

Think  
Visegrad  
V4 Think-Tank Platform

# POLICY BRIEF

2017/March

Think Visegrad in Brussels

## Central Europe: The Death of Dreams?<sup>1</sup>

Michal Kořan

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<sup>1</sup> The paper is part of a project titled "Think Visegrad in Brussels". It is based on interviews carried out during the author's stay in Brussels in January 2017 and also on the findings of three previously written texts by the author: Central Europe in the EU: A Story of Hypocrisy, *Visegrad Insights*, December 2015; Democracy in Central Europe (provisional title), in Basora, A., Marczyk, A., Otashvili, M. (2017): *Does Democracy Matter*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield and an unpublished paper co-authored together with T. Strazay and M. Simecka titled *Czechs and Slovaks in the EU: Democracy, Legitimacy and the Future* (to be published in Czech).

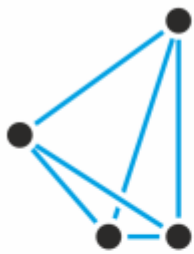
## Introduction

It took only a few months for the Central European countries to lose their place on the pedestal of the top democracy transition achievers and acquire the label of a xenophobic, nationalist and populist bunch with zero appetite for trans-European solidarity. Many contemporary Central European leading figures tend to bark back that quite to the contrary it is the “old” Europe that lives in a jacket of outlived stereotypes, unable or unwilling to recognize the progressivity of the Central European stance. This paper aims 1) to problematize this simple division 2) to show that there are firm foundations of what can be termed “idealistic thinking” about recent Europe 3) to provide room for a more genuine dialogue about the problems of (post)modern democracy and European integration.

## The weaknesses of liberal democracy in Europe

Since 2015, many “Western Europeans” seem to be frustrated with the leaders of the Visegrad countries because of their active opposition to the EU quotas and, as the time dragged on, also because of their questionable ways of handling the governance; this was the case especially for Hungary – but it was followed closely by Poland in this respect. In an article published in December 2015 in [Visegrad Insight](#), I tried to caution against drawing simplistic lines between Central Europe and “the rest of Europe” when it comes to the recent tendency to adhere to populist and radical currents in politics and societies. The argument was that we can see many structural weaknesses that are present in the societies and politics in Central Europe on the rise in the rest of the EU too – populism, xenophobia, a distrust in political parties and parliamentary politics, a disbelief in the EU, and so forth. These pathologies were not invented in Central Europe, even though the Central Europeans were among the first people to propel representatives of these currents to the highest executive offices.

Unfortunately, the year of 2016 and the beginning of 2017 proved the above argument to be true. Liberal democracy, as practiced throughout the world, shows real signs of failings. There are individuals and political movements all over the developed and democratic world eager to escalate and abuse popular frustrations with the economy and politics and transform them into a political power that would later be used not for creating a solution, but for garnering power in itself. As a result, there is a rising tendency to resort to populism on the one hand and an openness of the public to believing in simple solutions to complex problems on the other. Endless election circles force political parties to shrink and shallow the agenda of politics on the one hand and to promise ever more extensive and attractive achievements and goods on the other. However, under the conditions of economic, political, social or cultural globalization the national governments keep losing leverage and instruments with which to secure the



very goods and guarantees that were promised during those election campaigns. Democracy is growingly regarded as a dysfunctional and ineffective way of transferring the public will into policies, and people feel that the current system does not provide them with anything resembling real choices and impacts.

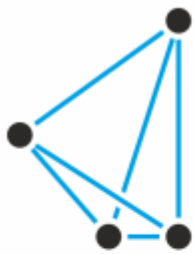
## Resetting a Central European narrative: the variables

While these structural conditions are common to all of the developed world's societies, there are indeed particularities that are more exclusive to the Central Europeans. Most importantly, while there are strong political figures exploiting these popular anxieties and frustrations all over Europe, what Central Europe is missing – as opposed to countries with longer democratic traditions – are political figures who are able to provide a strong political voice as an alternative to populism. Many of the reasons for CE to move in the direction towards a closer and more nationalistic/populist model of European politics lie in the differences of a structural and social nature and the heritage of the totalitarian and autocratic past as well as the heritage of the way economic transformation was carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s. By being invited late to join the EU, the CE countries (including Austria) have not fully identified themselves as a natural and integral part of the community. Instead of making genuine efforts to share the EU's responsibility and participate in making solutions and deciding about the way ahead, Central Europeans wait for the decisions and successes (or, rather, a lack thereof) of others. "The Brussels" resembles the proverbial Schrodinger's cat – it is at the same time too strong and dominant on the one hand, and weak, infected by Western decadence and ineffective on the other.

There is a tendency to externalize the EU flows into one of the most convincing narratives in Central Europe: the CE countries did not contribute to the multiple crises that have stricken the region and the world, and despite that the CE countries find themselves in the focus of the EU's critique as well as being forced to pay for the crises together with the others. Not only is this narrative wrong because the responsibility for the crisis *and* for the solutions is inevitably shared by all the members, but what is more important is that this permanent externalization of the EU on the part of the Central Europeans caused a greater shock for them than for the "West" after they realized that the EU and its future do not necessarily mean a linear progress towards greater prosperity, stability and security.

There are several factors that contribute to this "externalization":

- The adoption of a technocratic – as opposed to a normative – paradigm of political transition and EU integration.
- A higher and more extensive scale of corruption, which brings about a feeling of a "stolen revolution."



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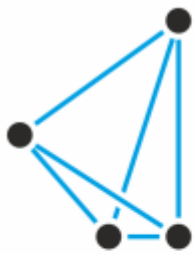
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- A reductionist understanding of democracy that is often limited to the election process.
- Despite profiting (economically, socially) from integration into the European and world markets, the Central European societies are closer to the “losing side of globalization” than the more developed world. Among the reasons lie a lower concurrence within the ever more sophisticated work market, their worse education and mobility capacities, an outflow of capital, their low wages and their worse “base conditions” in general.
- A partly justified feeling of being by-passed or ignored by the European Commission – it is almost a rule that important administrative posts (those of Director Generals and so on) are being occupied by non-CE representatives, and the CE countries find it comparatively more difficult to get a high-ranking job. Similarly, there is a sense of double standards being employed when it comes to the way the EU deals with CE states and the (mostly large) old countries.
- A feeling of bearing the undeserved mark of being “policy-killers” instead of “policy-shapers.” Even though there have been many areas and policies where the Central Europeans attempted to take the lead (energy, the Balkans, the EaP), the CE countries are often being labeled as a destructive and unconstructive bloc within the EU either by the Brussels officials or by some “old member” countries.
- Especially in Poland and Hungary, but partly in Slovakia too, there is a growing sentiment that the EU does not bother to try to understand the region and/or is unwilling to perceive the Visegrad group as a progressive grouping because the EU lives as if held captive by its own stereotypes.

## Debating “Central European idealism” in 2017

However, just as it was wrong to assume that the transformation process has been successfully finished in Central Europe, it is wrong now to assume that all hope is lost. As mentioned above, the challenges that European societies face nowadays are indeed similar. But more importantly, there is another legacy of Central Europe that is different from the negative one that made it to the limelight lately. It is a trait of idealism that contributed heavily to the real reshaping of the fate and nature of Central European societies after the fall of communism in 1989.

What is termed here as a “Central European idealism” took various forms in different contexts. However, the fundamental principles of “idealism” remained the same throughout the decades and can be described as an adherence to the idea that individual freedom, emancipatory politics, intra-national solidarity and humanism can and should be universally applied and can be universally achieved – without confining oneself to the narrow confines of nationally or ethnically defined communities. In the 1970s and 1980s, those who defined ideas of internationalism and universal humanism in Central Europe throughout the last twenty years of the communist reign did so mostly



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out of sheer desperation and for existential reasons – not for some abstract affection. In their eyes, the Western world had traded pan-European democracy for European stability, and this pragmatic approach had helped cement the division of Europe. That is why in 1986, in the dead of the so-called “normalization”, the then dissident and later the first Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs after the fall of communism Jiri Dienstbier wrote: “*Maintaining the status quo (the bipolarity and division of Europe - author’s note) protects us from a massacre. But such a status quo is a violence in itself. It protects us from a development which would (...) head towards liberalization of man and of his community (...) it prevents us from fulfilling the aspirations of all groups of European people (...), including those who are (or feel themselves to be) oppressed within a group into which they were incorporated.*”<sup>2</sup>

Dienstbier’s essay which contained this passage was called *Dreaming of Europe* but it was a dreaming that stemmed from a very real nightmare of the frozen and paralyzed political development in Europe in the mid-1980s. It was a desperate call of those who had nothing but universal values to hold on to when the world refused to listen. It was the call of distress of those who were direct victims of the fact that the “stability” and “peace” of the “West” were deemed as much dearer values than the individual aspirations of the people or nations of the “East”. Thus universalist aspirations were one of the most important aspects of CEE history during the 20th century. Finally, let us recall the words of one of the region’s most emblematic figures: the president-playwright Vaclav Havel.

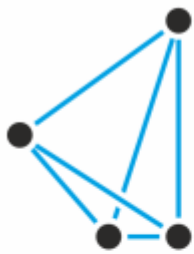
Václav Havel appealed to Western Europe in a similar vein in March 1986: “*Thousands of Western Europeans begin to realize the troubled nature of their consumerist happiness, which is being bought by indifference to the fate of humans only hundreds of kilometers further to the East, they begin to take an interest in them, and they begin to perceive them as their brothers, as someone whose fate is essentially tied with their own fate.*”<sup>3</sup>

This is to illustrate two fundamental points. The first point is that the universalistic calls for pan-European democracy, for universal humanism, and for a Europe undivided and perhaps united, stemmed from a very particular experience of politically and individually deprived people who had lost all other possible ways of changing their destiny and the destinies of their respective countries. We can term these cries as *idealism* in the sense that they tried to transcend and to disrupt the particular oppressive reality by appealing to sets of ideals that were rather unthinkable in those times. In the 1970s and 1980s this idealism had a very practical meaning – if this notion of humanism

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<sup>2</sup> Dienstbier, J.: *Snění o Evropě*. Prague: Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny 1990, p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Václav Havel, “Děkovná řeč” in *Do různých stran*, Prague: Lidové noviny, 1989, p. 97.



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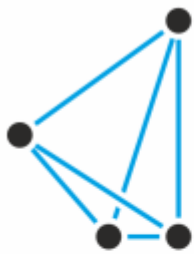
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and emancipation took hold in the minds of the “Western people,” who would otherwise not contest the division of Europe, there might be hope for more freedom in the East.

A second fundamental point is that these were times when Central Europeans brought more than a dose of their idealism into Western mainstream thinking. Albeit slowly, arguments similar to those presented above managed to permeate the political speeches of Helmut Kohl, Margaret Thatcher and others. While after the fall of communism the Central Europeans were focused on adopting norms and principles transferred from the West, in the 1980s Central European thinkers served as pioneers wielding the torch of universal freedom in the face of those who were deemed to be pragmatic and overly comfortable “Westerners”. A handful of Central European dissidents were able to act as a biting conscience not only against the communist regimes, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, against the “consumer happiness” of Western societies that shielded their sight from what was happening in Eastern Europe. This means that there is a lot of intellectual potential in Central Europe. If nothing else, Central Europeans can serve as a reflection of Europe’s own problems.

## Conclusion: Central Europe can be central to Europe

The recent radicalization and populist leanings in Central Europe need to be considered in a wider European and international context and with a regard for the real social pathologies of the contemporary developed world. These pathologies are not a phenomenon exclusive to Central Europe, even if, indeed, CE countries have already elected representatives of these currents to the highest political and, more importantly, executive posts. At the same time, it is important to stay away from any unnecessary determinism – such as looking at the most recent political development as a process with only one possible catastrophic ending. Contrary to that, it is important to take into account the human and social critical reflectivity that can give rise to a re-energization and a strengthening of the plural and democratic political model. For human reflectivity to take place, a genuine and open dialogue has to be established. Central Europe can play an important role in this endeavor – after all, it is a region that deserves a lot of credit for being able to transform itself from a region with autocratic and totalitarian rules to one with working democracies. It also deserves credit for standing as a model and an inspiration for other democracy-aspiring countries and for doing plenty of work in order to help them to democratize themselves. All of this constitutes a healthy and credible foundation upon which the revival of the spirit of a Europe “whole and free” can take place. Just as elsewhere in Europe, the question in this case is who is strong and inspirational enough as a political or public figure to carry this torch of “idealism”. The disappointing answer is that there is not much to see of these kinds of people on the recent political and public horizon. This essay only suggests that there is a foundation in Central Europe on which future non-discriminatory and non-populist politics can be built. However, this has to be carried out through a frank, plural and mutually respectful



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dialogue among all societies and countries in Europe. As this essay tried to demonstrate, the structural political and societal problems are common, and no blaming and bashing of “the others” will help to overcome them.

## *Michal Kořan*

Michal Kořan is a Senior Research Fellow at the *Institute of International Relations* based in Prague (Czech Republic) where he previously acted as a Deputy Director (2013 – 2016) and a Head of Research (2009 – 2013). He is also an Assistant Professor at the *Faculty of Social Sciences, Masaryk University* in Brno, where he received his Ph.D. In 2012 he was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the *Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at the Harvard University*. He focuses on foreign policy analysis of the Central European countries, Visegrad cooperation, security and Trans-Atlantic Relations. He is the lead-author of an annual book analyzing *Czech foreign policy* and founder and programme chair of an annual *International Symposium Czech Foreign Policy*. In 2013 – 2014 he was a vice-chairman of the *Programm Council of the Czech-Polish Forum*. He is the national co-coordinator of the *Think Visegrad* platform.