

Title: HOW STABLE IS CENTRAL EUROPE

Author: Henry Plater-Zyberk

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How Stable is Central Europe?

Henry Plater-Zyberk

Nine years after the collapse of communism in Central Europe the agenda of all the governments in the area is dominated by three interlinked issues:

- economic growth;
- national security; and
- membership of NATO and/or the EU.

The impending NATO membership of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary:

- has already dramatically improved the relations between their governments and NATO's and the same is true of the armed forces;
- reduces the possibility of frictions and conflicts between the new NATO members and their neighbours. On one hand, challenging any NATO member militarily would be a very risky undertaking, on the other hand any NATO member contemplating raising the political temperature in Central or Eastern Europe would find very little sympathy and support in Brussels and the other members' capitals. If, however, one of the new members was to be drawn into any regional conflicts, whatever may be the reason for it, and however innocuous it may be, NATO would inevitably become involved, its role depending on the level of aggression shown by the parties involved;
- forces the new members to reform and modernise their armed forces. Some aspects of this modernisation process are barely off the ground. The imminent NATO membership has created an illusion in Budapest, Warsaw and Prague that the signing of the NATO enlargement agreement was an end in itself and further modernisation and improvements would then come automatically. Cuts in their defence budgets are the main reason why modernisation and reform in the three countries have failed to reach a desirable speed and dynamism. Some of the more serious problems in all three Ministries of Defence, however, stem from an unwillingness of politicians and military to talk to each other on an everyday basis. Democratically elected politicians in the region are still reluctant to learn about their own armed forces and expect their generals to obey orders which they, the politicians, occasionally give without sufficient knowledge of their country's defence capabilities, the tasks facing their armed forces and the costs involved. They also tend to pay more attention to unemployment figures, which could rise as a result of modernisation, rather than to the combat readiness of their armed forces. The military, in turn, regard politicians as a

necessary nuisance which they could well do without. All three countries, to various degrees, have failed to train, or to create sufficient facilities to train, civil servants to work with their military. None of the armed forces of the three countries has made enough effort to train "civilian friendly" high ranking officers. There are still not enough officers able to think independently within their remit, to solve problems or who have the knowledge of basic accounting needed to perform their duties. These shortcomings are often hidden behind NATO compatible units and highly capable individuals performing credibly on the international arena. In the future Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic may be expected to take part in more NATO undertakings, in which case some of their hidden weaknesses could become painfully evident to all concerned.

The enlargement may, however, complicate the situation in Central Europe. The neighbours of the new NATO members may create tension in the area by mistreating

their own minorities, which have strong historical and linguistic links across the border, or embark on confrontational policies with one of their new NATO neighbours. This may range from energetic and unwarranted attention shown in military and security arrangements, to direct support given to various groups who are seen in the target country as detrimental to its security. The most dangerous scenario for regional stability would be an armed struggle taken up by any minority group in a non-NATO member with support (financial, logistical or training) provided from the enlarged NATO area. Whether such support would be semi-official or would amount to tolerance of an initiative of "concerned local citizens" supporting their kin across the border with funds and/or weapons, the temperature in the area would become frosty. NATO would most probably be drawn into a mediation process and possibly even into peace keeping/enforcing operations in the area. Before enlargement, NATO had the uneasy option of not becoming involved in the area; after the enlargement there will be no such option.

The not so immediate membership of the EU is seen in Central Europe as bringing primarily economic advantages leading possibly to strengthening military cooperation within the European part of NATO. NATO is seen in Central Europe not only as a guarantor of security but also as having a stabilising effect, making its new members more attractive to potential foreign investors. The European Union's economic and increasingly strong political muscle has been recognised as a formidable and effective weapon up to the point when actual shooting begins.

Central Europe is therefore divided into countries:

- which are about to join NATO and in the more distant future the EU;
- which, with considerable effort, will probably join one or both;
- which would like to belong to one or both organisations but have found the political, economic and social cost of the desired memberships too high.

Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland are about to be accepted as new members of NATO and all three belong to the first echelon of EU candidates. All three countries may yet go through political, economic and social problems but none of them will be likely to differ from those already experienced by some of the present NATO members, such as:

- politically and criminally motivated attempts on the lives of democratically elected politicians and civil servants;
- large scale corruption of political parties and individual politicians;
- terrorism;
- hung parliaments and unworkable coalitions;
- industrial unrest; and
- severe unemployment.

None of the above would make Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic less reliable in NATO than some of its present 16 members, and yet any signs of imperfections in Central Europe are bound to be overdramatised by:

- hypercritical local media and ordinary citizens who before 1989 expected democracy to be a perfect system and nine years later still cannot accept that its is not;
- the political opposition of the day, as it would in any democratic country;
- countries outside NATO which have expressed strong misgivings about its enlargement and still regard it as a potential future adversary.

Whatever may be the future of the three countries, the internal problems which they may encounter will be unlikely to undermine their, their allies', or their neighbours' security. They may, however, face problems with some of their neighbours. Managing these would require political maturity from their own governments and their NATO partners.

Various Shades of Potential Conflict

Poland

Poland is about to become the second European NATO member bordering **Russia**, the other being Norway. Having for the last several centuries been either partly occupied by Russia, or influenced by it one way or another, Poland watches the events in Moscow with stronger apprehension than any other country in Central Europe. The fact that it now has its shortest ever border with Russia, ie only with the geographically detached Kaliningrad Oblast, is not a long term reassuring factor as Russia wobbles into the unknown under Yel'tsin's erratic leadership. After his disappearance from the political arena or even before, there may well be a backlash in Moscow. If the new Russian leadership is weaker than the present one, the increasing regionalisation of the Russian Federation which would result would be welcomed in Warsaw. This could, however, bring long term problems. Such a fragmentation in turn could encourage decision makers in the Kaliningrad Oblast to sever links with Step-Mother Russia. Russia's presence there is internationally recognised but its roots in the area are very short. Kaliningrad's unilateral declaration of independence would force Moscow to choose one of two options:

- It would let the Kaliningrad Oblast go. This would make its neighbours, Poland and Lithuania, nervous, after an initial euphoria,

as it would not exclude a possibility that any future Russian government might claim it back, or that the new state would seek immediate and close links with prosperous Germany, to which it has strong historical connections rather than with its immediate neighbours. A return of German influence in this part of the former East Prussia would be received with quiet apprehension, especially in Poland. The reaction in Poland would have to be quiet because the government in Warsaw, desperate to join the EU, would do anything not to upset the largest, richest and most influential member by questioning its influence in Kaliningrad. If Poland fails to pass the eligibility test to join the EU, Kaliningrad/Konigsberg closely linked to Germany could dramatically complicate the situation in the area.

- Subdue the Oblast effectively but not efficiently (of which it will not be capable for several years) with all necessary force, resulting in bloodshed, waves of refugees and a frosty political atmosphere in the area for years to come. It could not be entirely excluded that Moscow would seek to reassert its position by exposing Poland and Lithuania to various provocations, demands and occasional airspace violations. This would be accompanied by support for, or toleration of transborder mafia activities, occasional small waves of undesirable "refugees" and repeated requests for a land corridor, known as the Suwalki Corridor, through Poland.

Russia appears not to have given up on the idea of the Suwalki Corridor, a road from Belarus to the Kaliningrad Oblast, through the Northeastern part of Poland, although so far it has received a firm rejection from Warsaw. Moscow will probably continue to ask periodically for the corridor, if only to test the reaction of the Polish leadership. The corridor would be economically very useful for Russia as it would allow it to transport by land people and goods to and from the Oblast. This method would be much cheaper than using the Baltic Sea route and does not depend on changing weather conditions, but it is not strategically or economically vital for Moscow or Kaliningrad. Russia is Poland's third largest commercial partner, with trade between the two countries amounting to \$4.5bn¹ and the supporters of the corridor claim that it would benefit the Suwalki region and improve the Polish trade balance. Critics insist that apart from the road tax the corridor could bring very little else, unless it was to include a network of access roads to and from Poland. This would create a security nightmare for Poland as it would *de facto* create another border within Poland with additional points of entry, a considerable pressure on the Polish authorities to relax or even abolish visa requirements for Russian business visitors to the region and stretch the still underfunded Polish border guard and customs services. All this would require substantial expenditure without a guarantee of sufficient return. There could also be a drawback for the Kaliningrad Oblast, as Russian trading companies might use the corridor to trade with Poland without bothering to go further.

Firm but not aggressive control of the Kaliningrad Oblast by Moscow would be welcomed in Warsaw, as it would guarantee some degree of stability as long as no additional military hardware or special forces units are brought into the area.

With **Belarus'** so far unsuccessful struggle to find its own identity and its strong links with Moscow, Warsaw treats Minsk as Russia's western outpost, although it would welcome a more independent Belorussian government. Having first lost the Warsaw Pact and then the Soviet Union, Moscow will do almost anything to keep Belarus firmly in its orbit. The policy is accepted by all its neighbours, who may become concerned only if:

- Moscow and Minsk were to create joint ground forces formations permanently based in Belarus. At the moment Warsaw cannot make an issue out of the present joint command and staff exercises of their eastern neighbours and their effort to maintain interoperability because Poland conducts various exercises with NATO units on its territory, tries to reach a high level of interoperability with NATO and has been shifting some of its units eastwards, if only to redress the old Warsaw Pact imbalance of location. A permanent deployment of joint Russian/Belorussian units in Belarus would make Warsaw anxious, however.
- The Russian non-combat outposts in Baranovichi and Wilejka were substantially enlarged.
- Existing joint Air Defence formations were to be strengthened, enlarged, modernised and/or redeployed westwards. Poland should expect this will probably take place as a response to its modernisation of the Air and Air Defence Forces, occasional NATO Air Forces presence in Polish airspace and the new multirole combat aircraft soon to be purchased by Polish Ministry of National Defence.

There are very few issues which complicate Russo-Polish relations more than Warsaw's present official and public support for the Baltic Republics' NATO membershipⁱⁱ. Considering their support of further NATO enlargement including the Baltic countries, voiced even before they become full NATO members, it can be expected that Poland and Hungary would become far more vocal in support of further enlargement, irrespective of whether such a move would be advantageous for the organisation as a wholeⁱⁱⁱ. Warsaw may hope that a further enlargement will reduce even more Russia's influence in Central Europe and force it to focus its attention on Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn. This would consist of Moscow's strong diplomatic pressure, at every level, in the three Baltic countries, in the capitals of the NATO member states and in Brussels. Using its position as a permanent member of the Security Council Moscow could also veto, filibuster and/or ignore many UN initiatives, rendering the whole organisation almost powerless. The Founding Act which Russia signed with NATO in 1997 also gives it considerable power to call practically non-stop meetings with NATO officials and instant and uninterrupted access to powerful media organisations concentrating on NATO. Russia could use its minorities in the Baltic area (some for subversion, some for propaganda) and put economic pressure on the three Baltic republics, creating a small cold war in the area. This pressure, which could come about even at a very early stage of the second enlargement, would not necessarily be to Warsaw's disadvantage. Poland would find itself at the edge of the political hot spot. This would make it a major player in NATO strategic thinking and allow it to request assistance in various forms from Brussels and major NATO capitals.

Far less controversial is Warsaw's enthusiastic support of Kiev, as it does not include suggestions that the next stage of NATO enlargement should include **Ukraine**. Ukraine's historical, ethnic and emotional links with Poland make her Poland's natural and geographically closest western ally. Warsaw's willingness to help Ukraine is historically understandable and improves its position within NATO. This policy could backfire if Poland, in an attempt to please Kiev, ignores some of its NATO obligations, or if the Ukrainians were to elect a new pro-Moscow government ready to cut its contacts with Poland and to release sensitive information concerning Polish-Ukrainian cooperation to embarrass its enthusiastic western neighbour and please the hardliners in Moscow. In one area of concern to

trade between the two countries, Warsaw's professed commitment to adhere to the EU border regulations is not matched by its deeds. Poland's relaxed border regime with Ukraine looks like a deliberate policy rather than simple inefficiency or a lack of resources.

Poland's relations with **Slovakia** depend entirely on the political situation in Bratislava. In this relationship there is none of the heavy historical, ethnic and economic baggage which Bratislava shares with Prague and Budapest; Poland could be its natural ally. Slovakia has never been a part of a political union with Poland as it has been with the Czech Republic and the Austro-Hungarian Empire in which it played the role respectively of a smaller and a minor element. It has no financial claims on Poland as it has with the Czech Republic and it has no ethnic problems, as it has with Hungary. If, however, Slovakia stays Russia's best friend in Central Europe, Poland, in contrast with the other two new NATO candidates would reduce contacts with its southern neighbour, without serious consequences.

After centuries of conflict, with **Germany** and Poland confronting each other, the relations between the two governments are better than ever. However, the situation looks less promising at street level. Waves of Polish predatory shoppers and refugees accompanied by increasingly well organised criminal organisations visiting the FRG and then Germany in the last three decades have made there the image of a Pole a less than flattering one.

Far more important and controversial is the issue of a large part of pre-Second World War Eastern Germany and of East Prussia (the other part becoming the Kaliningrad Oblast) given to Poland by the victorious powers after World War Two and forcing the local German population to move west, almost always without their possessions. This complex issue comes back with increasing regularity. The likelihood of military conflict between the two countries might be remote but the future is not bright. Germany does not question the present borders between the two countries but has declared that the matter of the property of the German population displaced from Poland is still open^{iv}. Those Germans who were thrown out of their land do not contest the postwar borders but claim that there has never been a legal justification for taking the individual farms, estates and immovables from them. The German government cannot officially declare the demand of its citizens as void because it would have to pay the claimants substantial indemnities or claim them from Warsaw on their behalf. The Polish postwar communist governments complicated the matter when giving the former German land to Polish settlers removed by the victorious Soviet allies from the Eastern parts of pre World War Two Poland. For ideological reasons unwilling to sell, the government leased it to them, using a phrase "for eternal use", which was legally 99 years^v. Only in September 1997 did the Polish parliament enact a law permitting the leaseholders to change their leases into freeholds; but even now the whole procedure takes a very long time. If Poland were to join the EU its laws would be superseded by the EU laws, and although property matters are not covered by the EU jurisdiction, the indemnities for various forms of suffering are. The most powerful weapon of the organisations representing the German refugees from Poland is their potential ability to slow down Polish membership of the EU, or possibly even postpone it indefinitely.

Slovakia

Originally one of the Visegrad Four, Slovakia missed the NATO train, after making half-hearted attempts to join, and will have great difficulty if it tries to catch the next one. After the split of Czechoslovakia the Slovaks inherited most of the old federation heavy industry, with the accompanying unenviable task of solving the related economic problems. The Slovak voters, and the leaders they elected, chose

a slow and partial privatisation, authoritarian government and close links with Moscow. The Slovak political scene continues to be dominated by Vladimir Meciar, the charismatic former Prime Minister prone to use undemocratic methods when dealing with political dissent and pluralism^{vi} a) that although at the moment Meciar needs the support of two smaller radical parties to run the country he is genuinely popular outside the larger towns and

b) that though professing loudly its dislike of the Prime Minister and accusing him of tampering with democratic values, the opposition have consistently failed to unite..

The results of Slovakia's recent elections will bring, at the beginning at least, many problems which could destabilise the country. Vladimir Meciar's Movement for Democratic Slovakia gained the most votes, but the four main opposition parties command 93 of the 150 seats in parliament^{vii}. The opposition parties now aiming at creating a coalition range from the right wing Slovak Christian Democratic Coalition to the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Left with various political shades and colours in between, including the Hungarian Coalition whose ethnic agenda is unlikely to please other coalition partners. The main challenges facing the new majority are:

- difficulties in maintaining a coalition. The lack of cooperation in opposition between parties which are now attempting to find a common ground is not encouraging;
- economic reforms, which at best will be very painful and socially divisive and judging by Polish, Czech and Hungarian experience, are likely to bring back to power the parties which were in opposition when the reforms were implemented. This would mean the return of Meciar;
- the ability and the determination of Meciar's Movement for Democratic Slovakia to fight back and to subvert and divide the coalition. The Movement is the richest of all Parties as a result of a "controlled" privatisation drive, which left 80% of the privatised sector in the hands of Meciar supporters;
- the reprivatisation of the privatised sector - if any illegalities in the process are proven. To prove irregularities at the highest level will be very difficult and could alienate the workforce of the companies in question;
- Meciar has been in complete control of the Ministry of the Interior and the Slovak special services. He has been accused by the opposition of misusing them on numerous occasions. The former opposition now reaching for power will purge all such establishments, provoking a backlash which could range from damaging leaks to acts of violence;
- changes in the armed forces.

The Slovak Armed forces had to be built up from practically zero when Czechoslovakia fell apart. There were no purges in the forces because Slovakia could not afford it and because Meciar supported the old type of officers. The Slovak Armed Forces have been closer to Meciar than to any of his opponents, including former President Kovacs, who in the past vetoed several high-ranking

promotions. The armed forces, which until recently succeeded in staying out of politics, were drawn into an unexpected controversy when in August 1998 Meciar instructed the Speaker of the Parliament, Ivan Gasparovic, to appoint a new Chief of the General Staff, Major General Marian Miklus, at a time when the Defence Minister Jan Sitek was on holiday. For several days Slovakia had two Chiefs of the General Staff, until General Jozef Tuchynia resigned on 9 September.^{viii} The process of change at the top of the Slovak MOD will be especially ruthless if the new leaders in Bratislava express an interest in joining NATO. This may provoke an angry reaction in the nationalist factions of all parties if the Slovak MOD gets too close to its Czech counterpart, which has a good track record of reforms in the armed forces but is regarded by some Slovaks as a domineering bigger cousin.

The two issues which will continue to undermine Slovakia's credibility on the international arena are its close links with Moscow and Bratislava's treatment of its Hungarian minority, which represents 10.9% of the total population. Slovaks are struggling with their own national identity and will not be willing to give equal language rights, at this stage at least, to the historically close but culturally and linguistically distant Hungarian minority, which the Slovaks see as an element diluting their new national identity. Any liberalisation of the present language laws would complicate the situation, especially if it was to accompany economically and socially painful market reforms. There is no doubt that such a liberalisation would please several democratic countries and international organisations preoccupied with human rights issues. It would also bring Bratislava slightly closer to a number of organisations it wants to join. At the same time it would allow the Hungarian minority not to learn Slovak, and to seek in Bratislava subsidies for their Hungarian language education. Nothing will unite all Slovak nationalists from whatever party more than the fear that the Hungarian minority's ultimate aim is to join Hungary. The fact that the part of Slovakia inhabited by the Hungarian-speaking minority borders Hungary is not a reassuring factor for Slovaks^{ix}. If the market reforms in Slovakia were to increase unemployment, which they most probably would, at least temporarily, Slovakia's Hungarian minority will probably be pushed to the end of the queue in the labour market and, with or without pressure from the Slovak majority they would look to further improve their links with Budapest. This, depending also on the situation in Hungary, could create a situation resembling the Spanish side of the Basque Country, rather than Quebec.

The Slovak constitution does not give equal rights to its Hungarian minority, when it comes to language, education and media matters and therefore automatically makes them second class citizens. This may complicate Slovakia's position in Europe. Whoever rules in Bratislava has to realise that "the problem" of the Hungarian minority is there to stay. At best the leaders in Bratislava can expect that the issue of the Hungarian minority will be raised by many, mainly European, countries on the international arena. The doors of many international organisations will remain closed to them and many grants and development funds will not be available to them as long as they continue with the present policies.

A worst case scenario could include increasingly oppressive policies towards the Hungarian minority. This could lead to violent reactions and to expulsions of groups of Slovak Magyars to Hungary. There is likely to be a growing standard of living gap between Hungary and Slovakia, to the latter's disadvantage, and the appearance of a militant Hungarian movement in Slovakia. Such a scenario would also envisage Hungary's determination to defend the Hungarian minority at all costs. This would result in a two-way ETA or IRA type of conflict across the Slovak-Hungarian border. Full-scale armed conflict between the two countries would be very unlikely, however. Hungary would be restrained by its NATO allies who, at the

same time would also, most probably, provide support for Budapest's defensive actions.

Slovakia's close economic and political links with Russia will complicate the life of the new government in Bratislava. Moscow supporters represent in Slovakia a powerful lobby, both politically and economically. It would be too expensive for Bratislava to abandon all its links with Moscow overnight and Meciar and his supporters will do everything they can to slow down any such move. Slovakia's close links with Moscow, and the semi-detached attitude of the Slovaks with regard to the European and pan-Atlantic alliances has been accepted, though without much joy, by Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. If Vladimir Meciar returns to power, as a result of the new majority's failure to form a coalition, and at the same time Moscow's foreign policy, in spite of all its economic difficulties, becomes more assertive, Slovakia, already its only ally in Central Europe, would be happy to strengthen the links between the two countries even further. This could result in the removal of Slovakia from many international projects involving NATO, the EU and the WEU. A plan to build, with Russian assistance, a nuclear power station in Mochovce near the Austrian border will not win Bratislava friends in Vienna. As a new full member of the EU, Austria will be able to block any Slovak attempts to establish closer ties with Brussels and Strasbourg.

Even with the victory of pro-EU, pro-NATO, pro-democracy parties in the last election, Prague, Budapest, Warsaw and other well-wishers might be forced to wait for quite a while before a new democratic stability settles in Bratislava. This will not come automatically, as:

- the opposition parties lack cohesion, purpose, charismatic politicians and experience;
- Vladimir Meciar is not only a charismatic politician but also a good organiser;
- the heads of power structures are accountable solely to Meciar and some of them can be expected to continue to provide him with information against his political opponents;
- the immediate and successful lustration of the special services in the Czech Republic and its late and incomplete versions in Poland and Hungary would not be possible in Slovakia unless the opposition wins by a landslide, stays together for long enough to enact appropriate laws, finds the number of people necessary to conduct the lustration and removes members of their own parties who are discovered to have been working for the former communists or the present Prime Minister, with an enthusiasm beyond the call of duty;
- a major shift in relations with Moscow would alienate the influential Slovak business lobby, in addition to all the social and professional groups upset by inevitable economic reforms.

In September the Slovaks had an unenviable choice of four more years of the muscular retro policies of Vladimir Meciar or painful reforms accompanied by political instability. Successful reforms are bound to be messy and painful, at least at the beginning. Unsuccessful reforms will be very messy and very painful for many years. Some of the reforms and internal struggles may destabilise Slovakia for years. Slovakia's neighbours will be watching developments anxiously. None

of Slovakia's neighbours is more concerned that the Czech Republic. If the Czech Republic becomes one of the first new EU members, the issues of the economic links and the border regime between the two countries will become very delicate. Bound by EU regulations, Prague will have very little choice but to distance itself from Bratislava, making many voters on both sides of the common border very unhappy.

Hungary

In 1994 economic mismanagement and austerity measures introduced by the ruling right of centre coalition brought to power, through the ballot box, the old reformed communists who in October 1989 had changed the name of their party from the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party to the Hungarian Socialist Party (HSP), accepting at the same time all the principles of democracy. The HSP had no choice but to continue with the austerity measures as Hungary's gross debt was growing fast^x. This policy eventually cost the HSP the 1998 election, which brought to power a new right of centre coalition led by the Alliance of Young Democrats^{xi}.

The new government is not expected to change the country's policies vis à vis NATO and other European institutions. It may, however, give stronger support to its minorities abroad. The Hungarian minorities represent 10.6% of the population of Romania, mainly concentrated in Transylvania, 10.9% of the population of Slovakia, 3.9% in Yugoslavia and 0.6% of the Croatian population. Any political statements in support of the ethnic Hungarians living in Slovakia or Romania are bound to damage Hungary's relations with those two countries and the present coalition would do well not to repeat the mistakes of the former Hungarian Prime Minister, the late Jozsef Antall, who presented himself as the Prime Minister of all Hungarians, ie those living in Romania and Slovakia as well. Budapest could expect strong statements from Bratislava and polite incomprehension from the present pragmatic government in Bucharest.

If the new Hungarian government fails, the voters may back the HSP or vote for politicians offering simplistic solutions, one of which might be to beat the nationalist drum loud enough to upset the neighbours and the NATO allies. If at the same time failing reforms in Romania bring to the surface similar Romanian nationalist elements, the situation of the Hungarian minority in Romania would become complicated, especially if the income gap between the two countries was to increase appreciably. However, Hungarian NATO membership and Romania's political and economic reforms, which in theory may possibly help it to join the alliance in the not too distant future, may reduce the likelihood of friction between the two countries. Even the most nationalistic future government in Budapest would think twice before upsetting NATO and the EU, which it hopes to join as soon as possible, with inflammatory statements, not to mention actions in support of the Hungarian minorities in the neighbouring countries. If, in the future, small radical groups of Hungarian nationalists in Romania and/or Slovakia were to use terrorist methods to achieve their goals, to avoid tensions in the area the Hungarian government would have to make many soothing public statements condemning their actions and make sure that such groups would not receive any financial or logistical support in Hungary. Such groups in Romania

would gain ground only if the present reforms fail and the country descends into chaos or becomes a dictatorship. The conflict could descend into cross border terrorism if Budapest decided to support the Hungarian militant nationalists in Romania or groups in Hungary ready to operate across the border. This, at the moment unlikely, scenario could not be entirely eliminated if the Romanian economy collapses and nationalists come to power in Budapest.

In spite of the simmering Balkan conflict, or maybe because of it, the relations between Budapest and Belgrade as well as Zagreb remain correct. The draft dodging young Serbs and Croats of Hungarian origin escaping to Hungary will remain a minor irritant rather than a bone of contention. The Hungarian minorities, representing 0.6% of the Croatian population and 3.9% of the Yugoslav population^{xiii}, are not seen as a threat by Zagreb and Belgrade. All the three countries have an interest in maintaining the present situation unchanged; the only threat to Hungary comes from regional criminal groups which occasionally settle their scores on Hungarian soil with explosives.

The Czech Republic

Geographically far from any potential conflict, ethnically homogenous, with a working democracy and economically moderately successful, the Czech Republic is one of the most stable European countries, in spite of its citizens' frequently and publicly expressed worries about what will happen when President Havel, the guardian of the Velvet Revolution, leaves politics. The only international problem which the republic may have to face, is if one way or another Vladimir Meciar returns to power in Bratislava, and if future Russian leaders decide to be more antagonistic towards NATO and succeed in roping-in Slovakia to become their security partner in Central Europe. With its strong historical, ethnic, economic, cultural and linguistic links Slovakia could become a more benign version of what the GDR was for the FRG during the Cold War.

This would be directly linked with the sensitive and painful problem of the Czecho-Slovak border on which Prague will have to take a unilateral decision if it seriously thinks about the EU membership. Such membership would mean that its border regime with Slovakia, as a non-EU country, would be tightened up. This, in addition to almost automatic reduction of the economic links between the two countries would make many Czech voters resentful, especially if the benefits of joining the EU are not immediately visible.

Will NATO Enlargement Make Central Europe Safer?

Any unfriendly, let alone hostile action against any NATO member will provoke an immediate NATO response, although in contrast with the popularly held misconception Article 5 of the Founding Treaty does not oblige the alliance to give its threatened members military assistance. NATO enlargement will help to modernise the armed forces of the three new members, will force them to widen and deepen the civilian control of their armed forces, will improve interoperability between the armed forces of the 19 nations and improve their cooperation during international peace-keeping missions.

However, a problem may arise if new NATO members were to question the NATO-Russia Founding Act signed by both sides in June 1997. The Act stipulates that no weapons of mass destruction will be deployed in the new member states. It also forbids storing such weapons and building relevant infrastructure in the area. In case of tensions in Russia or its more assertive posture on the international arena some new NATO members may come to question the legality of this part of the Act.

After obtaining in 1999 their full NATO membership the new members, especially Poland and Hungary, may become less amenable, coming in with their own international initiatives, without consulting their allies in advance, and hoping to get their support later. Both countries support further NATO enlargement, with Poland expressing its support for the Baltic countries and Hungary showing interest in Romania's membership. Both Poland and Hungary have also a direct interest in Ukraine's independence and its improved links with the West. It should not be surprising therefore that Budapest and Warsaw might pursue their own agenda no less vigorously than the present NATO members have been pursuing theirs. The only surprise may be the contrast of behaviour of almost completely amenable candidates before the final signature and more assertive full NATO members after. This may range from an insistence on political support in the international arena when facing problems, real or imaginary, with their neighbours, to increasing demands that NATO should spend more money on its new members, to possibly vetoing any further NATO enlargement.

The reaction of both countries will be especially important if the political forces in Kiev push it towards closer union with Russia. Russia would be very concerned if Poland and Hungary, their governments or individual members of their governments were to:

- conduct an anti Russian campaign, uncoordinated with NATO, on the international arena;
- allow their countries to serve as bases for Ukrainian nationalists;
- offer any clandestine help to them.

And the EU...?

To join the EU, for which all three new NATO members have already applied, each of the applicants will have to jump a very large number of very specific political, economic, legal, social and ecological hurdles. With 26.4% of its working population employed in the agricultural sector, Poland seems to be further from EU membership than Hungary and the Czech Republic, where the corresponding figures are 8% and 6%. The comparatively large number of people employed in the Polish agricultural sector produce food which in many cases does not correspond to the EU standards of hygiene (this includes storage, transport and food processing technology). The required reforms would put many small farmers and food processing enterprises out of business and many of those who would conform and survive, for a while at least, would not be able to produce food at the present low prices. Such major sacrifices would not be acceptable to the large and powerful Polish farm lobby or to consumers. A lot has been said about the need to reform

the Common Agricultural Policy, which takes considerably more than half of the EU budget; as yet very little has been done to deal with the problem, which is particularly acute for new members. On the other hand, at the present stage any Polish government attempting to undertake fundamental reforms of Polish agriculture faces not only numerically strong and possibly occasionally violent opposition but also the all-powerful Polish Catholic Church, which has its power base in Polish villages.

In spite of constant promises of the top European politicians that something will be done about the CAP, nothing has been done so far and the present trend suggests that nothing will be done for some time^{xiii}. With no compromise in sight Poland could find itself in a difficult position which it would share with Turkey, a good and reliable NATO partner but not good enough to join the EU. A rejection of Warsaw would be presented by Brussels as a temporary postponement of the membership application, until its agriculture becomes "compatible", rather than an outright rejection. In reality the EU's inability to reform the Common Agricultural Policy and the numerous, strong, inflexible Polish farming lobby might make this temporary postponement very long indeed. Temporarily rejected, Poland would then look for alternative markets and trading partners. It would be forced to look more positively at establishing closer trade links with its Eastern neighbours, with all the implications that this would bring in its wake.

Russia, Belarus and Ukraine could be potentially attractive trading partners for Poland if it were not for the enormity of their economic, political and social problems. If the EU decides that Poland will have to wait for its membership and at the same time the economic situation in its three Eastern neighbours improves, Warsaw will have difficulties in convincing its powerful lobby of traders with Eastern Europe that the EU-style border regulations introduced recently in an attempt to satisfy Brussels have any justification. The present economic problems in Russia, felt in various degrees throughout all of the former Soviet Republics and some of the former Warsaw Pact Allies, helped those in Poland who have frequently claimed, for political or even purely emotional reasons, that trade with Russia should be reduced to a minimum. They claim now, not without justification, that as a result of this policy the impact on the Polish economy of the latest Russian crash has been negligible. And yet, if Poland fails to join the EU, Warsaw will have to improve its trade links with Moscow, Minsk and Kiev. This would almost certainly be followed by more relaxed border regulations and in turn, would improve opportunities for not only Russian and Belorussian intelligence services, but mainly for the highly organised criminal organisations knocking with increasing success on various European doors.

It is more likely, at this stage at least, that Czech and Hungarian EU membership would create problems with Romania and Slovakia, whose governments and individual citizens would not welcome the already existing and growing gap in the standard of living between their own countries and the EU. Periodical floods of refugees is the least the two new members and the EU as a whole could expect.

European Integration, Central Europe and Organised Crime

A democratic and increasingly tolerant Europe is poorly prepared to deal with trans-European or international organised crime because:

- the general political culture puts emphasis on rights rather than responsibilities;

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- imprecise and slow legal systems bend over backwards to protect suspects but not victims;
- visa and border regulations are imprecise and variously interpreted;
- many frivolous refugee claimants gain temporary acceptance, allowing them to stay in the EU area;
- citizenship and permanent residence permits are available to wealthy foreign investors with "complicated" backgrounds;
- politicians are preoccupied with image and reluctant to upset even the smallest aggressive pressure groups which have good publicity machinery.

Central Europe only adds to the problems. The post-communist reforms in Central Europe saw also:

- reduced effectiveness of all law enforcement agencies in the region;
- the emergence of a new home grown criminal underworld;
- the appearance in the former USSR of new, powerful criminal organisations with political connections at a very high level and considerable funds;
- loosening of travel restrictions;
- inexperienced, badly trained and poorly motivated civil servants responsible for law and order issues;
- willingness to copy Western European democracies blindly rather than learning from them;
- visa-free travel between the EU and the new democracies.

This made the whole of Central Europe an attractive springboard for various criminal organisations, small and big, on the way to the richer EU countries. If the countries of the EU were:

- willing to tackle their own crime with more vigour;
- able to coordinate their crime fighting efforts better;
- able to control their borders more effectively;
- able to impose stricter rules concerning undesirable aliens; and
- forced potential EU candidates to do likewise,

the problems of organised crime in Central Europe would be manageable. With the Poles giving preferential treatment to the Ukrainians and the Balts, the Czechs to the Slovaks and the Hungarians to the Slovaks and Romanians of Hungarian origin, the frontiers of an enlarged Europe would become more porous than ever. It will be difficult to make the new candidates for European integration conform to a specific

requirement concerning crime fighting because of the lack of synchronisation of the present members in both large and small matters. Another delicate factor, rarely mentioned, is the different political culture in various EU members, sometimes described as political patronage. Central European criminal organisations or ill equipped and occasionally insufficiently well trained local law enforcement bodies are not the main problem. The reluctance of Central European countries to introduce strict border controls with the countries to the east with which they have close links and tolerating the activities of CIS-based criminal groups are. As the battle with drug dealers, firearms peddlers and people-smugglers is not yet lost, the EU can afford not to lower its accession standards.

Conclusion

Central Europe has never been so stable and democratic at the same time. This does not mean that the present situation will continue without appropriate and cautious care and maintenance.

The new members should not expect that NATO will solve all the regional security problems. If politicians in all three new NATO members were as good at modernising their armed forces and law enforcement agencies as they are at explaining why they have not done so, their countries would have been much better prepared to cooperate with their new allies. Their allies may, in the future, have serious misgivings about helping the new members if, as a result of internal infighting, lack of planning and management, unrealistic expectations or sheer ineptitude they fail to modernise the government organisations for which they are responsible.

The EU enlargement eastwards will create tensions in Central Europe. Most politicians in Central Europe are downplaying the difficulties and responsibilities which the candidate member countries have to face. Their views are reflected by the local media. As a result Central Europeans are well aware of the expected benefits of EU membership but know far less about obligatory, sometimes economically and socially painful, reforms the candidate members have to go through before they are allowed to join. Some countries in the area will be eligible faster than others, and that in itself will be a shock for those left behind.

The necessary reforms will hit some parts of the local economies almost immediately, while for the benefits of the enlargement the less fortunate inhabitants of the new potential members will have to wait. Citizens of countries which had been ruled for almost half a century by faceless bureaucrats who promised them a better tomorrow in exchange for today's sacrifices might not be very receptive to hearing the same thing from a different type of faceless Eurocrat, even if most of it is actually true. Many trading companies in the new candidate members will not be happy when forced to change their trading partners. This and the new border regulations will not improve the relations between the haves and have-nots in the area and might make the situation between them more difficult.

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The tendency among many powerful European politicians to tackle problems by signing agreements accompanied by elaborate public relations campaigns which are not followed by specific actions sweeps potential future conflicts under a thick bureaucratic carpet. History will show whether they, or their successors, will notice when the carpet begins to burn and whether they will be able to react in time.

Endnotes

ⁱ Trybuna 13 February 1998.

ⁱⁱ Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski declared in mid-April 1998 that Poland supports the ambitions of the Baltic countries and other countries in Central Europe to join NATO and the EU. (Polish Radio 15 April 1998, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (SWB) EE/D3203/C, 17 April 1998).

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, also Radio Budapest 24 November 1997, SWB EE/ 3086/C/5, 26 November 1997, MTI 7 October 1997, SWB EE/D3045/C, 9 October 1997. Both Warsaw and Budapest are cooperating in an attempt to enlarge NATO further, with Budapest supporting the future candidature of Slovenia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Romania.

^{iv} Polityka Nr 23, 6 June 1998 p.17.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Although some of the controversies involving the Prime Minister, such as the still unsolved mystery of the abduction of the son of the Slovak president, a Meciar opponent, are clearly dictatorial, others, such as the enlargement of the Bratislava electoral district, dealing with the National Theatre strike or barring some of the Members of Parliament from the Security Committee are not illegal. The problem with understanding the situation in Slovakia lies partly in the fact that the journalists covering the area are usually based in Vienna, Prague, Budapest or Warsaw and descend on Bratislava for catchy headlines, interviewing mainly the perceived underdogs and not bothering to learn about the country. This results in two points being missing from most of the reports on Slovakia:

^{vii} The Times, 29 September 1998, p.10.

^{viii} BBC SWB EE/3324 C/2, 5 September 1998 and 3325/C1, 7 September 1998.

^{ix} The understandable public criticism of the Slovak constitution by the honorary chairman of the Hungarian Coalition Party, Miklos Duray, on 30 August 1998 might probably win the support of many Slovaks but the fact that it was made in Budapest will only widen the gap between the two communities.

^x Hungarian Gross Debt in December 1994 reached \$28bn (The Economist Intelligence Unit Report, 3rd Quarter 1996, p.3).

^{xi} The number of seats won by the Alliance of Young Democrats went up from 20 in 1994 to 148 in 1998 with the HSP share decreasing from 209 in 1994 to 134 in 1998.

^{xii} Officina Vilagevkonyv, 94/95 pp. 186 and 234.

^{xiii} Bonn rejects most of the proposals to reform the CAP and has promised German farmers continuing subsidies. The Germans see also net contributions to the EU as too high (The Times, 10 June 1998, p.15).