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The Concept of Leadership in Central Europe: Discussing the Austrian and Polish Cases¹

Der Artikel analysiert in komparativer Perspektive österreichische und polnische Außenpolitik in Bezug auf Mitteleuropa. Mitteleuropa wird hier als ein Kern dargestellt, bestehend aus Österreich, der Visegrad-Gruppe, Slowenien und potenziell auch Kroatien. Der Artikel wird eingeleitet mit einer kurzen Beschreibung der Entwicklung von Aussagen und Prioritäten der österreichischen und polnischen mitteleuropäischen Außenpolitik von 1989 bis heute. Besondere Aufmerksamkeit gilt dabei den letzten Jahren. Obwohl Österreich und Polen verschiedene Typen von Ländern darstellen, haben (oder hatten) beide eine Führungsposition in Mitteleuropa angestrebt. In den letzten 15 Jahren haben beide Staaten wiederholt versucht, diese Rolle einzunehmen. Die Autoren sind der Ansicht, dass die österreichischen Ambitionen, eine solche Rolle zu spielen, aus der EU-Mitgliedschaft Österreichs hervorgeht. Andererseits sieht sich Polen als regionale Führungskraft, dessen Position auf dem offensichtlichen Beitrag Polens zur europäischen Sicherheit und Stabilität beruht. In anderen mitteleuropäischen Ländern werden keine ähnlichen Leadership-Tendenzen beobachtet. Im Vordergrund steht die Analyse dieser Themen im Kontext des diplomatischen und politischen Umfelds der mitteleuropäischen Länder. Ebenso werden die Perspektiven der EU und der NATO zur Diskussion gestellt. Der Beitrag endet mit einer vergleichenden Erwägung einer möglichen Führungsrolle Österreichs bzw. Polens im mitteleuropäischen Kontext.

*Keywords: Mitteleuropa, Österreich, Polen, Außenpolitik, Diplomatie, Führerschaft
Central Europe, Austria, Poland, foreign policy, diplomacy, leadership*

1. Central Europe as a research framework

May 1st 2004 remains a crucial event not only to the EU but also to the countries of Central Europe. Entering the EU reformed the potential framework of Central European space. The former level of cooperation created by the Visegrád Group could be expanded to a broader range of countries including Austria and Slovenia. Reassessment of the notion of Central Europe opens question of leadership of mutual cooperation in a variety of fields. This paper aims at evaluating the leadership possibilities of both of the “natural” leaders of the Central European area – Austria and Poland.

It is almost traditional that when dealing with the notion of Central Europe, it is impossible to

escape the definition of Central European. The agenda of Central Europe has been latently examined since the middle of the 19th century (cf. Miller 1999) and was revitalized during the second half of the 1980s when the concept of Central Europe replaced the notion of “East Central” (or sometimes even “Eastern”) Europe prevailing in Western political and scientific discourse till that time. We believe that methodological separation of a specific Central European region outside Eastern and Western Europe is fruitful and fully justified (cf. Halecki 2000; Halecki 1962; Szücs 1990; Berend/Ránki 1974; Wandycz 1992).

A clear opportunity emerged after the last wave of EU enlargement, that the concept of Central Europe would be able to cross over unnatural boundaries established in the period of

the Cold War. Thus we assume in this context that a “working” conceptualization of Central Europe could be as follows and could incorporate Austria, countries of the Visegrád group and Slovenia. There is a perspective that even Croatia could be a partner in the broader perspective of progress in the Croatian EU accession process. Such a conceptualization is not only a traditional or geopolitical one but one which pays respect to the mutual approaches of concerned countries and nations towards each other just as well as towards other European regions. The termination of division of Europe by the Iron Curtain could provoke certain progress of Central European cooperation. We can presuppose that such cooperation will be provided more on the basis of similar interest than on a common historical experience and shared historical identity (Béhar 1994; Le Rider 1994). The similarity of regional interests of Central European countries could build a new quality within the complex framework of multilevel governance structures of the EU, but we assume that the quality of the enlarged EU should be evaluated already. A more precise conceptualization and assessment of the Central European dimension of the EU multilevel governance system could be provided after a careful examination of recent evidence. The first opportunity for adequate research could be an analysis of the Austrian presidency of the EU in the context of regional aspirations and policies of Central European countries.

2. The concept of leadership – how to understand it in Central European terms?

Central Europe changed its status radically after the end of the Cold War. In this area, there was probably the most significantly visible dissolution of the bipolar world. The creation of new relationships in the Central European region has been accompanied by two parallel processes. One has an external and the other an internal nature.

The fundamental external factors with indubitable impact on the arrangement in Central

Europe were geopolitical interests of big European and also non-European players, namely the US, Russia, Germany, and France.

In the category of internal factors are counted concepts of arrangements which followed directly from Central European states. On the one hand, these factors were connected with the priorities of Central European countries in foreign policies. On the other hand, these factors also depended on their abilities to enforce a certain vision of arrangement.

The dimension of changes in the regional framework gave a relatively huge space for the exercise of different ideas, although not all countries had the same ambitions to realize their visions of a future Central European arrangement. In the next part of the paper, the “leadership” phenomenon will be elaborated, which is connected with the transformation of the international environment in a Central European framework.

Evaluation of leadership in Central Europe could be carried out through several approaches to international politics. Because of the remaining importance of national states as key actors in the process of creating the Central European arrangement, the authors decided to use realism (Hobson 2000; Holsti 1995) as a suitable approach to explain international relations in Central Europe after 1989. Several serious disputes between countries in the region back up the claim for realism. Examples such as the Austrian-Czech debate over the nuclear power plant Temelín, the Hungarian-Slovak controversy over a Danube dam in Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros, and the Polish-Russian rift over the military status of Kaliningrad clearly show that national interests are still leading motivations for states behavior in international politics.²

So, what is the definition of leadership? What are the preconditions for claiming that some country is in a leadership position?

Generally speaking, notions of leadership, or concepts of leadership are frequently used in texts dealing with company management and organizational structures (Bolman/Deal 2003; Ehrenberg 2004; Rothwell 2005). Leadership in international relations is much more fluent, but

the notion is also used very often. For common observers it is obvious that for instance the U.S. is a declared leader in the global international order (Brzezinski 2004; Kagan 2003; Nye 2003). Another example from European soil, France and Germany have been described as leading nations in the European integration process (Dyson/Featherstone 1999, 71ff.; Dyson 2000, 174ff.). Many other examples could be named, but there is still a lack of a simple, unquestionable definition of leadership in international relations. Because of that lack, we have tried to elaborate and adjusted another concept, which is designed for international relations and could link crucial aspects of leadership used in this text. For that purpose the superpower concept described by Ken Aldred and Martin A. Smith is very useful. Their evaluation concerns the U.S. position in the world. From that point of view, certain modifications have to be made with regard to leadership in the Central European region.

What kind of arguments support the claim of superpower and could serve also for a leadership concept? William T. R. Fox argues that "... in making an international superpower was more just a country's possession of the attributes of power: military, economic, political and ideological. A superpower was principally distinguished by *dynamism* and *pro-activity*, by the *ability* and *willingness* to project power and *influence*. Superpower status, in other words, was gained not just by what a country had but by what it did, or was *prepared to do*" (Fox 1944, 21; Aldred/Smith 1999, 18–19; *emph. added*). From that point of view, there are at least three essential prerequisites which must be fulfilled if a country is to assume a leadership position:

1. A country has to have *potential* for leadership;
2. A country has to have *ambition* and *will* to act as leader;
3. A country has to strive for achieving *legitimacy* of its leadership position.

Ad 1) A country's potential usually results from the fact that some parameters are objectively given such as territory size, number of

population, geographical location. But, economic power, military capacity, and membership in key international organizations are also significantly important – this is connected with political influence.

Ad 2) Nevertheless, only having huge potential is not sufficient guarantee that a country will be perceived by others as a leader. There is the necessity to have ambitions and aspirations to achieve leadership status. In the short term, the country has to be prepared to use its potential and promote itself with a very active approach on the international scene.

Ad 3) A real leader can only be a country which is perceived as such by others. The rest of the international players should have reasons as to why they should accept this leadership position. For long-term leadership it is necessary to deal with legitimacy. Without legitimacy derived from the international community, it is very difficult for a leader to keep its exceptional position. According to Samuel Huntington a leading or superpower position also derives from a country's ability to promote an ideal with appeal beyond its borders (cf. Aldred/Smith 1999, 168ff.).

Analysis of political development in the Central European area shows us that during the last fifteen years there have been examples of two countries which have tried to emerge as certain kinds of leaders, namely Austria and Poland. An evaluation of motivations and successes or failings of their efforts will be a matter for the following section.

3. Austria – hesitating candidate for leadership role in Central Europe

Austrian foreign policy orientation can be subsumed to three main given conditions:

- Tradition of foreign policy interests and activities both towards the Western and the Eastern part of European continent;
- Austrian position within the EU limited in the relations towards new member countries and candidate countries by domestic political, social, and economic interests;

- Strict policy of neutrality in security and foreign policy issues; active support of multilateral security structures (OSCE) and EU tools (CFSP, ESDP).

In spite of the isolation which was created between Austria and other Central European States during the Cold War period, Austrian foreign policy tried to play an active role towards these states whose frontiers were given by State Treaty (1955), while at the same time adopting a neutral position within the general configuration of a bipolar Europe, sharply divided by the Iron Curtain. Some proposals from the Central European confederation emerged shortly after World War Two but they were quickly obscured and disregarded by other problems in a divided Central Europe (cf. Marjanović 1998, 77ff.). Austria however remained a very active player in Central Europe.

The first international community in Central Europe not paying respect to a bipolar world was founded in 1978. It was the *Working Community Alps-Adriatic* which continued the activities of a smaller circle and coupled together Austria, Italy, the former Yugoslavian federation, and later Hungary.

The idea of Central European cooperation was discussed broadly in Austria in the 1980s. Concerning the political reality, these discussions were not able to cross over the academic or literal debates and concepts. Both the SPÖ and ÖVP took an active part in this process but the latter developed a series of projects designed for strengthening cooperation in Central Europe and the Danube macro-region. Interestingly, Austria was not willing to create and maintain special relations with Central European countries after 1989. Moreover, there was a clear tendency to create clear border-lines *between* Austria and Central Europe.

Austria oriented itself more towards the European Community and the general public in Austria started to think about Central European countries more in terms of economic rivalry and potential danger (cf. Marjanović 1998, 126 ff.). The enthusiasm of the early 1990s connected with efforts to help the states of Central Europe politically and economically

diminished fast (Khol 1990, 826ff.; Bischof/Pelinka 1992).

If we compare real outcomes and importance, we have to say that more effective than classical interstate bilateral contacts were clearly designed projects of regional cooperation which comprehended questions of transit transportation, ecological issues, or cultural contacts. There was a novelized issue of Federal constitutional law entering into force on 1st January 1989 which allowed federal regions (*Länder*) to negotiate and sign international cooperation treaties with neighboring countries without necessity of confirmation by federal agencies. This amendment led indirectly to new activities in the framework of the Working Community Alps-Adriatic. This former regional initiative was restructured at the level of states in 1989. Agreement institutionalizing regional cooperation was signed on 12th November 1989 and the new organization was labeled as the Initiative of Four or *Quadrangone*. This institution then increased the number of member states step-by-step, and finally transformed itself into the *Central European Initiative* (CEI).

Another cooperative body was created with the founding of the Working Community of the Danubian Countries (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft Donauländer*, ARGE) which was constituted in 1990. ARGE Donauländer also tries to cooperate intensively with CEI and it concentrates its effort on projects that use instruments of the EU regional policy. The Working Community is however stuck on regional and sector-limited cooperation and its territorial scope goes far beyond Central Europe, we can evaluate it as an example of the active Austrian approach to regional cooperation and agenda setting processes.

Austria also took an active part in the process of the establishment of the political initiative *Danube Cooperation Process* whose aim was the recovery of the Danube zone damaged by the U.S.-led military intervention in Serbia. Austria was one of the countries presenting this idea in September 2001.

The last important Austrian initiative aimed at strengthening mutual relations in Central Europe was the meeting between Austria and

five of the then EU candidate countries (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) in Vienna in June 2001. The aim of this encounter was to create an informal regional partnership among the states concerned. Austrian diplomacy prospected possibilities of broader cooperation with countries that were meant to be in the next wave of the EU enlargement and that would probably have many common interests in the EU framework. A more or less hidden goal of the Austrian initiative thus was to identify shared interests and to find out effective means of their representation. The notion of cultural cooperation was discussed too. Although meetings of this vague forum composed of foreign ministers continued in the following years (for example in November 2001 in Bratislava or in July 2003 in Buchlovice), we can not assume that this partnership is working as a bold element in the forming of mutual policies of Central European states nor is it the key factor of Central European countries' cooperation in the EU. Regional partnership however remains important factor of Austrian foreign policy in Central Europe (Ferrero-Waldner 2004; Plassnik 2005). Another important factor of Austrian foreign policy in Central Europe is intensive and broad cultural "diplomacy" such as platform *Culture – Central Europe*.

3.1. Austria and NATO – the limit for Austrian security leadership potential

The Austrian chancellor Wolfgang Schäussel's first cabinet tried to foster cooperation with Austria at the international security field level by ties with NATO, notably by engaging Austria in the Partnership for Peace Program (PfP) and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. Austria welcomed the enlargement of NATO at the Prague summit although it is not a member of the Alliance. NATO's enlargement was seen as an extension of the zone of peace and stability in Central and South-Eastern Europe. Attempts to strengthen the relationship with NATO including the possibility of a full-fledged membership were abandoned in Schäussel's second term given the strict rejection

by the Austrian public and the opposition parties. Thus the prospect of abandoning neutrality is very small at least in the short term (Hummer 2000, 221ff.). Austrian not-being in NATO limits Austrian leadership potential in the security field because most other Central European countries (especially Poland) are designing their security policies more in accordance with NATO than with instruments of the EU.

3.2. Austria in the European Union

Despite of some controversies connected to Austrian neutrality (Neuhoff 1995), Austria became a full member of the European Union by 1st January 1995, just forty years after regaining its national sovereignty. It was a mutually beneficial deal for both sides because Austria is one of the richest countries and thus a net payer to the EU budget. Austria met the EU's convergence criteria without problems and has become one of eleven countries that have introduced the Euro since 1999.

Another important challenge for Austria was the question of further enlargement of the EU. Austria was the neighbor of four candidate countries; important Austrian economic centers are near the borderlines with these countries which meant there was potential concurrence in the environment according to the framework of the single market of the EU. Some of the new member countries have unsolved questions derived from the past. Austria is facing the problem of Central European nuclear plants too. All these and related issues were a dramatic part of pre-accession negotiations with candidate countries because Austria naturally tried to express its point of view in a broader diplomatic context. However, if we evaluate the outcome of EU enlargement from a broader time perspective, we can clearly see that Austria will profit from this process (Petsche/Hinteregger 2001). It can be shown in terms of economic opportunities offered by new markets in which Austrian firms are already well established. Another advantage for Austria is in political potential that is embodied by Central European countries in terms of strengthening external security by reshuffling

EU borders farther to the East. And it could be just a Central European dimension of an enlarged EU that could help Austria to expand its voice in the framework of the EU if it were able to create a feeling of joint interests in the Central European region, whether in the position of leader or not.

The first hard test of potential Central European coherence however almost failed. It was connected to the difficult creation of Schüssel's first coalition government at the beginning of the year 2000. The so-called sanctions against Austria by the EU-14 also showed deep division of policies towards Austria provided by different Central European states (Böhm/Lahodinsky 2001; Mayr-Harting 2001; Olt 2001; Feldner 2000).

One of the negative outcomes of this situation was a dramatic decline of Austrian public support of the EU, disappointment of the Austrian political elite caused by steps made by other member countries and last but not least also disappointment from positions adopted by several candidate states (we recall that the Czech Republic fully supported the EU-14, in contrast to the more balanced view of Hungary). A positive outcome could be found in the fact that Austria was once again forced to collect diplomatic support from EU member and candidate countries and thus became more engaged in Central European affairs.

How should the present activities of Austria in the EU be evaluated? Previous activity of Austria in the EU indicates that Austria is still searching for its role within the Union. There are several reasons that support this statement. Austria can still be regarded a "young" member of the club, the Austria-EU crisis in 2000 also caused difficulties for the Austrian role-defining process and in the outcome it weakened the Austrian position which was clearly seen when Austria tried without success to link the accession talks with the Czech Republic with the so-called Beneš decrees and the Czech nuclear plant Temelín. On the other hand, we can say, that Austria was not "damaged" by sanctions and Austrian diplomacy proved its ability to get at least some support from candidate countries of Central Europe.

It could be concluded that Austrian EU-membership has a positive impact on the Austrian economy (Breuss 2003; Joint Report 2000, 19) thus improving its economic position in Central Europe.³ In political terms, Austria is far less successful due to some hard to solve problems with its neighbors. The sanctions clearly showed limits of support provided to Austria by other countries of Central Europe. Recent evidence shows however a strong potential of improvement of bilateral relations of Austria to other Central European countries in the context of European integration. For instance, problems concerning the nuclear power plant Temelín were eased decisively by the so-called Melk Process (Conclusions 2001).⁴

Some other EU policies issues could however make a gap between the Austrian position and political priorities of other Central European EU-members. A specific problem is the question of protection of the Austrian labor market provided by seven years of restrictions on the free movement of persons.

The further Eastern enlargement of the EU could have a positive impact, which could lead to a more convergent position of Austria and other Central European countries vis-à-vis new member countries. The geopolitical position of Austria connecting East and West of the EU could be strengthened again.

3.3. Austria and its leadership potential – other aspects and evaluation

What conditions are given to Austria following the above mentioned concept of leadership? First of all, Austria has a very favorable position both in geopolitical and geo-economic terms. Austria is a transit country for important European transport routes and its position connecting Western and Central Europe is from a geopolitical point of view almost ideal. Austrian economic capacities are also relatively highly developed and Austria plays an important role in Central European foreign trade and belongs to the group of most important foreign investors for new EU member countries. Austria plays an active role in many international organiza-

tions. Austria is active above all in questions concerning international development and relief. Vienna is the seat of many international organizations (UN, OSCE, OPEC, several important NGOs). Assuming Austrian leadership potential we can conclude that Austria has a certain capacity to play the role of Central European leader, most of all in economic (Kastner 2001) and cultural terms.

However, the leadership potential is not sufficient. Equally important is the willingness of an actor to play the role of (regional) leader. Looking back at the previous fifteen years, we can observe on some occasions that Austria tried to play a leading role in Central Europe by presenting new projects and initiating broader cooperation (e.g. ARGE). Certain problems were created by the scope of cooperation. Too many countries were involved and were too limited in the development of their shared aims at the same time. Austria's most serious attempt was made in unfavorable circumstances shortly after the Austrian coalition crisis and European sanctions.

This leads us to the final condition of leadership. No country should become a regional leader without a certain level of recognition by its neighboring countries that would have to accept its leadership. This is a crucial point in the explanation of why Austrian ambitions are so far unfulfilled. Austria has simply too many unresolved issues with some of its neighboring countries that limit the possibility of a broad acceptance of Austrian leadership. Another problem is a certain unwillingness and unpreparedness of Central European countries to create a tighter international partnership, although it may help strongly to define and defend common interests.

The example of the Czech Republic highlights another problem which is an obstacle to Central European cooperation. Czech politics is divided somehow between the economic gravitational power of Germany, and security affiliation to U.S.-dominated security structures (although the Czech political elite are divided on this issue). Without reasonable and acceptable concepts of cooperation suitable for a complex Central European environment, Austria

would hardly be able to compete with the "natural" strength of Germany or the U.S.

Thus, Austria shows certain elements of leadership ambitions but they are not always based in clear Central European territorial settings and they are very often directed towards cross-regional patterns of cooperation more than interstates ones. Austria is using its leadership potential in Central Europe only in a limited way and it shows that Austrian foreign policy directed towards the Central European region is very often not so ambitious to deliberately strive for the key role of regional leader. A certain "lack of will" creates a firm obstacle for the Austrian leadership position.

4. Poland – an ambitious player in Central European affairs

Poland was in the leading position in Central Europe thanks to the fact that it was the first country within the so-called Eastern Block where political changes started in 1989. Polish events were an inspiration and example for others to follow. Shortly after the country's regaining of sovereignty, the main foreign policy priorities were formulated. There are three stable and dominant spheres of Polish interests in foreign policy:

1. Relations with neighbors and Central-European co-operation;
2. Membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union;
3. Relationships with the Russian Federation and post-Soviet countries.

Each of the above mentioned categories have a set of subcategories and they can be compared by their importance. For instance under the agenda of relationships with neighbors belong bilateral relations with Germany but also relations within the EU and NATO. The same stands for relations with the Czech Republic which have bilateral and multilateral dimensions on the Visegrád Group platform. Analysis of relations within NATO is impossible without consideration of bilateral relations between Poland and

the United States. A particular place in Polish security policies has been occupied by strategic partnerships with Lithuania and Ukraine.

In addition to relationships with its neighbors, a Central-European approach was strongly emphasized. Poland joined *Pentagonale* in 1991, which was renamed *Hexagonale* and later appears as the CEI. More important for Polish Central European policy has been the cooperation established by the *Visegrád Declaration* in 1991. Poland along with Czechoslovakia and Hungary founded this informal political group for the purpose of integration into western political, economic and security structures. The Visegrád Triangle and later the Visegrád Group or Visegrád Four (V4) – the formation was renamed after the Czechoslovak “divorce” in 1993 – serves as a suitable diplomatic tool for the promotion of Central-European and in broader terms also the European aspirations of Poland. Indeed, other partners in this project profit too (Gajewski 2002, 298ff.).

The Polish attitude towards Visegrád cooperation is usually labeled as “maximalist”. (Kolankiewicz 1994, 483f.). Due to its size and preferred aspirations, Poland played a really important role in the Central European region in the transitional period. The commonly accepted opinion of Poland is that it is categorized as a middle-sized country in European understanding, comparable for instance with Spain. In addition to its size and population there is significant evidence that the country is located on the main line of relationships between the EU, NATO, Ukraine and Russia.

Current Polish leadership potential is based largely on these parameters and is less a result of its economic power or technological development. Indeed, the latter mentioned attributes are improving now, but still show significant shortfalls compared to larger European countries.

The Polish maximalist approach means that country is well exercised in Central-European co-operation for maximizing its fundamental national interests. In the first place Poland is determined to preserve its sovereignty and security. Security is perceived as a basic condition for prospective economic and civilization development. In particular insurance terms,

“hard security guarantees” means membership in NATO and “soft security guarantees” means membership in the EU.

Poland has gained a dominant position in Central Europe in a natural way thanks to its geographical size. Participation in Central European projects offered the proper opportunity to support stability inside the transitional region. So, the leading role of Poland can be especially well demonstrated in the field of Central-European security issues. Although all the V4 countries intended to join the North-Atlantic Alliance for security purposes, the decision of enlargement had to be adopted within the existing NATO member states.

Political evolution in the first half of the 1990s clearly showed that two conditions for NATO enlargement had to be fulfilled. First of all there must be at least one significant supporter of enlargement within NATO. Secondly, the process of enlargement has to be accompanied by a visibly enlarged zone of stability.

Substantive steps from the side of NATO emerged after Bill Clinton’s administration decided to promote the widely understood strategy of “enlargement” areas of liberal democracies and free markets. In the fall of 1993 a new strategy of “enlargement” was formulated which replaced the strategy of “containment” (Lake 1993).

The most visible point of the new strategy was NATO enlargement. During the process of taking countries from Central Europe into NATO, the administration could demonstrate America’s security commitment towards the old Continent. From the other side, the success of the project depended among other factors on full participation of candidate states in each stage of enlargement. Without the aspirants’ cooperation the goal was unachievable (Goldgeier 1999, 9 and 52f.).

In this respect an important event was the presentation of the PfP in January 1994 in Brussels and later that month in Prague. When Clinton arrived in Prague at the summit with V4 presidents there was a clear intention to persuade them to accept PfP as a first step to NATO. But the American delegation had to hear serious reservations and many concerns about the

adequacy of the program. There was no unqualified willingness to take part in PfP because some Central Europeans did not perceive PfP as enough of a guarantee of full membership in NATO in the foreseeable future (Asmus 2002, 54ff.; Goldgeier 1999, 53).

The US-administration had a special attitude towards Poland. From the geopolitical point of view, and with consideration of enlargement effectiveness, Poland stayed ahead of the group. There were two earlier mentioned reasons. First, Poland has expressed the most active position among candidate states. And second, without Poland's involvement in the enlargement the premise of stabilization of the area would make the project a de facto failure (Asmus 2002, 62 f.).

After the Alliance's enlargement in March 1999 the Organization had something which could be described as a "Central-European experience". Joining NATO, Poland was objectively – in comparison to existing members – militarily weak, but with a vital interest in keeping NATO as a functioning security structure. As a consequence, it was in Poland's interest to oppose changing NATO from a strong military organization to a formal political structure without a clear role.

The high level of Polish-American bilateral relations has also had an impact on Polish European policy and not only in its Central-European framework. Signs of this emerged just after Poland's entry to the EU.

11th September 2001 brought additional impulses for Polish-American relations. NATO, as a whole, expressed support for the USA. At the same time an unusual situation opened space for Poland (and others) to intensify bilateral relations with the U.S. President Bush's declaration on war against international terrorism also meant that Poland became part of a global security environment and it happened in a very physical manner (Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003). But collaterally, Polish-American relations have steadily improved and the traditionally strong linkage between the U.S. and its European allies (Germany) has eroded. On the one hand it has strengthened the Polish position. On the other hand, risks have appeared concerning the reduction of American presence in Europe, and

it is in direct contrast to the long-term security strategy of Poland. Demand for a constant American presence in Europe has been an integral part of each stage of Polish foreign policy since the 1990s. It was not different on the eve of the invasion of Iraq (Cimoszewicz 2003).

The Pentagon's plans for new dislocated American units around the world inspired Poland to offer its own territory for the next mission in Europe. The possibility that some of the American troops from Germany could be moved to Poland was also considered by experts during a meeting between the U.S. and Polish representatives in Warsaw in December 2003. Until now, there is no positive answer to the Polish invitations by the Americans.

The new Polish government created after parliamentary elections in September 2005 keeps Polish-American relations high on the agenda, especially with regard to security issues. The current Minister of Defense Radoslaw Sikorski is a well-known pro-Atlanticist and he spent a long time in Great Britain and the United States. The same ideological and political roots of President Lech Kaczynski, who has taken office after elections in October 2005, and the ruling political party "Law and Justice" enable us to assume that no differences between government and President will emerge in this respect.

4. 1. Poland in an enlarged Europe

The core of Polish foreign policy interests lies in Europe, but Poland only gained the opportunity to directly shape the most important European organization, the EU, recently. How can it be that "the new-comer" has created so much excitement in such a short time? The gradual building of this position within the Union should be recognized as an extension of the previous Polish performance in NATO. Despite the non-existence of causal relations between membership status in the EU and NATO it is possible to find certain trends in Polish foreign policy from the recent past.

The EU is the primary source of future Polish growth and development in economic, social,

and cultural terms. But this statement is not in full correlation with the Polish projection of a security area. A range of reservations on this point are emerging and there is also good reason for the Poles distance towards concepts of a future role of the EU regarding security areas. Directly speaking, in comparison with NATO the EU is not a full-valued security alternative and this fact is projected into basic governmental documents too. The former Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz expressed the position in his parliamentary expose in January 2004 as follows: “The logic of European integration makes cooperation in the framework of security and defense unavoidable. The Union, as a global actor, must have at its disposal an appropriate set of instruments, including military ones. Poland will join in all undertakings and forms of cooperation that will not weaken the North Atlantic Alliance and duplicate its functions” (Cimoszewicz 2004).

But with a certain degree of caution towards the EU as a security guarantor there is connected also a sense for realism in foreign policy. In practical terms it looks like Poland is not perfectly situated for a leadership position in this case, but is understandably participant in projects of common security policy of the EU. And this approach is in Poland’s own interest. Simultaneously it is evident that projection of particular Polish influence on development in the EU framework is limited by the existing capacity of Poland.

Some limits, resulting among others from the economic power of Poland, which as a country tries to compensate by increased activities on the political level. Amongst factors used by Warsaw in its “European” policy, prime position is held by its close relationship with the U.S. The speech given by Minister Cimoszewicz in January 2004 serves as a good example: “Polish-American relations have recently attained unprecedented stature. One of the reasons for this has been the Polish position during the Iraqi crisis. This new quality in our relations has had positive political consequences. It is a source of our enhanced prestige, also among our European partners” (Cimoszewicz 2004).

New Minister of Foreign Affairs Adam D. Rotfeld described Polish interests in a similar way in his annual parliamentary speech a year later. “The prestige of Poland in Washington is today higher than at any time in the past. ... That prestige has gained in significance since our entry into the European Union. Our relations with the United States are important primarily because only America is in a position to extend security guarantees to Poland – in their most credible version.” But Minister Rotfeld realistically added: “We, in Poland, are aware that our close – even privileged – relations with the United States are not an alternative to our engagement in European integration. ... Our commitment to improving the transatlantic relations will not be credible unless it is coupled with an equally strong commitment to the development of European cooperation” (Rotfeld 2005).

As was mentioned above, Poland has made efforts to be in the leading position in the Central European region and this approach has similarly been used with regard to the EU. Polish diplomacy was always among the most active and made a lot of attempts to participate in various projects, many of them promoted by themselves too. Poland has the intention of being perceived as a “catalyst” country, a country which not only participates in important international processes but which is also their initiative part and creator of the direction of its development (Dančák 2004, 16ff.).

It shows clearly Polish policy towards the EU and could be documented by another passage from Minister Cimoszewicz’s expose on the state of Polish foreign policy:

Our primary objective in the framework of the Union’s common foreign policy will consist of strengthening and invigorating EU cooperation with its neighbors, in particular the Eastern ones, through the establishment of the Eastern Dimension of the EU policy. The relevant proposals that we have put forward over the last few months have animated the Union’s debates on the subject. We will continue our involvement in the work on the EU initiative ‘A Wider Europe – A New Neighborhood’ (Cimoszewicz 2004)

The same tone echoed in the next year presentation when Minister Rotfeld (2005) stated:

(A)s a member of the NATO and EU we shall seek a new opening in the relations of the whole West with Ukraine. ...In particular, we shall seek to it that the European Union raises its relations with Ukraine to the level of Strategic Partnership and opens the prospect of integration, while advocating NATO offer of a Membership Action Program.

4.2. The legitimacy of Polish leadership ambitions

Polish foreign policy has showed a really strong tendency towards a leadership position and this tendency has been apparent since the start of the transformation in 1989. We do not find the same approach by other Visegrád Group countries. Poland has played an active role in international relations at various levels and within differently wide forums. This attitude has enabled Poland to promote its own national interests not only in a Central European framework, but also in a broader European context.

From the legitimacy point of view there is no dispute about the key Polish role in the very beginning of political reforms in Central Europe. The Polish example served as one of the possible ways of dealing with communist regimes in certain areas and the willingness of other nations to follow this example was evident.

We are very close to making a similar claim about the security issue and leading role of Poland with regards to NATO's enlargement. The concept of enlargement was designed for the whole Visegrád Group, but without Poland's involvement in it, the enlargement probably wouldn't have fulfilled its essential purpose.

If a country wants to keep its position at "the top", the nature of the international environment calls for a necessity to be ever active. The struggle for leadership is constant and requires permanent readiness. Polish foreign policy is created with respect to this and it is a long-term trend.

Of course, from time to time and in some situations, leadership policy clashes with others because the game is played between actors with different national interests. It is an inherent dimension of international relations.

In the Polish case (but not only) tensions were highly evident around the Iraqi crisis which concurred with the final stage of Polish preparation to join the EU. These tensions followed from disputes about Euro-Atlantic relations and the position of particular European states towards American foreign policy. Poland decided to follow the U.S. direction which brought Warsaw some advantages. But, taking a long-term perspective, it is difficult to assume the real impact of this policy on the Polish position on the European framework.

5. Conclusion

Due to several factors the potential leadership ambitions of two Central European countries – Poland and Austria – remain unfulfilled. First, both of the discussed countries have not been ready to take on a leading role during the last fifteen years. Second, they are lacking some capacities (Austria in terms of military capacities, Poland in its level of economic development) necessary for successful leadership positions in all analyzed dimensions of this concept. Third, acceptance from other Central European countries is limited due to the first two limits and, of course, also due to individualist (and, sometimes even "solipsistic") strategies of some neighboring countries (the best example here is the Czech one) and/or due to the existence of stronger centers of gravitation (Germany, USA).

Austria has the economic potential to play the role of the leader but only limited political power given its poor military potential. Poland has only military potential but its diplomatic possibilities are limited (although by different reasons) and its economic potential is not sufficiently developed for a regional leader.

Austrian ambitions to play such a role are at best ambivalent. On the contrary, Poland is trying openly to achieve a leading position in Central Europe which could be demonstrated by Polish policy within the Visegrád mechanism. Poland is striving for the position of sub-regional power in foreign and security policy terms. Poland doesn't try to play a leadership role in economic sphere. Regional acceptance of Polish

leadership ambitions is limited by the strong Polish affiliation to US policies and divergent position of Central European countries concerning many issues of European integration. Austrian acceptance is limited mainly because of controversial issues in bilateral relations to particular countries in the region.

NOTES

- 1 The paper has been elaborated in the framework of the Czech Science Foundation (GA CR) research project "Trans-Atlantic Relations and Foreign Policy of Central European Countries" (Code No. 407/06/P444).
- 2 Realistic approach has led us not to take into account other aspects of regional cooperation such as paradiplomacy of sub-state units and actors (Soldatos 1990).
- 3 Although Austria has to face strong economic competition of Germany in Central European region. German importance in Central European foreign trade could be illustrated even on Austrian example. Germany is the most important Austrian foreign partner both in trade with commodities (31,9% of total export and 40,8% of total import in 2003) and the services (39,3% of total export and 36,5% of total import in 2003). Central European countries are less important in trade with commodities than Italy, USA, Switzerland, France, or the UK. Hungary took the 7th position in 2003 (4% export; 3,2% import) followed by the Czech Republic (3,1% export; 3,3% import). Slovenia is on the 11th position, Poland on the 12th, and Slovakia on the 13th (import) and the 14th (export). If we consider services, Hungary is placed on the 9th place (2,5% export; 2,0% import), followed by Poland (2% export; 1,4% import) and the Czech Republic (1,5% export; 1,6% import). Slovenia and Slovakia occupy the 13th and the 14th positions (cf. BMWA 2004: 175, 183 f.).
- 4 The activities of the Austrian-Czech Working Group on radiation protection have led to important improving of regional cooperation in this field. An informal system of cooperation was agreed among Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia at a symposium in Salzburg in 2003. Austrian-Slovenian discussions related to the problem of Slovenian-Croatian nuclear power plant Krško also lead to positive conclusions and an expansion of mutual information and cooperation (Ferrero-Waldner 2001).

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