



THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL WORLD ORDER FROM A CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

It is now generally accepted that the global order is shifting, but the literature is divided on how. Consequently, it is not surprising that there is a lack of strong scholarship on the characteristics of the order from a Central and Eastern European (CEE) perspective. Therefore, this article aims to explore the future of the Liberal World Order (LWO) from this perspective through the lens of mainstream theories. The article looks at the geopolitical dynamics of the region and the evolving strategic perceptions of the LWO. It examines how CEE, traditionally seen as the frontier of the LWO (EU and NATO), is navigating the complexities of the current global political landscape in the light of the changing order. The second part of the article specifically analyses the security perceptions of CEE governments. The article seeks to contribute to the understanding of the future trajectory of the LWO, the potential implications for global peace and security, and the interplay of realism and liberalism in shaping our understanding of this trajectory from the CEE perspective.

Keywords: Liberal world order, International Relations theories, Central and Eastern Europe.

Titulo en Español: El futuro del orden mundial liberal desde la perspectiva de Europa Central y Oriental.

Resumen:

En la actualidad se acepta de forma generalizada que el orden mundial está cambiando, pero la bibliografía está dividida sobre el cómo. No es de extrañar, por tanto, la falta de estudios sólidos sobre las características del orden desde la perspectiva de Europa Central y Oriental (ECE). Por lo tanto, este artículo pretende explorar el futuro del Orden Mundial Liberal (OML) desde esta perspectiva a través de la lente de las teorías dominantes. El artículo examina la dinámica geopolítica de la región y la evolución de las percepciones estratégicas del OLM. Examina cómo la CEE, considerada tradicionalmente como la frontera de la OML (UE y OTAN), navega por las complejidades del actual panorama político mundial a la luz del cambio del orden mundial. La segunda parte del artículo analiza específicamente las percepciones de seguridad de los gobiernos de la CEE. El artículo pretende contribuir a la comprensión de la trayectoria futura del OLM, las implicaciones potenciales para la paz y la seguridad globales, y la interacción entre realismo y liberalismo en la configuración de nuestra comprensión de esta trayectoria desde la perspectiva de la CEE.

Palabras Clave: Orden mundial liberal, Teorías de las relaciones internacionales, Europa Central y Oriental,

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1. Introduction

Given the discourse on the "post-liberal world order" and the re-emergence of intensifying great power competition, the return of realist anarchy, the understanding of order will be crucial for shaping our future. The comfortable equation of world order was based on liberal beliefs, but as the rules-based order has eroded, regional approaches have become dominant. A similar phenomenon is called deglobalisation and regionalisation, or derisking and decoupling. Russian aggression in Europe is a wake-up call for the surRealist³ approach of liberal internationalism.

Many have accepted axiomatically that we live in a "liberal world order" designed by the United States, and liberal internationalism - based on the expansion of free trade, universal protection of human rights, peaceful coexistence of sovereign states - has been the leading paradigm of a truly universal international system. SurRealism is tangible because recent years have brought events that do not rationally fit into the logic of the liberal order. But simply saying that the realists are right is not convincing either.

The emergence of the Liberal World Order (LWO) in the international arena in recent decades is an undeniable reality⁴.

Its concept is characterised by a surReal combination of idealistic aspirations and the existence of the most unfavourable circumstances of power competition. The development of the organisation in the area of these two opposing ends has always reflected a specific condition in the surReal - liberal and realist - world. Put simply, we can adopt a liberal perspective while recognising the validity of realist predictions.

The LWO is currently facing significant and undeniable challenges to its very existence, fundamental principles and operational effectiveness. In recent years, Russia and China have progressively challenged the limits of the order. However, there is currently no viable alternative to the existing system as an organising principle - i.e. a rules-based system based on liberal values, albeit with some realist aspects. Countries conform to order either because of their immediate self-interest or because they have no alternative, because order itself reduces uncertainty and prevents the emergence of a chaotic state of unbridled anarchy, which is contrary to the realist instinct for survival.

The LWO is a framework for the international system that allows states to cooperate to survive in complex interdependencies. This means that changes in the international order may require regional cooperation more than ever for smaller states. The Visegrád countries face a world in which the international system is state-centred, with states acting in their own interests and derived from their domestic politics. The pursuit of existing and valid interests is rational, but the process of domestic interest formation is not. Within the international order, there are subsystems in which the socialising effect of the order is more pronounced along regional or thematic lines. Interdependencies are stronger in CEE, Europe and the West, and can be more strongly institutionalised regionally or globally on an ideological basis.

Although the LWO is a unique historical anomaly, deviating from traditional realist theories of the international system,⁵ and although it has not been universally adopted, it has successfully averted major conflicts between powerful nations since 1945. This is the order that the post-socialist countries rushed to join in the 1990s, and even the Visegrád cooperation was funded with this very goal in mind to help this process. This article emphasises the importance of different views in establishing a logical and conceptual system applicable to Central and

³ The capital R refers to the permanent conflicts in international relations described by the realist school even if the liberal interdependencies dictate cooperation. See in more details: Rada & Stepper, 2023

⁴ Rada, Péter, Nyilas, Laura: "Europe Whole and Free and the Global Zeitenwende", *European Mirror*, Vol. 16, n° 2 (2023), pp. 73-88.

⁵ Waltz, Kenneth N. (2010): *Theory of International Politics*, Long Grove, IL, Waveland Press



Eastern Europe in the context of the LWO. The starting point is the world as seen from CEE. It is recognised that there are distinct regional features in foreign policy that are unique to the countries of a particular region. CEE is placed in a broader analytical context in which the Visegrad Group is integrated into several large "security complexes" such as the EU and NATO. The aim is to interpret our own region, specifically CEE and the V4.⁶ On this basis, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- The world order can be described in terms of an equilibrium balance that is neither liberal nor realist;
- The order is regionally differentiated by the strategic perceptions of the states within it;
- CEE is undeniably part of the LWO, i.e. CEE is both ultimately affected by the order and contributes to it.⁷

2.Theories and the changing world order

The changes in the international system started earlier than the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2014. Even if the international system's main characteristics is that it is not constant, stability is very important feature because it makes international relations predictable. Scholars have come out with ideas about a "new world order"⁸ time-to-time especially often after systemic events such as the war in Ukraine. Nevertheless, we need to understand how our world functions to be able to assess scenarios for the future which will designate a space in which Europe and the V4 countries need to navigate. At the end of the Cold War two parallel processes could be witnessed. These two trends were (have been) interconnected, thus they are needed to be analyzed together: the transformation of the Westphalian system based on modern nation states and the security architecture which was based on the bipolar opposition of the two superpowers became obsolete. The new world order is more complex and more unpredictable.

The mainstream theories (mostly neorealist and neoliberal) take rational starting point and accept materialist and individualist conclusions about the world order: in international relations, the state conducts foreign policy in a relatively autonomous manner in the absence of a global government. The difference between the two main rational schools is that neorealists – like John Mearsheimer⁹ – do not believe in the real limiting power of liberal international institutions and rules; when self-interest comes into conflict with the rules of the system, it determines the outcome of the foreign policy process, whether the power of the country and the material base behind it is stronger, or the pressure from the system. The neoliberal school – John Ikenberry¹⁰ has provided the most detailed analysis of this feature since Robert Keohane¹¹ – argues that institutions can moderate the balance of the world order, even if they cannot always eliminate power-politics. Based on all this, we can derive the following aggregate equation of world order, even if it appears to be an oversimplification:

⁶ We know it can be criticised, but from a methodological point of view we treat Central and Eastern Europe and Visegrád as synonyms.

⁷ Rada, Péter: "A liberális világrend napirendalkotói: az Európai Unió és az Egyesült Államok kapcsolatai", *Európai Tükör*, Vol. 25, n° 1 (2023), pp. 7-29, at <https://doi.org/10.32559/et.2022.1-2.1>

⁸ See the detailed description in Rada, Péter: "Megváltozó világunk és a biztonsági kihívások átalakulása", in Szálkai, Kinga et al. (eds.) (2019): *Biztonságpolitikai Corvinák*, Budapest: Antall József Tudásközpont, pp. 15–23.; Rada, Peter: "US-Visegrad Realities in Biden's World of Democracies", *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 20, n° 1 (2024), pp. 193-210, at <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2024-0008>

⁹ Mearsheimer, John J. (2001): *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, W.W. Nanon

¹⁰ Ikenberry, John G. (2020): *A World Safe for Democracy: Liberal Internationalism and the Crises of Global Order*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

¹¹ Keohane, Robert O. (1984): *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press.



$$E = u\{P1-\infty\} = \sim u\{US; EU; C; RU; GS; others\}^{12}$$

The strength of the United States may also be more valid in this approach, but this is overshadowed by the fact that the US is trying to maintain the international order it has otherwise designed, i.e. to ensure compliance with the rules for itself. This requires considerable power. The fact of the LWO is that governments with less power are not immediately terrified of this superpower, nor are they most concerned with Washington's excessive power, but rather with the fear of what the "post-American" world might bring. In Europe¹³ moreover, the US withdrawal and the increased pressure to develop European capabilities were seen as directly proportional to the decline in US military bases, a lower American commitment to Europe's defence, which had provided the usual comfort for deepening European integration or expanding with post-socialist countries. To return to the theoretical dimension, the European allies would choose to live in the liberal and regulated order given by the LWO, while leaving the struggle in realist anarchy to the United States. The US became a European power after the Second World War by not having to conquer the continent militarily in the classical sense, and by extending its own power and order into the former Soviet sphere of interest after the Cold War. By filling the geopolitical power vacuum, the US prevented physical violence in Europe and "exploited" the well-considered self-interest of small (or medium-sized) states seeking to avoid anarchy. The legitimacy of the United States as a superpower is crucial, and the acceptance of this power by others - what is referred to in the literature as hegemony by invitation or beneficent hegemon¹⁴ - goes far beyond the material capabilities of the United States in terms of maintaining order. In other words, the United States may become physically overwhelmed, or its military or economic power may decline relative to China (but not relative to Russia); the issue here is not sheer American power, but the legitimacy or credibility of American efforts to maintain the LWO.

The liberal world order is an exception,¹⁵ having been established and sustained for so long thanks to the unquestioned material power of the United States. This material power base may be waning somewhat, but the more crucial pillar of the liberal order is intangible. The United States remains at the centre of the liberal system by virtue of its membership, but even its critics benefit more from its operation than they sacrifice to maintain the order. If we consider the opportunity costs, they would be much higher if each country had to maintain its own security and defuse disputes in all areas of international relations (not just the military dimension) without international institutions. The concepts, norms and institutions developed in the US-led "North Atlantic design centre" will be attractive as long as they can be credibly represented by the US (and the West). If this credibility is eroded, for example by movements that disproportionately exaggerate the system's flaws, by selfish interests, or by other pressing

¹² E: balance/world order; P: actors; P substituted: United States, EU, China, Russia, "Global South" such as India, Indonesia, African countries. Balance is sustained in the long term if $E \geq 1$. For the sake of a highly simplified quantification: if there is a direct security threat, it's -2, if indirect, -1; similarly for the economy: -2, -1; and conversely, it can be +2 and +1 in all cases. When $E < 0$ for the world order, the order is called into question and each actor engages in self-interested behaviour to reduce its own losses or potentially realise perceived gains. Despite relative losses, only the United States has been willing to maintain the order in recent decades. Other countries won't, but there is no alternative system, only realist anarchy, which is certainly disadvantageous for everyone in the above logic.

¹³ Mitchell, Wess: "The Ties that Bind: U.S.-Central European Relations 25 Years After the Transition," CEPA 2014.

¹⁴ Magyarics, Tamás (2008): *Az Amerikai Egyesült Államok története - A rövid XX. század - 1914-1991*, Budapest, Kossuth Kiadó; Magyarics, Tamás (2000): *Az Egyesült Államok külpolitikájának története*, Budapest, Eötvös József Könyvkiadó.

¹⁵ Kagan, Robert (2023): *The Ghost at the Feast: America and the Collapse of World Order, 1900-1941*, New York, Knopf.



real issues - mislabelled as liberal or conservative - such as BLM¹⁶ or MAGA,¹⁷ not only the United States but also the liberal world order will suffer.

3. Regions and global equilibrium

The logic of the world order may be explained by liberalism, but the basic unit of the system is the state, which feeds not on liberalism but on Westphalian sovereignty, which affects the system in all its aspects. That is, the international system is state-centric and states are self-interested and their interests stem from their internal endowments. That is, interests and values are "constructed" within the state, the pursuit of these existing interests is rational, but their formation is not. At the same time, there is an international order that is institutionalised as a compromise of the self-interested behaviour of states, which can be called norms or international values. The international order is anarchic, but it influences its actors and "reconstructs" the network of interests and moves towards hierarchy or controlled anarchy through this institutional compromise. Moreover, within the international order there are subsystems where the "socialising influence" of the order is more characteristic, such as in Central and Eastern Europe, either regionally or thematically.

On the basis of all this, there is a distinctive regional characteristic that influences the foreign policy of the states of a region, which, not surprisingly, is fundamentally influenced by the agenda developed by more powerful states and regions (in this case, for example, the EU or NATO). The foreign policy of regional states is influenced by the international order and international events, but interests and values are determined by a longer and more internal process (individualistic approach, which is more classical realist or classical liberal). That is, what a given state thinks about its challenges, to which a given response first appears in a given region, is validated in the regional problem-specific complex.¹⁸

$$S = L (R1, R2...) +/- IL (O1, O2...)$$

$$L = R1 +/- R2...$$

$$R1 = +/- H, P, CZ, SK¹⁹$$

However, it must be recognised that the material base and 'reality' remain crucial because within states the political and economic system and society are built on these material elements and they determine the processes that allow the state, for example, to navigate. Virtually all strategic analysis emphasizes²⁰ the notion that a good strategy (i.e. one that is workable and sustainable) begins with the tools available to the subject of the strategy and what can be achieved with those tools. Objectives are only realistic if they take account of changes in the external world, and the course of action determined on this basis also links the means to the objectives. In other words, goals emerge from within (domestic politics) and become a reality through the interpretation of the international system (world order and its agenda), and the course of action is influenced by the actors who shape the agenda. That is, according to current thinking, countries in some regions, no matter how small, have goals that come from within, that are "constructed" at home, but in order for these interests to be real and authentic goals, they must also pass through two filters: the regional level and the world order level. It is an idealistic

¹⁶ Black Lives Matter

¹⁷ Make America Great Again

¹⁸ Marton, Péter, Rada Péter, Balogh, István (2015): *Biztonsági tanulmányok - Új fogalmi keretek, és tanulságok a visegrádi országok számára*, Budapest, Antall József Tudásközpont.

¹⁹ In the formula, S stands for the international order, L for the liberal order and its members, IL for the non-aligned regions and O for the actors. Within the liberal order, R represents the individual regions, actors, in which the United States, the EU, but also Central Europe, are one. The formula does not apply to the size and weight of each player. Let's say R1 is Central Europe, so it depends on the individual interests of the V4 countries.

²⁰ Freedman, Lawrence (2013): *Strategy: A History*, Oxford University Press.



illusion to formulate completely different goals in the belief that a country will not encounter serious resistance in achieving them.

The international order has a socialising influence that varies from area to area.

The United States established the current LWO, which functioned as a subsystem during the Cold War, but allowed the development and progress of European integration. Established as a subsystem, the EU rebuilt the interest networks of its members and, in cooperation with the United States, consolidated the LWO in the 1990s as a concession to its own interests. Inequalities may persist even within the strictly defined subsystem or within the liberal, democratic core, due to differences in internally generated interests and beliefs. In our understanding, this is a regional security complex.²¹

4. CEE security perceptions and future trajectory

There is no doubt²² that the Visegrad Cooperation is a regional political institution representing CEE, which, through the regional political process, influences the composition and ultimately the future trajectory of the world order. Even if some scholars question the validity of the regional security complex theory,²³ CEE is a regionally constructed (R1) and integral element of the liberal world order (L).²⁴ There is no doubt that the validity of the V4 will not cease just because there are (domestic) political disagreements within the group, and a strong liberal world order needs regional political cooperation that can provide flexible and effective regional responses to regional or global challenges.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a cornerstone in our history and it has also raised questions about the liberal world order and the effectiveness, usefulness and even existence of the V4 as a regional security complex. Even before the war, we argued²⁵ that the V4 was rather an issue-specific security complex with a regional character. It has meant that on some issues the countries have agreed and taken a regional common approach, with the Visegrad cooperation being praised at the time. Good examples are the Euro-Atlantic integration of the four countries - yet the entire organisation was financed with the very aim of institutionalising cooperation in this process - or the response to the illegal migration crisis in 2015. However, there have been many examples of disagreements - such as the strength of relations with Russia or China, the interpretation of EU values versus sovereignty - where the entire cooperation has been called into question. This ambivalence is precisely the characteristic of the issue-based regional security complex: there are - and we are convinced that there will be - issues that have such a strong regional character that the CEE countries need to cooperate, and of course there will be cases where there will be heated political debates. In any case, the validity of the statement that most foreign (and security) policy issues are constructed domestically and are first measured in interaction with neighbours is not in question. In terms of issues, the most important element is how individual countries perceive threats, challenges and opportunities.

Since 1989, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe have been exposed to changes in global politics and have had to react quickly to a changing security environment, such as the civil war that erupted as a result of the disintegration of Yugoslavia or the challenge posed by the strengthening of Russia, even at times when the "West" did not hear the voice of the

²¹ See Marton et al, *op. cit.*

²² Rada, Péter: "Közép-Európa helye a világrendben: az amerikai-közép-európai kapcsolatok a „Biden-doktrína” fényében”, *KÜLÜGYI SZEMLE*, Vol. 22, n° 4 (2023), pp. 77-95. https://doi.org/10.47707/Kulugyi_Szemle.2023.4.6

²³ Rada, Péter: "A nemzetközi politika elméleti iskoláinak biztonságfelfogása", in Deák, Péter (ed.) (2007): *Biztonságpolitikai kézikönyv*, Budapest, Osiris

²⁴ See chapter 3.

²⁵ See Marton et al, *op. cit.*



"canaries".²⁶ The old members of the EU or NATO expected full integration and the adaptation of Central and Eastern Europeans to the existing structure, regardless of regional interests. Moreover, the last 35 years in the post-Cold War world have seen a number of historical turning points that have had a significant impact on regional security perceptions, both directly and indirectly (e.g. through NATO after 1999 and EU membership after 2004).

Some of the 'tipping points' - the collapse of the Soviet Union, the global economic crisis, overt Russian aggression since 2014, the illegal migration crisis or the COVID-19 pandemic - directly affected CEE, in many ways more severely than the Western Euro-Atlantic allies. On the other hand, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States and the ensuing global war on terror have had a more indirect impact on changing perceptions of security. After 2001, the fight against terrorism became a top strategic priority in (or for) the Visegrad countries, despite the lack of a direct threat. Nevertheless, perceptions dictated that the CEE countries were directly involved through NATO's presence in Afghanistan and Iraq as part of the "coalition of the willing".²⁷ The Visegrad countries were directly or indirectly affected by each of these systematic changes and had to adapt to the new circumstances, so that dealing with their regional consequences was crucial for Central and Eastern Europe.

After the Cold War, despite the clear challenges, the goal of integration into the Euro-Atlantic system was not questioned in the Visegrad countries. At the same time, it has to be acknowledged that the rules of the game in the EU and NATO were developed without the CEE members, and even after full membership there was a justifiable sense of lack of equality: the Alliance expected unconditional adaptation as a starting point and did not always take the new members' reservations into account. There is, of course, no alternative to Euro-Atlantic integration, and the Visegrád countries have a clear pro-NATO and pro-EU policy, despite what is said to the contrary.²⁸ For a long time, the Visegrad countries wanted to show that they were reliable allies and tried to comply with everything in order to avoid criticism. As a result, full membership, as the term implies, has created real expectations that were not necessarily seen in Western Europe. The Visegrad countries wanted to be effective, important and reliable partners, with the wish that the typically regionally important issues would also be on the EU's transatlantic policy agenda.

The Visegrad countries are members of the European Union and NATO, and while their foreign and security policies are driven by some kind of national interest, traditional, classical, realistic power categories cannot explain their political behaviour. Although some elements of liberal institutionalism and other liberal theories (interdependence, democratic peace) are relevant for understanding the security practices of the Visegrad group, they cannot fully capture this position or path. The security policy of the countries of the region can only be reconstructed as a choice between possible futures imagined in the past, partly based on interests and consciousness, partly formed in the midst of debates, and partly fed by fundamental values and the constructive power of imagination. For example, NATO cannot be seen merely as a community of interests, otherwise it is doubtful that it could have survived in the post-Cold War world with the end of the Soviet military threat. Nevertheless, it is essential for the Alliance to provide its members with serious collective defence and deterrence

²⁶ See Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁷ Lorenz, Jesse: "The Coalition of the Willing", Stanford University 2003, at <https://web.stanford.edu/class/e297a/The%20Coalition%20of%20the%20Willing.htm>

²⁸ With this comment, many will automatically disagree, but real political, economic acts and decisions prove it. Consider that criticism is not necessarily equal to skepticism, and polls are clear evidence of the popularity of NATO and the EU in Central and Eastern Europe, which governments should not otherwise ignore. See in more details Rada, Peter: "The Rubik's Cube of Visegrád", in Kancik-Koltun, Ewelina (ed.) (2022): *30 Years of the Visegrad Group. Volume 2: Basic Project Ideas and International Reality*, Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press, pp. 1-16.



capabilities. Without it, the V4 countries would not have been able to take proper care of their own security. As genuinely autonomous neutral countries, they would have to develop unacceptably costly military capabilities, or else be forced to subordinate themselves to the interests of some external powers. Thus, from the point of view of Central and Eastern Europe, remaining outside the liberal order would mean neither sovereignty nor decision-making autonomy.

Here it is worth reflecting on the original and most important purpose of Visegrad cooperation, because the countries wanted to overcome the historical distortions and simply cooperate and decide together and freely in which international order they wanted to participate. This was clearly the Western orientation and Euro-Atlantic integration. Neither society nor the political elite questioned the need to join the EU and NATO. But, of course, it does not matter how this order is able to deal with the important and immediate challenges facing the region. In other words, it was a question of not forgetting the region's (or individual countries') well-considered interests under the burden of unconditional adaptation.

Through the EU and NATO, the countries of the region are indirectly linked to the global security complex. In view of the possibility of more drastic consequences in the short term, the transatlantic-post-Soviet military security complex primarily affects the region, the fundamental determinant of which is the conflict with Russia, so that it is much easier to emphasise, for example, the position taken by the Hungarian government: the impact of the regional complex is stronger than the force of the transatlantic one - and at least in the short term the perception dictates that total hostility towards Russia tends to exacerbate security problems (see, for example, energy security). Under these circumstances, there is only so much that can be done to reduce vulnerability, and there is no way to opt out.²⁹ The benefits of all direct and indirect contributions to global security as a public good are often unclear, and the effectiveness of some measures is difficult to quantify. What is certain, however, is that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are beneficiaries of the liberal world order in more ways than one, regardless of the specific contribution they make. Participation in international burden-sharing is thus not only a direct interest for the V4 countries, but also an expectation and a core value.³⁰

A key aspect of the threat and perception complex is that the Visegrad countries have very different assessments of the threat posed by the Ukraine conflict. While Poland aggressively condemned Moscow in 2014 and is one of NATO's 'hawks', the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary have been more reserved in their criticism of Moscow. Warsaw has been very vocal about the Russian threat, while the other three have been much more cautious. Based on its historical experience, Poland sees Russia's expansionist intentions as an unlimited existential threat. In contrast, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary see Russia's strategy as more limited to the near periphery of Russia, and this perception is mixed and complicated by their economic and energy links with Russia; energy security concerns are stronger than the perceived threat of a direct Russian attack on the region. As a result, the perceptions of public opinion and political actors differ between Poland and the other three Visegrad countries (this constellation is constantly changing, but this is true in this case). This means that there are differences even within the valid and visible regional security complex.

The regionally strong socialisation effect of Central Eastern European cooperation and interaction has a direct and inevitably solid influence on the individual foreign policy of the countries of the sub-regions (here the V4, R1=+/- H, P, CZ, SK³¹). However, as we have

²⁹ Marton et al, *op. cit.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ See Chapter 3.



discussed, national interests are constructed internally, i.e. Hungary and the other three Visegrad countries also shape the outcome of the complex Central European compromise of interests and values. This is a valid but overlooked explanation when many talk about the crisis or even the obsolescence of the V4 if this compromise is not easily born.³² As a result, interests and foreign policy orientations are at first born independently (led, of course, by the governments that are the engines of interest construction through securitisation), Consequently, the interests and foreign policy directions are born first independently (of course led by the governments who are the engines of interest construction through securitization)³³ even from the neighbours; later, through the regional "socialisation process", they come closer and adapt to the compromise. But it is a process, and it can take longer than we would expect in a crisis situation: the construction of the compromise and the "common" interest was faster in 2015 than in 2022. According to this logic, the differences in interests are normal, despite many comments that Visegrad is dead. This will later influence the future trajectory, i.e. despite any disagreements, the CEE countries need and will cooperate because security perceptions correlate in the long run. despite many comments that Visegrad is dead.³⁴

Regional security debates on perceptions will be particularly important in the near future, as they can help identify and respond to longer-term security concerns, build resilience, and further promote regional cooperation. Regional security discussions can enhance global security by clarifying the relationship between global and regional policies and improving the effectiveness of multilateral cooperation.³⁵ As a result of changing perceptions, most countries are refining their security policies and summarising security objectives (including the categorisation of security threats) in comprehensive public documents for local and external audiences, even if these are not codified; different countries have different formats and hierarchies of strategy documents. The most solid argument for the "survival" of regional cooperation is that these documents from the Visegrad countries share common political and cultural traits due to common experiences, mainly related to the geographical region - including past experiences with the Soviet bloc, democratic transition and Euro-Atlantic integration. That is, they share basic perceptions, and there is a similarity in the way these perceptions are subject to change.

The main challenge of the present moment is the complicated problems caused by a changing world order and the resulting uncertainty. In this regard, the international and national literature³⁶ has also described a number of possibilities for the evolution of the world order, and we cannot predict which of them will eventually come true. However, one of the most important uncertainties is how the actors in the order will react. In each scenario there is a visible process of de-globalisation, decoupling and de-risking that requires each country to think pragmatically and realistically, even if the liberal world order benefits them.³⁷ Global politics is often unpredictable, with sudden shifts in alliances, unexpected policy changes, and unforeseen

³² Such as today.

³³ Marton et al, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Luckily, those experts who have dealt scientifically with our region have different opinion. See in Cabada, Ladislav: "Central Europe between the West and East: Independent Region, the Bridge, Buffer Zone or 'eternal' Semi-Periphery?", *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 16, n° 2 (2020), pp. 419-432, at <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2020-0018>; Ušiak, Jaroslav: "The Security Environment of the V4 Countries", *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 14, n° 2 (2018), pp. 21-37, at <https://doi.org/10.2478/pce-2018-0007>

³⁵ Agnew, John: "The territorial trap: The geographical assumptions of international relations theory", *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 1, n°1 (1994) pp.53-80.

³⁶ Rada, Péter: "Ukrajna és a világtrend", *MKI Elmezés*, KE-2023/24 (2023)

³⁷ Rada and Nyilas *op. cit.*



events.³⁸ For CEE countries, connectivity is a way forward, but each country must develop alternative strategies that connect them to global networks.

Strategic planning is of great importance in the field of security policy, especially in a region as diverse and complex as Central and Eastern Europe. A comprehensive and inclusive strategy also serves as a roadmap to guide nations in their efforts to maintain peace, stability and prosperity. Strategic planning enables nations to anticipate, prepare for and respond to various security threats, both traditional and unconventional. In Central and Eastern Europe, strategic planning is even more important because of the region's unique geopolitical dynamics and the list of uncertainties mentioned above. The region's history, its proximity to Russia and its integration into Western institutions such as NATO and the EU make the security environment more complex. Regional cooperation, on the other hand, is an effective tool for strengthening the security of the region, as the countries in the region can pool their resources and respond to common threats together, and by maintaining consultations, which is exactly what the Visegrad cooperation has done. Partly because of its size, the CEE region, as a subregion of the liberal world order, has little direct influence on international events, but on regionally important issues and through Visegrad cooperation, the countries of the region are bound to cooperate and overcome differences. This is the essence of the issue-based security complex: perceptions are similar³⁹ due to geographical (and historical) proximity, so joint responses are logical. In our view, this will continue to be the case.

5. Conclusions

The LWO is a historical order which, although it did not immediately become universal, was able to prevent the outbreak of great power wars after 1945. It was created by the United States, and its longevity was due to the fact that its adherents interpreted the world in a liberal way. Today, the LWO is at a critical juncture, facing unprecedented challenges that call into question both its structure and its viability. As this article has argued, the current global landscape of intensifying great power competition has exposed the limits of liberal internationalism. Central and Eastern Europe, particularly through the Visegrád cooperation, is at the crossroads of these global changes. Historically, CEE countries have been strong proponents of Euro-Atlantic integration, aligning themselves with the values and institutions of the Western World, such as NATO and the EU. However, the geopolitical realities of the region require a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of the order.

The Visegrád Group is an important example of regional cooperation within the broader framework of the LWO. The strategic importance of the V4 lies in its ability to provide regional solutions to complex global challenges, particularly those affecting security and political stability. Russian aggression in Ukraine is a stark example of how the region is directly affected by shifts in global power. However, the V4's responses to these challenges are not always uniform, reflecting the diverse national interests and security concerns of its members. Poland's more aggressive stance towards Russia contrasts with the more cautious positions of Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic, particularly with regard to economic and energy dependencies.

This divergence in security perceptions underscores the article's central argument: regional approaches are becoming increasingly important as globalisation recedes and regionalisation takes precedence. The Visegrád cooperation, despite its internal disagreements, remains an essential mechanism for CEE countries to navigate the evolving global order. The

³⁸ Sikorski, Radek: "Europe's Real Test Is Yet to Come", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 102, n° 4 (July, August 2023).

³⁹ Nyilas, Laura; Stepper, Péter: "A visegrádi partnereink stratégiai gondolkodása I. Csehország és Szlovákia", *MKI Elemzés*, KE-2023/40; Nyilas, Laura; Stepper, Péter: "A visegrádi partnereink stratégiai gondolkodása II. Lengyelország", *MKI Elemzés*, KE-2023/41.



strength of the V4 lies in its ability to provide flexible, issue-specific cooperation that can adapt to both regional and global challenges. While the group has been criticised for its internal political differences, particularly over interpretations of EU values, it continues to serve as a vital 'security' complex within the LWO.

The article argues that the LWO itself, once seen as a seamless global system driven by liberal ideals, now operates under a more surRealist logic, mixing liberalism with realism in response to the realities of global power politics. For CEE countries, this means navigating a world in which liberal values remain important but are increasingly intertwined with realist concerns about survival and power. As a regional entity, the V4 exemplifies how smaller states can use regional cooperation to maintain stability and security in a broader, increasingly uncertain international system.

Moreover, the article emphasises that while the LWO is not without its shortcomings, particularly in accommodating the interests of smaller states such as those in Central and Eastern Europe, there is currently no viable alternative to this system. The rules-based order, despite its liberal underpinnings, provides a degree of predictability and security that is essential for smaller states navigating the complexities of global interdependence. This is particularly true for the V4, where regional cooperation within the framework of the WTO provides both a buffer against external threats and a platform for advancing national interests in a global context.

In sum, from a CEE perspective, the future of the LWO depends on the ability of regions or regional organisations such as the Visegrád Group to maintain cohesion and adapt to the evolving global order. The surRealist blend of liberal and realist elements in the LWO reflects the complexity of contemporary international relations, where smaller states must balance their regional interests with global imperatives. As the V4 countries continue to engage with both the EU and NATO, their regional cooperation will remain a critical factor in shaping not only the future of the LWO, but also their own security and political stability in a world marked by increasing uncertainty and shifting power dynamics.

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