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THE UK'S RELATIONSHIP WITH CENTRAL EUROPE IN TIMES OF POLITICAL CHANGE

On 25th-26th April 2024, government officials, think tank representatives and academics from the UK and Central Europe met at Masaryk University, Brno, for a series of talks and discussions about the changing context for UK-Central European relations. The event was jointly organised by Masaryk University, Brno, and the Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Birmingham. This note brings together some of the key outcomes of the discussion.

Key findings and recommendations

The UK enjoys goodwill but should be realistic in assessing its own relevance. The UK is regarded with tremendous affection in Central Europe, and its role in European security, in particular, is acknowledged and appreciated. Substantial diaspora communities in the UK are also an important resource. However, non-specialists living in Central Europe do not follow UK politics day-to-day, and for those countries willing to take their lead from the Commission (or other key EU member states such as Germany), there will be limited appetite to deviate from the EU mainstream or go out on a limb to support the UK's priorities.

Cooperation needs to take into account the increasing diversity of the Central European region. In practice, even within the V4 group of countries, positioning on key issues is exceptionally diverse, as are relationships with the EU. It may be convenient to group these countries together for engagement or analytical purposes but the limits of such grouping must be recognised.

Mobility policies are a strategic opportunity. Enhancing mobility possibilities presents an opportunity for fruitful cooperation between the UK and the EU. The UK should carefully recalibrate its domestic narrative concerning mobility from the EU. It is important to communicate the benefits of increased mobility clearly and compellingly to the British public. This will help build public support for bolstered cooperation, ensuring that mobility policy adjustments are both strategic and consensual, and aligning with broader European interests without triggering defensive reactions. On the EU side, a delicate balance should be maintained to avoid exerting undue pressure that could precipitate rigid stances, thereby hampering mutual cooperation.

Navigate bilateral agreements with EU member states with caution (and expect caution in return). As the UK seeks to enhance its cooperation with Central European countries through bilateral agreements, it should proceed with caution. The EU remains sensitive to what could be perceived as UK attempts at post-Brexit cherry-picking of EU benefits. Therefore, while bilateral agreements offer a pathway for addressing specific shared interests, the UK needs to ensure that these agreements are not perceived as a threat to "EU unity".

Focus on strategic defence and security cooperation. Defence and security remain critical areas for cooperation between the UK and Central Europe, especially in light of ongoing threats from Russia and other global security challenges. It is important to actively participate in regional defence initiatives to strengthen ties and ensure collective security.

Partner in countering misinformation. Both the UK and Central European countries face significant challenges from misinformation and disinformation campaigns. There is a strong need for cooperation in developing robust mechanisms to combat these threats, which could involve both governmental and civil society initiatives.

Work together to address socio-economic and democratic challenges. Many Central European countries are grappling with socio-economic disparities and threats to liberal democracy. The UK can play a supportive role in addressing these issues, fostering stability and democratic values across the region.

Prepare for changes in US and China relations. The geopolitical context with regards to the US and China is rapidly evolving. The UK and Central European countries need to prepare for these changes, including taking account of the potential impacts of worsening relations, and adapt their policies to ensure they remain effective partners in the global arena.

The developing political context in the UK

- In recent years there have been high levels of voter volatility in the UK, with fewer than 50% of people voting for the same party in each of the last three elections. Significantly, in 2019 the Conservative Party won in several constituencies traditionally won by Labour.
- The Labour Party is expected to win a majority in the next UK general election. It is also expected that the Liberal Democrats and the right-wing populist party Reform UK will make gains, taking votes from the Conservatives. Although Reform UK is the third most popular party according to polls, this is unlikely to translate into seats in parliament. Similarly, there are major misgivings among many UK voters, notably those of the Muslim faith, about policy towards Gaza from both main parties, but the electoral impact of these concerns will probably be limited.
- Shadow foreign secretary David Lammy's recent article lays out Labour's foreign policy vision. Both Labour and the Conservatives are committed to supporting Ukraine in the war against Russia. However, Labour may seek more institutionalised cooperation with European partners, including a security pact with the EU and a defence pact with Germany. In contrast, the Conservatives prefer ad hoc, unstructured cooperation that allows for swift action without consulting partners.
- The Labour Party is cautious in its handling of the topic of UK-EU relations in advance of the election, but this should not be taken as endorsement of the status quo.
- The UK economy and domestic politics (for example, the crisis in the public sector) will play an important role in the election and under the next government. This will need to be balanced with foreign policy goals and defence spending.
- The UK's response to the war in Ukraine and the commitment of both Labour and the Conservatives to the defence budget have led to favourable perceptions of the UK as a strategic partner for Central Europe.
- Bilateral agreements are the primary means of cooperation open to the UK in Europe. These can have benefits as they can be used to pursue specific shared interests between countries and lead to quicker decisions. However, the UK's ability to negotiate customised agreements with individual EU member states is limited due to concerns about undermining the unity of the EU, as evidenced by recent talks on mobility and exchange programmes. Thus, we can expect a continuation of the EU-wide approach, which ensures all member states are treated equally. The main areas of cooperation are mobility, research and development, and security.
- Concerning mobility policy, the new British government needs to consider changing the rhetoric in the domestic arena. It will have to find a way to explain to the public that increasing mobility from the EU does not pose a risk to public services, and can make a positive difference to people's lives. It may be challenging to increase mobility between the UK and the EU if domestic support is lacking.

The UK and Central Europe: allies in times of global challenge

- Despite significant Euroscepticism, Central European governments and populations remain committed to EU membership, and this will always shape policy in the region.
- Central and Eastern European countries do not have significant leverage in the EU, so they need to incentivise larger partners to support their interests.
- For the UK, leaving the EU does not mean leaving Europe, and many challenges (for instance, security or access to scarce but vital resources) are European and extend well beyond EU members. Cooperating to address these challenges can result in mutual benefits.
- Many countries in Central and Eastern Europe face socio-economic challenges and threats to liberal democracy. Sources of disinformation aim to polarise society and spread conspiracy theories, and the effects of this can be seen in countries like Slovakia, where pro-Russian narratives have had a clear influence on the population. Recent studies have suggested that 50% of Slovaks perceive the US to be a security threat.
- The UK can play a role in countering disinformation, not just at the government-to-government level but also through civil society initiatives that encourage best practices.
- Research and development is also a key area for collaboration between the UK and Central Europe. However, there will be limits to the extent to which the UK will be able to access all the benefits of EU membership without accepting the obligations that come with it.
- The recently formed European Political Community has the potential to facilitate cooperation between the UK and a range of other countries, but it is important that the format remains flexible. The UK could take a leading role in this format.
- A potential new Labour government will have fewer natural allies in Central Europe if centre-left voters in the Czech Republic vote for Andrej Babiš' populist catch-all party; in Slovakia, the governing (nominally) left-leaning SMER party is stirring up anti-European and pro-Russian sentiment and undermining the rule of law, while the left in Poland is currently in some disarray. On the one hand, there is potential for security cooperation between the UK and Central Europe; on the other, there is the question of whether the UK and other European partners can still trust Slovakia and Hungary when it comes to sharing intelligence information. This poses a potential challenge to cooperation.
- The war in Ukraine has created a foreign policy dilemma in places like the Czech Republic which previously took a passive approach to foreign policy. It is possible that they would return to this approach when the war is over rather than maintaining the more active status they have taken on in response to Russia's invasion.
- To support Ukraine, it is necessary to increase defence spending. Therefore, it is important to show the public that investing in defence is in line with national interests (an argument can be advanced in terms of growth for countries which have a domestic defence industry, but also in terms of the inherent value of European security).

The changing political context in Europe

- The 2024 European Parliament elections are likely to result in a more fragmented EU, which may mean it will be harder to reach consensus. If the expected gains by centre-right and right-wing parties are realised, there will be less focus on climate policy and more emphasis on economic competitiveness and border security. However, the far right is poorly organised, and Viktor Orbán's Fidesz MEPs are not affiliated to a parliamentary group, meaning they have limited influence.
- Ursula von der Leyen has broadly been a good communicator and has run the Commission well, so is expected to be kept on as President of the Commission in the current climate.
- It would be beneficial for Central and Eastern Europe to have a representative in a top position in the European Commission, though it is unclear if this will happen and what form it will take.
- The EU is unlikely to become a leading security actor, but can complement NATO activity by raising finances and investing in the defence industry.
- Although a Labour government may see the 2026 Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) review as an opportunity to make significant changes to the UK-EU relationship, there may be reluctance from the EU side. Instead, EU representatives are likely to view it as a technical review, since the TCA is seen as essentially effective, and there is still a certain amount of 'Brexit fatigue' and suspicion about the UK 'cherry-picking' different forms of cooperation with the EU. Therefore, the next UK government should not focus primarily on the TCA review and should explore other areas for cooperation.
- One challenge to EU-UK defence cooperation is that defence funding and cooperation are linked to the single market and EU bonds, making it difficult for the UK to fit into this model. However, there are other ways for the UK to be involved. For example, the UK is a key shareholder of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, which is an important instrument for promoting Ukraine's accession to the EU
- The prospect of EU enlargement will play a significant role in European politics in the coming years. Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought many sceptics of enlargement on board, but if there are no results in terms of enlargement in the coming years, it will damage the project for a long time. Ukraine's accession to the EU would have important consequences for current Central European member states, as some would become net contributors to the EU budget. Ukraine would also have a significant impact on the agricultural market, necessitating major reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.
- One very positive achievement of the EU since 2022 has been the swift and relatively unified decoupling from Russian resources.

UK-Central European relations in a changing global context: the US and China

- In Central and Eastern Europe, the US is perceived as a trusted leader. However, it is also important that these countries seek resources from other allies such as the UK, Canada and Australia.
- We cannot assume that a second Biden or Trump presidency would be the same as their respective first presidencies. Furthermore, while a Biden presidency may be more predictable, European countries will still need to find ways to fill a potential void created by a greater US focus on the Indo-Pacific. While it is important to maintain a stable relationship with the US (which will be easier under a second Biden presidency), European countries need to strengthen their ability to defend themselves. Therefore, we should not wait for the US election results to become more proactive about European security. The UK has a role to play in this – particularly in the case of a second Trump presidency - ,for example through intelligence sharing.
- Regarding policy towards China, it is essential to distinguish between the different Central and Eastern European countries. Some see China as a systemic rival, which aligns with the UK stance, while others view China as a strategic and economic partner – for example, the Hungarian and Slovak governments. This is despite the minimal benefits of Chinese investments for taxpayers that can be observed in Hungary, for example. The approaches taken by European countries towards China will also determine their future relationship with the US, where China is primarily viewed as a rival.
- Earlier multilateral formats for cooperation between Central and Eastern Europe and China (e.g., 16+1/14+1 formats) are becoming less significant and China is instead pursuing bilateral partnerships in the region.
- A unified and coordinated European and US approach to China is needed. For example, Germany's China policy has consequences for Central and Eastern Europe.
- The issue of defence is not just about spending; it is also about wise investment and coordinated action. Furthermore, it is essential to justify defence spending and frame it positively, while also weighing up costs and benefits in the context of other policy areas.
- There is currently no clear leader on European defence policy: the UK's role is limited as a non-member of the EU, while mistrust towards France, Germany and Poland all exist in some quarters. This strengthens the case for a careful deepening of institutionalised cooperation, including beyond EU institutions.

This note was drafted by Simona Dianova (Masaryk University, Sorbonne Nouvelle University), Rachel Herring (Aston University), Monika Brusenbauch Meislova (Masaryk University) and Ed Turner (Aston University). The views expressed are a distillation of points discussed at our conference and do not represent the views of any individual or institution.

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