



Report

A WIND OF CHANGE? ROLE OF CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE NEXT EU POLITICAL CYCLE

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About EUROPEUM

EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.



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On Thursday, 17 October, EUROPEUM representing the Think Visegrad platform, and in cooperation with Center for Eastern Studies (OSW) and the Polish National Centre for Research and Development, hosted a public conference titled **'A Wind of Change? The Role of Central Europe in the Next EU Political Cycle.'** The event featured a keynote speech by **Laszlo Andor, Secretary General of FEPS**, followed by a panel discussion with **Andrzej Sadecki, OSW; Žiga Faktor, EUROPEUM; Jolanta Szymanska, PISM**, and **Eric Maurice, EPC**. The debate was moderated by **Silke Maes, EUROPEUM**.

In his opening remarks, László Andor emphasized **the need for a cohesive strategy to strengthen Central Europe's role in the EU, but also citing the V4 as a region, which is still vulnerable to many challenges.**

Despite economic growth, the region still faces difficulties such as income inequality, brain drain, slow innovation, and reliance on low-tax

policies. He also raised concerns about rule of law, gender equality, and corruption. Mr. Andor highlighted positive developments in Romania's internet infrastructure, the Czech Republic's start-up ecosystem, and Poland's economic growth, urging these successes be leveraged to build a stronger Central European identity in the EU. Mr. Andor noted shared priorities in cohesion and agriculture policy, or innovation, offering an opportunity for a unified regional voice within the EU in contrast with the currently difficult political dimension. Recent reports from Draghi, Letta, but also Rodríguez-Pose's from the High-level group of the Future of Cohesion policy should provide way forward while Central European countries must engage more actively in EU debates, not only to highlight their successes but also to address ongoing challenges, ensuring balanced representation of their interests within the EU.

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Following the opening remarks, moderator Silke Maes introduced speakers who addressed Central Europe's challenges, including economic competitiveness, security threats from Russia, and EU enlargement debates, or the issue of underrepresentation in EU institutions. **Eric Maurice highlighted the success of Central European countries in securing key European Commission roles but noted that this has not translated into a unified voice or greater influence within the EU.** He emphasized the region's economic dependence on Germany and the lack of a long-term strategic vision, along with political instability, as factors weakening Central Europe's ability to shape a positive EU agenda.

Following up on the aforementioned statements, Jolanta Szymanska continued with the **perspective on Central Europe's rising prominence due to the weakening Franco-German leadership, driven by political instability and rising populism in the two countries.** As the so-called engine of European integration undergoes internal problems, the European Commission stepped in as the main political driver, while Poland, under Donald Tusk's expected leadership during the Polish Presidency to the Council of the EU, could play a key role in the next political cycle. Poland's shift under Tusk is seen as a model for countering populism and offers Central Europe a chance to move from the EU's periphery to a more central role. However, she cautioned that V4 countries must adopt a broader EU vision and prove itself as a constructive leader amid ongoing populist challenges, stressing the need for political stability and long-term planning.

Later on, Mr. Sadecki stressed the need for the European Commission to boost competitiveness while preventing divides between wealthier and less-developed EU states, ensuring balanced industrial growth, climate alignment, and stronger defense ties with the U.S. He highlighted **increasing challenges around migration and EU enlargement, intensified by political instability in France, Germany, and the rise of Euroscepticism.** Mr. Sadecki also pointed out divisions within the V4 over security and responses to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with

Poland and the Baltic states supporting Ukraine, while Hungary and Slovakia take softer stances.

Žiga Faktor acknowledged reduced cooperation within the V4 but emphasized that challenges associated with the war in Ukraine and economic competitiveness have also boosted certain CEE countries' importance in the EU. These challenges have, for example, prompted V4 countries to expand alliances beyond traditional platforms. Poland has strengthened ties with the Baltic and Nordic states over shared security concerns, while the Czech Republic has worked on deepening its relations with its neighbors also through closer cooperation with the Weimar triangle through meetings on the level of directors of departments at respective ministries. **This shift shows Central European countries are acting more proactively in shaping EU policies and seeking for new partnerships to support their role on the EU level.** Furthermore, Russian war in Ukraine has

elevated Central Europe's role in the field of regional security and EU foreign policy, with Poland emerging as a key player enhancing its influence.

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The opening remarks were followed up by questions by the moderator. One of them focused on how Central European countries are contributing to enhancing competitiveness, the single market, and research and development, as outlined in Mario Draghi's report. Mr. Sadecki noted

concerns about the report's uneven regional impact and stressed the importance of cohesion policy to prevent disparities as the EU advances investment and technology reforms. **He urged V4 leaders to better communicate the broader benefits of EU market access, not just cohesion and agriculture funds.**

The discussion also highlighted differences in industrial policy, with Central Europe lagging behind France and Germany, which have developed national champions through state-supported investment. This raised questions about whether stricter pan-European rules would help Central Europe remain competitive. Ms. Szymanska highlighted the division within Western Europe on investment strategies. Countries like Slovakia, Slovenia, and Hungary have welcomed Chinese investment, while Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states view it as a security risk, complicating the creation of a unified EU industrial strategy. The moderator also addressed Central Europe's fragmented defense policy coordination, noting **the region's historical caution towards deeper integration in European defense. Diverging national priorities have hindered a cohesive approach.**

Eric Maurice highlighted that while Central European countries hold significant portfolios in the European Commission, this representation has not yet translated into a cohesive voice or greater influence in EU decision-making. Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic are responsible for critical areas such as foreign and security policy, defense, trade, and international partnerships. However, he argued that **Central Europe's economic dependence on Germany,** where many countries serve as subcontractors in the German industrial supply chain, **limits the region's autonomy in shaping its long-term vision for growth.**

Mr. Faktor emphasized that EU enlargement policy, particularly towards Ukraine, Moldova, but also the Western Balkans, is a top priority for V4 countries, Slovenia, and Croatia, driven by historical, cultural, and economic factors. Central European states are among the key investors in the Western Balkans and could also enhance opportunities in Ukraine's post-war reconstruction, with security concerns pushing Western Europe to support enlargement more actively. **Countries of the V4 can in this regard offer valuable guidance to candidates like Ukraine and Moldova based on their own accession experiences.**

The upcoming Polish Presidency of the EU Council is seen as a crucial moment in enhancing the role of the CEE countries and to strengthen the plans to further support the enlargement agenda and Euro-Atlantic commitments. Ms. Szymanska noted that the formal programme of the Polish Presidency will not be presented until mid-December, but it is likely that elements of the previous programme proposed by the outgoing government will be retained. **Key areas of focus are expected to include security and defence including investment in the defence industry and energy security.** In contrast to Hungary's recent presidency, Poland is expected to place significant emphasis on Ukraine, particularly in relation to EU enlargement, which was notably absent from Hungary's agenda. Additionally, the Polish Presidency is likely to prioritize competitiveness, aligning with efforts to strengthen transatlantic partnerships. It may also focus on expanding cooperation with third countries and aim to push forward negotiations on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

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During the debate, concerns were raised about the EU's focus on integration over tangible results. One participant criticized this "culture of optimism" for lacking accountability. In response, Ms. Szymanska noted that Central and Eastern Europe could indeed play a leadership role if it can articulate a clear, ambitious vision for the EU. The current state of the EU, with the waning influence of the Franco-German leadership tandem, presents a unique opportunity for Central and Eastern European countries to step up and offer solutions. Mr. Žiga further observed that France, typically the source of visionary ideas, and Germany, traditionally responsible for implementing them, are less active in EU debates at

present. This shift creates an opening for Central and Eastern Europe to assert itself.

However, other speakers cautioned that while this may be a moment for Central and Eastern Europe, **the region still faces challenges, such as its historically low representation in EU institutions.** They emphasized the need for policies or financial support that encourage citizens from these countries to engage with EU institutions in Brussels. Moreover, in countries like the Czech Republic, the national discourse often neglects the importance of a member state's role within the EU, which needs to be addressed to strengthen regional influence. Mr. Faktor also underscored that while there may be perceived differences among Central and Eastern European countries, these are often exaggerated. On core issues such as energy, migration, and cohesion, countries like Poland, Slovakia, and Romania tend to align regardless of the government in power. However, differences are likely to emerge during budget negotiations, where new priorities, such as defence spending and joint borrowing, will come to the forefront alongside traditional areas like agriculture and cohesion.

The discussion concluded with the final remarks urging Central European countries to seize this moment and assert themselves as key players in shaping the future direction of the EU. Ms. Maes emphasized that while the region faces challenges, including its historically low representation in EU institutions, it also has significant opportunities to influence policy by forming innovative coalitions and addressing emerging challenges with creativity. **The region must therefore continue to build alliances beyond the V4 and align its strategic interests with broader EU goals.** By actively engaging in key areas such as security, economic growth, and EU enlargement, Central Europe can enhance its influence and play a leading role in shaping the future of the European Union.