laws regulating security and defence issues were drafted and sent to the Czech parliament. Transparency of the defence sector has been increased both internally and externally following the NATO Defence Planning Questionnaire and preparation for accession in 1999.

Implementation of the National Defence Strategy is a matter for state and local authorities and also for private firms and citizens. It defines four types of security situation: peace; a state of emergency; a state of danger to the state; and a state of war. It lays down the tasks of various authorities in these situations.

By 1998 the time-scale of NATO enlargement had been set and the Czech armed forces had gone through deep-reaching changes, and it became necessary to adapt the Military
Strategy both to the new realities and to NATO principles. An updated version of the Military Strategy is being prepared for discussion by the government.

**Hungary**

The Hungarian parliament (the National Assembly) passed two parliamentary resolutions in April 1993: the Basic Principles of Security Policy and the Basic Principles of National Defence of the Republic of Hungary. The two documents create the fundamental basis of the individual national security concept (doctrine). Analysing the two documents, one can conclude that integration is considered to be one of the most significant security factors for the Republic of Hungary. Since the documents have been supported by consensus in parliament, it can also be concluded that Hungarian integration into West European institutions is a general political objective of all the main political forces of the country.

The Hungarian preparation process accelerated and entered a new and more intensive phase in 1996. Various institutions were established for more effective coordination of the related activities carried out by different governmental bodies, including the Integration Cabinet (headed by the Prime Minister), which covers both NATO and European Union integration issues. Moreover, a State Secretariat was formed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Coordinating bodies were also set up in the Ministry of Defence, such as the Secretariat for NATO Integration (and the Euro-Atlantic Working Group in the General Staff). After the May 1998 elections a new government was formed which established several new institutions. The most significant from the security point of view is the apparatus of the Chief Adviser on National Security Policy.

The Hungarian government has made significant efforts to improve ties with neighbouring countries. The most important elements of this process were the Basic Treaties concluded with Slovakia (1995) and Romania (1996), irreplaceable tools for strengthening the country's good-neighbourly relations.

Hungary has actively taken part in all forms of regional and sub-regional cooperation, such as the Quadrangle-Pentagonale-Hexagonale, the Central European Initiative, the ‘Visegrad group’ and the Central European Free Trade Association (CEFTA). The country also joined the South European Cooperation Initiative (SECI), launched by the United States.

**Poland**

Taking into account that NATO membership for Poland is of vital importance and unquestioned by anyone in the country, it is surprising that the issue of integration surfaced relatively late among the priorities of Polish foreign policy. Even in April 1992 President Walesa mooted the idea of a Central and East European defence alliance (with the ‘Visegrad countries’ and Ukraine). Only in November 1992 - in the defence programme endorsed by parliament - did NATO membership appear as a priority, and Poland’s desire for NATO integration was the last to be officially declared within the ‘Visegrad group’. This was the moment when Polish foreign policy began an active campaign for the intensification of the relationship with NATO beyond the NACC framework.

The impact of civilian management within the Ministry of Defence was enhanced and continues to be so. In 1992, for the first time, a civilian Minister of Defence was appointed. The Ministry of Defence was reformed in order to subordinate the General Staff to the Ministry (the General Staff was incorporated into the structure of the Ministry).

The main institutions of democratic control over the armed forces are: the Defence Committees of the Parliament and of the Senate; the President (the Supreme Commander in Chief); and the Council of Ministers, in particular the (civilian) Minister of Defence. The main task of the Minister of Defence is to command the armed forces through the Chief of the General Staff. An important change occurred in 1996 in the Ministry of Defence structure, when a special committee formulated the means and provisions with which to enhance democratic control of the military.
The basic statements of the address of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to parliament on 5 March 1998, on the main lines of Poland's foreign and security policy, are the following:

1. In 1998 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs shall focus particular attention on the following tasks of priority importance:
   • support the process of ratification of the protocol on Poland's accession to the North Atlantic Alliance by NATO member states and the continuation of the process of political and military integration;
   • the initiation and a flawless course of negotiations of Poland's accession to the European Union.
2. It is the Polish intention to transform into a lasting phenomenon the animation of the trilateral cooperation between Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, connected with the forthcoming membership in both structures. Poland is already now perceived as the major partner of the Czech Republic in Central Europe. Warsaw is intending to stress consistently the need to create an increasingly stronger community of interests and joint responsibility with Hungary for the problems of the region.
3. In connection with Slovakia, Poland wishes to utilise its possibilities to influence positively the policy pursued by that country, and in particular to act in favour of unhampered development of democratic institutions and procedures. Isolation of Bratislava does not lie in Poland's interest. Warsaw deems Slovak isolation trends as disadvantageous for itself, for Poland and for the region. Poland shall not avoid its active role in drawing Slovakia closer to NATO and to the European Union, after it satisfies indispensable conditions.
4. In connection with the Eastern policy:
   • Moscow is not the only partner for Poland and not even the centre of the Eastern policy;
   • after centuries Poland has not one single Eastern neighbour but several independent states;
   • the East represents not only a threat to Poland but also serious economic opportunities.

Slovakia

The dissolution of Czechoslovakia (on 1 January 1993) meant that Bratislava was able to create an independent state, but from the viewpoint of European integration it also meant a disadvantageous position. Nevertheless Slovakia very quickly managed to obtain membership in different international institutions.

Slovakia was also quick in forming a new security concept: Basics of the National Security of the Slovak Republic and Defence Doctrine of the Slovak Republic were ratified by parliament in June 1994. According to these documents the security of Slovakia is threatened by both external and internal dangers. The potential risks and threats are a result of the geopolitical and geostrategic position of Slovakia.

The external threats were: the significant presence of great powers in the region; the instability of the successor states of the Soviet Union; the escalation of the Yugoslav conflict; uncontrolled arms trade and proliferation; intensification of nationalism; efforts aimed at the revision of European borders; international crime and terrorism; and penetration by foreign intelligence services into Slovakian state institutions.

The following could be considered as current internal risks to Slovakia: the potential increase of nationalism and irredentism among citizens who have the tendency to violate the territorial integrity of the country; the growth of extremist political organisations that may undertake anti-constitutional activities; the increase of organised crime; social tension and other risks that may result from the unfinished transition process; (increase of) corruption; the state's lack of efficient control mechanisms; and risks resulting from the unwise economic policy of the government.
The dissolution of Czechoslovakia did not change the Slovak official position to integrate into West European and Euro-Atlantic organisations, since this was permanently declared in all documents and programmes regarding foreign and security policy. Nevertheless the relationship between Bratislava and Moscow intensified in practice. The Basic Treaty between the two countries (the first document of its type for the independent Slovakia) was signed in spring 1993. In autumn 1993 the two Ministers of Defence signed the military framework agreement of the two countries. There are Slovak arguments about the country's dependence on the Russian energy supply, but in reality the reasons for having such close contacts are more complicated.

Slovakia's security position after the accession of its three neighbouring countries to NATO will not worsen. On the contrary, the external security of the state will grow. Military threat to Slovakia from its neighbouring countries is not expected, and after their accession as full members and the implementation of common Western European values, military threat can be discounted.

In the middle term outlook, Slovakia will not acquire strong security guarantees. Indeed, the internal security of the state may become worse, especially for the following reasons:

1. The absence of the same security guarantees for Slovakia does not produce the same conditions for economic prosperity.
2. While NATO officially left the door open to other European countries, no timetable or scope for this has been given, and nothing was said about Slovakia.
3. A new regional dividing line between new NATO members and Slovakia will emerge.
4. The invited neighbours are likely to be distanced from existing intensive cooperation with Slovakia, which might contribute to an understandable feeling of isolation in Slovakia.

Slovakia does not want to take advantage of the favourable security environment, but, on the other hand, as a full member of a European community, it wants to contribute actively to the formation of a security system in Europe. Depending on its possibilities, Slovakia will participate further in the activities of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council and the Partnership for Peace programme. To strengthen peace and security in the Euro-Atlantic area, Slovakia will furthermore actively participate in a cooperative security system within the OSCE. As an associated partner of the Western European Union, Slovakia will also fulfil agreed commitments for selection of forces and resources compatible with NATO forces, and the achievement of interoperability remains among its primary efforts.

The basic document regarding security is the Fundamental Principles of the National Security of the Slovak Republic, and the Concept of National Security, which will replace the Fundamental Principles, is under preparation and discussion.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Slovakia's neighbouring countries (except Ukraine) will become members of the Euro-Atlantic and West European security and economic structures, and will obtain hard guarantees of security and stability, thus creating preconditions for economic prosperity. This situation will change Slovakia's geopolitical situation: for a certain period the country will belong to a region where the absence of effective security guarantees will influence the political, economic and social situation.

Prior to entering into the collective security structure, the fundamental objectives of Slovak security policy are the following:

1. to guarantee the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Slovak Republic;
2. to strengthen good relations with the neighbouring countries;
3. to establish a comprehensive system of security and defence which will be interoperable with the European security architecture;
4. to create the prerequisites for gradual integration into the Western security and economic institutions.
Conclusions

There are a number of similarities between the security concepts of the 'Visegrad group' countries. This is not accidental: the four countries found themselves in the same security environment after the Cold War had finished, they faced the same security problems. First of all the four countries have a very similar judgement of the present security conditions of the region, as well as of the international institutions dealing with security issues. The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia came to the same conclusions in connection with their security options after 1989-90 (sovereign security concept, neutrality, regional security cooperation, integration), and they selected the same solution: to be integrated into the Western institutions. They are of the same opinion about the functions of the armed forces.

There are, however, several differences as well, resulting from the special conditions of each country, from their geopolitical, geostrategic position. Poland has a common border with the Russian Federation; Hungary is located very close to the conflict region of former Yugoslavia; three of the Visegrad Four have been invited to join NATO and to start accession negotiations with the EU, but Slovakia has not. For several years Prague was more reluctant in connection with cooperation in the 'Visegrad group' (this attitude changed after the invitation to start NATO accession negotiations by the Madrid summit in July 1997); Warsaw and Budapest were more active in this direction. The proportion of the military budget of GDP decreased sharply in the Czech Republic and in Hungary (in 1997 it was around 1.4 per cent), and in both countries a governmental decision was made to increase this proportion by 0.1 per cent every year until the 2 per cent level. Polish ideas about security are influenced very much by historical experiences and by the fact that Poland has a common border with Russia (the Kaliningrad area). According to Polish evaluation, Russia - being an unstable country - represents certain security risks for its Western neighbours. (At the same time Warsaw declares that the East embodies not only security threats but large economic opportunities for Poland as well.)

Slovakia has a good relationship with Russia. Some experts say that this is a consequence of the divorce of Czechoslovakia and the reluctant Western attitude towards Bratislava. There is, however, an opposite opinion, according to which the Eastern orientation of Slovakia is instead a reason for and not a consequence of this attitude. The Slovak security concept is the only one in the region that formulates worries about the penetration of foreign secret services into Slovak state institutions.

The special features of the Hungarian security concept follow from the fact that the country is adjacent to the conflict region of former Yugoslavia, and that there are large Hungarian minority groups in neighbouring countries. So it is understandable that among the priorities of Hungarian foreign policy one can find the contacts with those minority groups. Hungary has a special geostrategic position from the point of view of the efforts to solve the Yugoslav crisis. Consequently the country could effectively contribute to managing the crisis by offering transit and logistical bases for peace-keeping troops of different nationalities (first of all Americans).

The three new members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation will be faced with three challenges in the next few years:

1. Even after inclusion into NATO they will have to complete the transformation and reform of their armed forces, security policy structures, defence industries and relations between the armies and societies.

2. At least for the first few years they will be subject to evaluation and assessment by their partners in the Alliance and by the NATO structure itself. The results of this assessment might be critical for the conditions of the next waves of NATO enlargement. They might determine which countries will be seen as most desirable candidates and which criteria will be the most critical.
3. The last but not least challenge will be the very fact that these new members are going to be the main contact for other candidates.

The Czech Republic, but especially Hungary and Poland, as candidates to NATO and the European Union and then as members, should try their utmost to ensure that their Eastern borders do not become civilisational, economic or military barriers. They must be open to cooperation and good neighbourly relations. It is in their direct interest that as many of their neighbouring countries as possible participate in the integration process.

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