

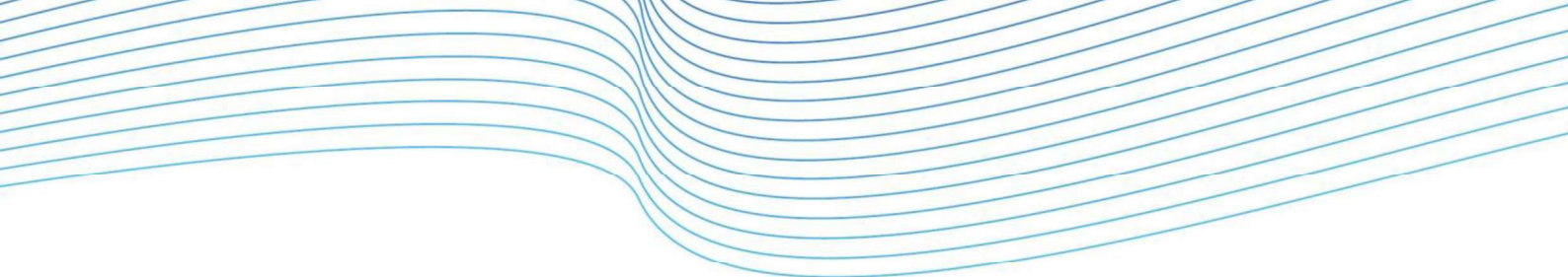
RESEARCH FORUM Column

Trilateral Illiberal cooperation between Serbia, Hungary and Slovakia

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We have recently witnessed a further rapprochement between the governments of Serbia, Hungary and Slovakia, them being two EU states and one candidate state. Their political leaders have recently held several meetings to showcase their cooperation and wide agreement on many issues, creating an interesting challenge for the EU and the values it is promoting. Prime minister Orbán has been an exponent of what he has termed “illiberal democracy” back in 2014, restricting the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) and limiting the political freedoms of those who support a further liberalisation of Hungarian society.[1] The three leaders have made ties with many right wing and Eurosceptic politicians in the EU. They have many similarities and use similar rhetoric, creating an affinity of opinions and stances between them. They present themselves as protectors of the people against elites, with Mr. Orbán criticising what he terms “Brussels tyranny” as well as contemporary Western liberalism. These politicians have likewise created a difficult environment for independent media and suppressed the opposition parties, strengthening their control over state institutions.[2] As the previous Polish government has exhibited similar rhetoric, and such views are present in Czechia as well, there is an evident alignment of political views in the Visegrad group. This could create a bloc of states hindering further consolidation of the union under its foundational values, and Serbia joining would bolster this bloc.

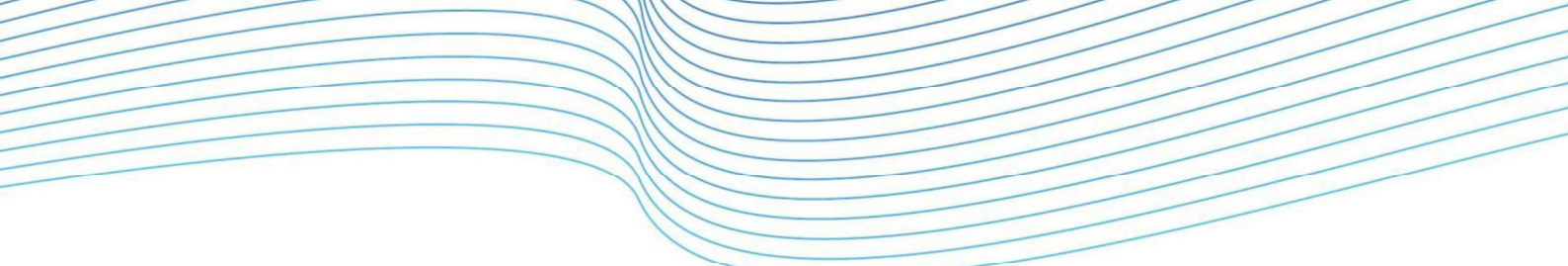
Mr. Orbán has often stated that migration will destroy the EU, calling migrants “poison” and framing it as an existential issue, promising not to let migrants into the country. Hungarian politicians close to him claim that Brussels is trying to force their country to accept immigrants, which the government rejects.[3] In connection to this Mr. Orbán has repeatedly claimed that cultural identity plays a large role in European politics, presenting himself as a defender of Christianity against muslim immigration.[4] Hungary takes a hard line on asylum seekers and sees them as a threat to the Christian identity of the country,[5] constantly being at odds with Brussels and rejecting the union wide migration policies, with Slovakia being generally supportive of its views.[6] The European Parliament has in response used harsh rhetoric, denouncing Mr. Orbán’s government as a “hybrid regime”, which would make it the only consolidated liberal democracy to



backslide into a hybrid regime in the EU.[7] Slovakia is also sliding towards illiberal democracy under prime minister Mr. Fico, who has a populist agenda and a pro Russian attitude, similar to his two counterparts. His governance style is viewed as authoritarian, and he follows the pattern of institutional control and centralisation, colliding with the independent media.[8] This caused the European commission to express concern, while Mr. Fico has pledged to go against CSOs that criticise him, while taking action to take control of public media. Like his counterparts, he labels CSOs exponents of foreign interests and frames himself as a defender of ordinary people against elites and EU bureaucrats.[9] He has also cooperated with the ex president of Czechia, mr. Zeman, who is also sympathetic towards Russia, expanding his circle of friends.[10] The Visegrad EU states joined the union later and are still not as liberal as the rest of the union, having a special concern with traditional values, with Hungary and Slovakia being more oriented in this way. The mutual support provided by these politicians strengthens them against Brussels and the values it promotes.

Under President Vucic, Serbia has been distancing itself from EU foreign policy and democratic standards, undermining its accession. It's democracy is in crisis, with the opposition staging large protests and claiming that the recent elections were not free and fair. The democratic institutions of Serbia are not properly functioning and the rights of the citizens are being curtailed.[11]The elections were described by international observers as free but not fair, with the field strongly tilted towards the ruling party, and many irregularities being present.[12] Press freedom in Serbia has been threatened for years, with a large part of the media space being under government control, and the independent media being pressured and verbally attacked by government officials. Criticising government policy in Serbia is framed by the government as a betrayal of national interests,[13] and the president himself regularly states that his political opponents simply hate their own country, contributing to polarisation.[14] Criticism of Serbia's democracy has been directed at Serbia by various prominent international CSOs, accusing it of becoming a hybrid regime.[15] The media atmosphere in Serbia is becoming increasingly tense and filled with political conflict, with tabloidization of the public sphere. Attacks by the government-aligned media outlets are regular not only against the opposition, but even accuse the EU of undermining the government. Mr. Orban has created a special relationship with Mr. Vucic, hoping to find more supporters for his divergent views in the EU,[16] supporting Serbian accession in that context.

Mr Vucic echoes Mr. Orban's rhetoric on Christian and family values, increasingly aligning himself with the leader and learning much from him actions and words,[17] as the two governments have both been described as hybrid regimes controlled by dominant illiberal conservative parties.[18] The two leaders recently opened a renovated Catholic



church in Serbia, which was considered a step forward in reconciliation, and allowed them to be presented as defenders of Christian values.[19] The two leaders both admire the recently reelected president Trump, who is seen as a strong conservative, congratulating him on his victory and expressing support. Previously Mr. Orban visited Mr. Trump in the US, giving him support in his election.[20] This is indicative of an international conservative political informal alliance meant to undermine the liberal international order, which could harm the consolidation and stability of the EU.

In late October, the three leaders held a trilateral meeting in Slovakia. The three acted very warmly towards each other and stressed the friendly relations of the countries, highlighting their divergent opinion on the conflict in Ukraine, calling for peace through compromise. One of the main topics was the prevention of illegal migration, which is related to their general anti-immigrant sentiment, with the three promising stricter measures and refusing to accept the resettling of migrants in their countries. Mr. Fico repeated the general anti-immigration rhetoric towards non-Europeans, which was echoed by Mr. Orban who expressed support for strong borders.[21] Anti immigrant sentiment is generally fueling the rise of right wing populist parties, like the ones that the three leaders control, causing trouble for Brussels. Vucic also declared that Serbia should join the Visegrad group, which also has strong anti-immigrant sentiment, and that relations with Hungary and Slovakia are better than ever.[22]

Mr Vucic and Mr. Fico recently met and exchanged views amicably, considering that their refusal of EU foreign policy vis a vis Russia meant that they are independent. They gave each other support against the criticism they receive and expressed common values.[23] At a recent bilateral meeting, Mr. Vucic and Mr. Orban signed a political declaration between the two countries, promising greater cooperation, calling the relations better than ever in history.[24] Hungarian officials reiterated their full support for Serbia joining the EU, which would give it a much needed ally, and which would expand their economic cooperation and therefore their respective stability.[25] The support for Serbia joining the EU by leaders supporting strong borders can be explained by the fact that Hungary would no longer be at the border of the EU, and it would have another conservative-oriented country join and give voting power to the conservative bloc.

The EU should therefore take note that there has been an increase in the questioning of its Liberal character by both members and candidates. It should also take note that the right wing ascendance in Europe is a continuing trend and that its liberal values need to be highlighted more actively. Liberal democracy is the foundation of the EU, In the increasingly challenging situation for Europe, speaking geopolitically, greater unity and

consolidation is necessary within the EU. Likewise, for the enlargement process to be effective, it is necessary to have clear unity within the union, and for basic EU values to be accepted by candidate states.

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