

The Slavkov Declaration. A new format of regional cooperation

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On 29 January in the Czech town of Slavkov (historically known as Austerlitz) the prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia together with the Chancellor of Austria announced the creation of a new format of cooperation in Central Europe. According to the so called "Slavkov Declaration", this new format is aimed at bolstering the cooperation both between the three states of the region and in the European forum, as well as at boosting economic growth and employment levels. Annual meetings of the heads of government were announced, during which areas of trilateral cooperation would be defined. This year these areas include: infrastructure and cross-border cooperation, social policy and relations with the Western Balkan states and the states comprised by the Eastern Partnership initiative. For the Czech government – who are the format's initiators – the main objective was to strengthen the strictly regional dimension of cooperation, meanwhile Austria and Slovakia began to use this forum to criticise the sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and to promote Europe's more lenient approach in its relations with Russia.

The mastermind behind the new cooperation format is the Czech deputy foreign minister Petr Drulák, who has been promoting a revival of his country's relations with Austria. According to declarations he made, the format is intended to supplement the activities of the Visegrad Group in a way similar to how cooperation in the Baltic region supplements the Central European dimension of Poland's foreign policy. Trilateral cooperation would be aimed at contributing to a new opening in the Czech Republic's relations with Austria, which have been dominated by the dispute over the Czech nuclear energy policy for years. The first meeting held under the new format has indicated, however, that the main beneficiary of the new form of cooperation would be Vienna, since it received a promise that the positions of the three states would be aligned before the European Council meeting. The Visegrad Group, on the other hand, seems to be the biggest loser. So far, cooperation mechanisms developed throughout the years have led to it being considered the representative of Central Europe's interests.

Scope of cooperation

Trilateral cooperation between the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria has been characterised by significant divergences of interests, where Vienna is positioned in the EU as a country opposing those states which joined after 2004. Austria's strong resistance to the nuclear energy development plans devised by the Czech Republic and Slovakia has

remained a permanent challenge. Moreover, the rather general scope of cooperation defined in Slavkov overlaps other measures to a large extent, including the actions: defined in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), those carried out as part of cross-border cooperation, and also Visegrad cooperation to which other countries can be included on an *ad hoc* basis in the V4+ format, in particular in the area of sector-specific cooperation.

According to the declaration, strengthening cooperation between the Czech Republic, Austria and Slovakia is above all intended to help these countries develop their transport and energy infrastructure. There is no motorway connection between the Czech Republic and Austria and no connector pipeline between their gas transmission networks. The plans to construct an oil pipeline connector between Slovakia and Austria have also been abandoned; this would have enabled the OMV refinery in Schwechat to gain access to Russian oil from the Druzhba pipeline. For the Austrian refinery this would mean strengthening its position towards the Slovnaft refinery in Bratislava, owned by the Hungarian oil company MOL. Integration of the gas markets in the context of infrastructure and regulation has been listed as another possible area of cooperation. This, however, is going to be achieved in line with the initiatives already under way in the V4.

Another factor fostering the launch of Austrian-Czech-Slovak cooperation has been the fact that the heads of these countries' governments are leaders of social-democratic parties making up the Party of European Socialists (PES). This common pedigree is one of the reasons why Hungary has not been invited to this new cooperation format. The Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán has been one of the most prominent critics in the EU of the sanctions imposed on Russia, which demonstrates that the convergence of the positions adopted by Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia regarding Russia has not been the only assumption for launching trilateral cooperation.

A challenge for the V4

During the preparations for the meeting in Slavkov, the Czech government claimed that the establishment of a cooperation format with Austria and Slovakia would not challenge the Visegrad Group, since it would concern the strictly regional and cross-border dimension of cooperation and have no ambitions to represent Central Europe externally. In spite of this, during the Slavkov meeting the prime ministers decided that a teleconference would still be held before the European Council meeting in February to help coordinate their positions. The upcoming meeting of the EU heads of state and government is to be devoted mainly to EU-Russia relations. It should be expected that Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia will present a common position during the meeting and oppose the planned introduction of another series of sanctions against Russia; they are also likely to call for the EU's efforts aimed at devising a peace plan for Russia and Ukraine to be intensified.

Should the trilateral consultations preceding European Council meetings become a habit, the prime ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovakia would face the dilemma as to whether cooperation with Austria is more important to them than the Visegrad Group. In previous years the coordination of positions in the area of various European policies brought measurable results to the V4 states, which was evident for instance in the course of negotiations on the multiannual financial perspective and the energy-climate package. A key element of this cooperation was the multi-step coordination of positions before European

Council meetings, and the regular meetings in Brussels of the V4's prime ministers just before the Council summits were a symbol. The positive heritage of the V4 has been recently overshadowed by sharp differences in the four countries' attitudes towards Russia. Bratislava and Prague, but also Budapest, have been trying to maintain the best possible climate in their economic cooperation with Moscow. Russia is seen by the governments of Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary as a valuable and promising market for their domestic exporters. This means that the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary have adopted a position closer to that of Austria than that of Poland when dealing with Russia. So far, the difference of opinions on Russia within the V4 has not halted cooperation on the implementation of important Visegrad projects such as those in the area of energy security or preparations for the establishment of the Visegrad Battle Group in 2016. In the immediate future the dynamics of this cooperation will to a large degree depend on the Czech Republic which is to assume its one-year presidency of the V4 in mid-2015, replacing Slovakia.