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## The continuing relevance of Germany's engine for CEE and the EU



Vladimir Handl<sup>a,\*</sup>, William E. Paterson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Institute of International Relations, Nerudova 3, 118 50 Prague 1, Czech Republic*

<sup>b</sup> *Aston Centre for Europe, School of Languages and Social Sciences, Aston University, Birmingham, United Kingdom*

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### ABSTRACT

The article looks first into the nature of the relations between Germany and the CEE countries a decade since the accession of the CEE countries to the EU. The relations are characterized as normalised and intensive with diverse levels of closeness and co-operation reflecting of the conceptual and ideological compatibility/differences.

Next, the article focuses on the German attitude to the euro zone crisis. Germany has become a hegemon in the rescue effort aimed at stabilisation and economic invigoration of the euro zone. However, German hegemony has developed by default, not by design: her leading position is linked with considerable political and financial costs. Germany moved central stage and took the position of a reluctant hegemon. However, German role is contested internationally (it has not the support of the French government in key areas) as well as internally (particularly by the Federal Constitutional Court and the Bundesbank). The article argues that the new situation makes the German-CEE relations increasingly relevant for both sides. The German leadership of the EU increasing split along the north-south divide requires backing by the Northern group countries to which the CEE in general belongs. Given a number of reasons the CEE countries implement three distinctive strategies of co-operation with Germany in European politics. Also military co-operation, which remained rather limited so far, may receive new impulses, given the financial austerity.

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It have been mainly key questions of European development – such as the solution to the euro-crisis and Europe's security and defence policy rather than historical decisions which have influenced the level of political co-operation between Germany and the Central-East European (CEE) countries since the EU-enlargement. The latter resulted in a far reaching (and yet incomplete) “Westernization” of CEE but not in a “Germanization” of it. Germany now occupies a central geographical position in the enlarged EU – unlike the former West Germany, which represented the Eastern border of the EU and whose capital, Bonn, was in close proximity to Brussels. At the same time, though, the eastern enlargement relatively decreased the dominant presence of Germany in the region as other EU-member states started to engage with CEE more actively. Also, with the overarching and uniting goal of a individual CEE countries started to appear more freely. As a result, we witness, on the one hand, a dynamic development of the matter-of-fact co-operation and, on the other, a lack of coherence in the German-CEE relations (Handl, 2012a,b). Germany has been seen as a crucial European power and a reluctant hegemon eager to avoid the position, responsibility and costs of being a European leader. Having reached a zenith under Helmut Kohl, Germany's “European vocation” has experienced a gradual decline in the years leading up to the euro zone crisis (Paterson, 2011). The

\* Corresponding author.

pragmatism of the German post-Lisbon policy (Bulmer and Paterson, 2010) was matched by the pragmatism of the policy of the newcomers to the EU. Even at this stage, though, the perceptions of the German role were very diverse: for example, Jaroslaw Kaczyński argued that Chancellor Merkel seeks to “reinstat[e] Germany’s imperial power” and to subdue Poland with the help of a “strategic axis with Moscow” (Kaczynski, 2011).

Several developments, however, brought this ‘pragmatic nirvana’ to an end. To begin with, the USA has been turning its attention (and resources) to the Pacific region. Thus the growing global competition threatens to sideline Europe; while Germany may be the only globalized economy of Europe, it needs a strong and functioning EU – which is the purpose of the Lisbon treaty, but the exploitation of the treaty’s potential is, however, still limited. Most importantly, the euro zone crisis has proved to be a tipping point for classic German Europeanism while simultaneously Germany has been pushed somewhat reluctantly to the centre stage to become Europe’s reluctant hegemon (Paterson, 2011). The rescue efforts have also caused the EU to be more differentiated than before – with the UK distancing itself from the tendency to gradually deepen the EU.

We do not see a well-designed and established hegemonic position for Germany in Europe, though. Some experts argue that a return of Germany into the limelight may prove to be a historical moment rather than a constant feature of the EU development (Möller and Parkes, 2012, 72). Nonetheless, we expect Germany to retain a leading role for lack of anything better in the economic and financial matters. However much Germany would like others to share the burden this is not going to happen quickly. On the other hand, in areas like security and defence Germany still underperforms.

In this article, we argue that the new situation makes the German–CEE relations increasingly relevant for both sides. The post-Lisbon decision-making presupposes coalition building of like-minded countries. Also, the German leadership of the EU, which is increasingly split along the north–south divide, requires backing by the Northern group countries. In addition, the CEE countries, linked with Germany in many ways, represent an important potential for co-operation. There has been a limitation to the co-operation, though: the CEE countries are differentiated when it comes to the deepening of the EU, and Germany kept a relatively low profile in military and defence co-operation so far. Nevertheless, the situation may be changing with the austerity measures and the new international constellation.

## 1. The role of Germany in the CEE countries

The past influenced the mutual relations between Germany and the CEE countries very unevenly over the last 20 years: the Baltic republics and Hungary have been linked to Germany mostly in positive terms; the past burdened primarily Germany’s relations with its Eastern neighbours – the Poles and the Czechs (Gardner Feldman, 2012); Slovakia, as is often the case, represented a mixed case in this respect. Perhaps most importantly, the past mattered as a motivation of the German and, more broadly, the West European support for the enlargement of both NATO and the EU (Lasas, 2008).

Currently, the past does not represent a major issue in the mutual relations, but it can be (and often is) used for mobilization in political campaigns – most recently, it was used during the Czech presidential elections in 2013; also, the opposition party Law and Justice in Poland and the governing FIDES party in Hungary stir nationalistic debates which have anti-German (and/or anti-EU and anti-Russian) undertones.

What became much more prominent, however, were the matter-of-fact relations. The German trade with all the CEE countries taken together surpasses the German trade with the two top trade partners – France and the Netherlands; meanwhile, the trade with Poland as well as the trade with the Czech Republic stabilized at roughly the same volume as the German trade with Russia (Außenhandel, 2012, 1).

The CEE countries’ manufacturing exports to Germany make up between 18.2% (the Czech Republic) and 6.8% (Poland) of the given country’s GDP and link them to German industry’s supply change (Germany and Eastern Europe, 2012). Generally, as a study of Visegrad group researchers shows, Germany’s shares of the exports of the Visegrad group countries put Germany at the top of the list of their trading partners (it is the recipient of over 30% of Czech, 25% of Hungarian, 35% of Polish and 20.4% of Slovak exports). Also, foreign direct investment from companies registered in Germany plays a crucial role in the Visegrad countries (in 2010, FDI from German companies amounted to over 20% of the investments in Poland, 16% of those in the Czech Republic, and 25% of those in Hungary) (V4 Trade and FDI, 2012).

Baltic states focus more on the Nordic countries in their economic relations – so, Germany was only the 5th greatest trading partner of Estonia (in 2010) and the 6th most important investor in Lithuania (Estonia and Germany, 2011).

Germany’s most intensive and historically informed relations have developed between itself and its two Eastern neighbours, Poland and the Czech Republic, with which Germany has its longest and politically most sensitive borderline.<sup>1</sup> This fact finds reflection in the development of the German–Czech and German–Polish relations at all levels. Furthermore, the new role of Germany in Europe has dynamized the relations further. This fact is reflected in the programmatic documents of Polish and Czech governments.

Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Sikorski underlined Germany and Poland’s “common interests and democratic values” (The Minister, 2011) and considered “raising [the] level of [the] relations with Germany to the level of [an] intensive strategic partnership” (The Minister, 2010). The praxis was less convincing, however: in early 2011, Piotr Buras concluded that the German–Polish reconciliation still did not produce added value for the EU (Buras, 2011, 8). The situation, however, was about

<sup>1</sup> The German–Polish border is 467 km long and the German–Czech border is 815 km long.

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