



Austria in Central Europe: The Aspiration to Become a Bridge-Builder

Łukasz Ogrodnik

Austria's government has declared it will be a bridge-builder in the European Union between its western and eastern members. This is in fact rather more an endorsement of the Union cohesion on the eve of Austria's presidency of the EU Council than a genuine offer to represent the Visegrad states' interests in the EU. Vienna is also trying to strengthen its position in Central Europe using regional cooperation initiatives such as the Slavkov Triangle, Three Seas Initiative, and the V4+ format. However, Austria's pro-Russia stances and economic conflicts of interest have burdened relations with regional partners. Common goals remain limited but include the development of transport infrastructure, an endorsement of the European integration of the Western Balkans and strengthening the EU's external borders.

The establishment of a coalition government in December 2017, consisting of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the far-right Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), marks a new era in Austrian politics with consequences for the country's regional policy. As Chancellor Sebastian Kurz declared, Austria is willing to act as a bridge between the EU's western and eastern members.¹ This corresponds with the international activity of the new government. Kurz paid his first state visit to Brussels and Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl travelled to Bratislava, while Hungary's Viktor Orbán became one of the first premiers to visit Vienna after the new government was sworn in.

Austrian policymakers have not forgotten the country's tradition of bridge-building, with its special historical relationship to such countries as the Czech Republic and Hungary. Even though Austria is regarded in the United Nations system as Western Europe, the country's history, location and multidimensional ties define its place in Central Europe. During the Cold War, its neutral status placed Austria between West and East, and turned Vienna into a convenient meeting place between the two blocs. This was symbolically confirmed by visits of U.S. and Soviet leaders to Austria. Nikita Khrushchev met John F. Kennedy there in 1961, and in 1979 Jimmy Carter met with Leonid Brezhnev. The fall of the Iron Curtain re-established Austria's place in the centre of a politically uniting Europe, a point stressed later by

¹ "Ich wünsche mir eine stabile Regierung in Berlin," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 January 2018.

Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel.² After the Cold War, Austria became focused on building ties with Western European countries (*Westorientierung*), simultaneously leaning towards ever-stronger relations with its post-communist neighbourhood. Together with Hungary, Italy, and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Austria, in the same month the Berlin Wall fell, founded the Quadragonale,³ which later evolved into the Pentagonale,⁴ and finally into the Central European Initiative (CEI).⁵

Within Regional Groupings

Austria strives to strengthen its influence by participating in “V4+” format talks and joining multiple regional initiatives such as the Slavkov Triangle (S3) and Three Seas Initiative (TSI). This is a consequence of Austria defining itself as part of the region, looking for more opportunities and pursuing them by rediscovering ties with neighbouring countries.

Transport and energy are among the most promising areas for cooperation between V4 countries and Austria, but internal affairs and security seem to most important.⁶ In 1999, interior ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia met with their Austrian counterpart in the Czech town of Židlochovice to discuss security issues. Earlier, in 1993, Austria and Switzerland established the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), to which V4 countries and nine other mostly Central European states later signed up.⁷ One of organisation’s major aims is to promote sustainable migration policies. As far as internal affairs are concerned, the Salzburg Forum was established in 2000 on the initiative of Austria. This partnership of Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia brings interior ministries together to discuss internal security matters such as police cooperation and border checks. Today, Austria’s cooperation with regional partners on home affairs is gaining prominence as a result of growing security threats from the east and south. Vienna’s cooperation with the Visegrad Group depends to a large extent on the country holding the V4 presidency, with closer ties to Austria translating into greater interest in intensifying the cooperation. During the Hungarian V4 presidency (July 2017 to June 2018), Austria has been a partner on numerous issues such as migration, security, the stability of the Western Balkans, EU enlargement, digitisation, innovation and agriculture.⁸ This contrasts with the previous V4 presidency (held by Poland from July 2016 to June 2017), during which cooperation with Vienna did not play a major role.⁹ In fact, the only time it was mentioned during that period was in the context of combating the financing of terrorism.

The Slavkov Triangle (S3), also known as the Austerlitz format, was established in early 2015. During annual summits of the prime ministers of Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, topics such as infrastructure development, energy security, education and manufacturing technologies (Industry 4.0) have been discussed.¹⁰ In its short history, the S3 has expanded the range of topics it concerns itself with, as well as its infrastructure and economic development profile¹¹ Talks with French President Emmanuel Macron additionally proved that Austria is using S3 to solicit its economic interests, for example by lobbying for the

² “Rede von Bundeskanzler Dr. Wolfgang Schüssel anlässlich der Feierlichkeiten zum 50. Jubiläum der Staatsvertragsunterzeichnung im Schloss Belvedere,” *APA-OTS*, 15 May 2005.

³ Quadragonales: Austria, Yugoslavia, Italy and Hungary.

⁴ Pentagonales: Austria, Yugoslavia, Italy, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

⁵ CEI is a regional intergovernmental forum supporting integration through cooperation among its members: Albania, Austria, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Ukraine.

⁶ “Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group, Austria, Croatia and Slovenia,” *www.visegradgroup.eu*, 10 July 2017.

⁷ The ICMPD consists of 15 members: Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland.

⁸ “Hungarian Presidency Programme,” *www.visegradgroup.eu*, June 2017.

⁹ “Polish Presidency Programme,” *www.visegradgroup.eu*, July 2016.

¹⁰ *Austerlitz Declaration*, Government of the Czech Republic, February 2015.

¹¹ “Kern drängt bei Treffen mit Fico und Sobotka auf Solidarität in EU,” *Wiener Zeitung*, 22 June 2017.

Posted Workers Directive to be updated.¹² Austria backed the French approach, which includes reducing posted time, equal pay for equal work in the same place, increased controls over posting companies, and working conditions. The element of coordinated joint action with some of the Central European countries (which are often the source of posted workers) is particularly important for Vienna, because Austria is behind only Germany, France and Belgium as a destination for posted workers.¹³ In 2015, such workers in Austria numbered 110,000.¹⁴

The Slavkov Triangle is not the only trilateral platform in which Austria participates. Since 2014, the presidents of Austria, Slovenia and Croatia have been holding annual meetings to discuss trilateral and international issues. Regardless of the president's limited role in the Austrian political system, the meetings with other heads of state are intended to send the political message that Austria is determined to solve issues such as the situation in the east of Ukraine and the migration crisis. During the trilateral summit in Salzburg in July 2017, President Alexander Van der Bellen not only called on Slovenia and Croatia to solve their border dispute, but also offered Austria's assistance in resolving it.¹⁵

Austria also joined the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), a project initiated in 2016 and focused on developing infrastructure and strengthening economic ties in the region. Austria differs from the other 11 members of the TSI in numerous aspects as it is the only EU Member State within the initiative that joined the EU before 2004, the only country without a communist history, is not member, and has a significantly higher GDP per capita than the other Central European states. The first TSI summit, which took place in Dubrovnik in July 2016, was used to strengthen economic contacts. The Austrian National Chamber of Commerce signed a joint statement with its Polish, Croatian, Bulgarian and Slovenian counterparts on the promotion of economic cooperation under the TSI. However, Austria's low level of representation at both TSI summits¹⁶ proved that the government in Vienna is rather cautious about the initiative and will follow its development closely.

Divergence of Interests

Despite bilateral and multilateral cooperation, conflicts of interest and different views on EU matters limits the chances for a stronger regional partnership. The EU budget negotiations, which were defined alongside Brexit by the government in Vienna as the main challenge facing the forthcoming Austrian EU presidency,¹⁷ are a possible area of confrontation. This is because Austria, in contrast to other Central European countries which are net recipients of the EU budget, is a net contributor. The Austrian government is reluctant to pay more in the next multiannual financial framework (2021 to 2027), particularly after Brexit, which will leave a gap in the EU budget.¹⁸ As Kurz stated in an interview for the Austrian daily newspaper *der Standard*: "in the discussion about EU budget policy, our partners in the Union are net contributors rather than net beneficiaries."¹⁹

The Austrian government sounds rather cautious about deepening European integration. In its programme for 2017 to 2022, the ÖVP-FPÖ government declares its commitment to "doing less more efficiently."²⁰

¹² Ł. Jurczyszyn, Ł. Ogródnik, "The French President's Meeting with the Heads of Government of the Slavkov Triangle," *PISM Spotlight*, no. 46/2017, 25 August 2017.

¹³ U. Batsaikhan, "EU posted workers: separating fact and fiction," *Bruegel.org*, 31 August 2017.

¹⁴ Additionally, Austria, after Luxembourg and Belgium, has the highest share of posted workers relative to domestic employment (2.5%).

¹⁵ "Van der Bellen empfängt Präsidenten von Kroatien und Slowenien," *die Presse*, 18 July 2017.

¹⁶ During the TSI Dubrovnik summit in 2016, Austria was represented by the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, and during the Warsaw summit in 2017 by the Austrian Ambassador to Poland, which was the lowest rank from all countries present. Other countries (except for the Czech Republic) were represented at the TSI Warsaw summit by heads of state.

¹⁷ *Präsentation der Schwerpunkte für den EU-Ratsvorsitz 2018*, Austrian Foreign Ministry, 9 March 2018.

¹⁸ "Bessere Alternative," *ORF*, 9 March 2017.

¹⁹ "Bundeskanzler Kurz will EU-Mittel für Osteuropa kürzen," *der Standard*, 4 February 2018.

²⁰ *Zusammen für Österreich – Regierungsprogramm 2017–2022*, p. 23.

According to Kurz, the EU should focus on fewer tasks, such as securing its external borders and reducing the size of the European Commission.²¹ This approach was later supported by Hungary's Orbán, when Kurz mentioned subsidiarity within the EU as one of the common goals of Austria and Hungary.²² However, any similarity between the language used by the V4 and Austria in relation to subsidiarity might be misleading. Austria, unlike its neighbours to the east, connects this type of rhetoric with a reduction in the EU budget and cuts for net recipients.

Vienna has a list of minor issues with other Central European countries. Austria is continuing its decades-old policy of opposing nuclear energy. This stance, applied to the Czech Republic while it was building its nuclear power station in Temelín, currently applies to Hungary, which intends to expand its power plant in Paks. Another issue is the Austrian government's decision to cut child benefits for EU workers, which will mainly hit citizens from countries such as Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. Moreover, additional tensions developed following Austrian objections about Poland lacking respect for common EU principles. Former Chancellor Kern stated that it would be hard to explain to Austrian citizens why they needed to contribute to the development of countries which did not respect the rule of law.²³ Kern recommended that the EU take harsh steps against such countries, a position that Kurz seemed to support when he declared his trust in the European Commission on this matter.²⁴

Ever Stronger Ties with Russia

Austria's "bridging function" might also be understood as pursuing a policy of *détente* between the West and Russia.²⁵ Ties with the Russian Federation became stronger when Kurz's government was sworn in, as ministerial posts went to FPÖ members Herbert Kickl (Interior Minister), Mario Kunasek (Defence Minister), and to Karin Kneissl (Foreign Minister), who is non-partisan but was nevertheless nominated by the FPÖ. The Freedom Party of Austria has the strongest links to Russia within Austrian political system. In December 2016, its leaders visited Moscow and signed an agreement with the United Russia Party.²⁶ According to that document, both parties will exchange experience, organise bilateral visits and share information about domestic politics. As a result of the FPÖ crucial impact on Austria's security, the country risks undermining its own credibility, which may lead to limited intelligence cooperation with Western partners.²⁷

In contrast to some Central European countries such as Poland, and despite the Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Vienna has attempted to maintain cordial relations with Moscow. On the one hand, Austria criticised Russia for aggression in Ukraine (as the former Chancellor Werner Faymann expressed it, for "deception and salami tactics"). On the other hand, Russian President Vladimir Putin is perceived in Austria as a partner rather than as an adversary. This was confirmed by Putin's state visit to Vienna in June 2014, just three months after the annexation of Crimea. During the visit, the two governments signed an agreement on mutual assistance following natural or industrial disasters, and on cooperation in preventing them.²⁸ As the visit was taking place, Vienna-based oil and gas company OMV was signing a contract with Gazprom for the construction of the Austrian section of the South Stream pipeline.²⁹

Although Austria regularly agrees to extend EU sanctions against Russia, at the same time it signals the lack of effectiveness of this instrument. However, a reluctance to extend sanctions is a common feature of the Austrian, Slovak and Hungarian governments. Kern underlined the damaging impact of sanctions on the

²¹ "Ich wünsche mir eine stabile Regierung in Berlin," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 January 2018.

²² Twitter account of Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, 30 January 2018.

²³ "Ihr seid einfach kein Beitrittskandidat," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 26 July 2017.

²⁴ Live EC press conference by EC President Jean-Claude Juncker, European Commission, January 2018.

²⁵ *Zusammen für Österreich – Regierungsprogramm 2017–2022*, p. 22.

²⁶ "FPÖ unterzeichnet Absichtserklärung mit Putins Partei," *Der Standard*, 19 December 2016.

²⁷ "Berlin besorgt über Einfluss der FPÖ auf Geheimdienste," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 January 2018.

²⁸ "Russian-Austrian talks," *Kremlin.ru*, 24 June 2014.

²⁹ "Austria defies US, EU over South Stream during Putin visit," *Deutsche Welle*, 24 June 2014.

Austrian economy more than once, including during the panel discussion at the plenary session of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2017, in which he and Putin participated. Kneissl later expressed her disapproval of the sanctions, which he described as “dull.”³⁰ In addition, Austria and Germany have spoken out against U.S. sanctions on Russia, raising concerns that they may affect European businesses. In a joint statement,³¹ Kern and German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel reacted harshly to the imposition of sanctions on Russia by the U.S. Senate, stating that they would not only help secure U.S. energy jobs and threaten Russian gas deliveries to Europe, but also diminish the effectiveness of the joint stance on the conflict in Ukraine. U.S. sanctions put pressure on companies such as OMV, with which Gazprom is engaged in the Nord Stream II pipeline project. When the U.S. House of Representatives passed sanctions against Russia in July 2017, OMV CEO Rainer Seele criticised the American, Polish and Baltic States’ opposition to Nord Stream II.³² While Austria is willing to transit gas from Nord Stream II regionally, Slovakia, which remains a transit route for Russian gas to Western Europe, would lose its significance due to this project.

Austria also attempts to contribute to the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine’s Donbas region. The purpose is not only to strengthen Austria’s credibility, but ultimately to normalise relations with Russia. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Kurz’s first foreign visit in the framework of the current Austrian chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) took place in the east of Ukraine in early 2017. Austria expressed support for Ukrainian integration with the EU by backing the Eastern Partnership project from the very beginning.³³ Documents such as the July 2017 joint statement of the ministers of foreign affairs of the V4 countries, Austria, Croatia and Slovenia prove the common denominators of these countries’ policy in this respect. Austria expressed its support for Ukrainian “independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.” The document also points out the necessity of the Minsk Agreements being fully implemented, and underlines Austria’s OSCE chairmanship and special monitoring mission.³⁴

The Refugee Crisis

During the refugee crisis, Austria became one of the countries most affected by mass migration to Europe. In 2015, more than 88,000 people requested asylum in Austria, placing the country first among EU Member States regarding the ratio of asylum seekers to population.³⁵ Even if the number of asylum seekers has fallen significantly (more than 24,000 requests were made in 2017), migration still plays a significant role in public debate.

The Austrian government tried to create an image of a state that provides multilateral solutions to the refugee crisis. Among other initiatives, Vienna hosted German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Council President Donald Tusk at an intergovernmental conference to discuss the Balkan migration route countries in September 2016. The Austrian Chancellor used this opportunity (together with his Slovenian counterpart) to advocate stronger EU external borders and call for a fight against illegal migration.

Austria and V4 countries support same solutions, such as reinforcing the EU’s external borders, to limit the inflow of refugees. The closure of the Western Balkan route has become a priority for Austria. That is why, during Orbán’s visit to Vienna, Kurz expressed gratitude to Hungary for closing the Western Balkan route and gave assurances about Austrian willingness to continue sending soldiers to the Hungarian border. From

³⁰ K. Kneissl: “Russland-Sanktionen sind stumpf,” *Kurier*, 8 January 2018.

³¹ *Foreign Minister Gabriel and Austrian Federal Chancellor Kern on the imposition of Russia sanctions by the US Senate*, Federal Foreign Office, 15 June 2017.

³² “Nord Stream 2 ist nicht Trumps Sache,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 24 July 2017.

³³ *Eastern Partnership: The Opening Report*, PISM Report, April 2009.

³⁴ “V4+ Austria, Croatia and Slovenia Joint Statement,” www.visegradgroup.eu, 10 July 2017.

³⁵ *Asyl Statistiken*, Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs, 10 February 2018.

the beginning of the migration crisis, Austria and the V4 countries expressed the need for better EU border protection and declared their willingness to control migration.

Together with Slovakia, Austria created a transition camp for refugees transferred from Traiskirchen to Gabčíkovo near Bratislava. For the Slovak presidency of the EU Council (July to December 2016), this initiative was an opportunity to improve Bratislava's image and served as an example of "flexible solidarity," a concept submitted by the V4 at the informal EU summit in the Slovak capital in September 2016 and developed during the Slovak presidency into "effective solidarity." According to this concept, each EU Member State should choose its own way of contributing to the migration crisis, taking into account their potential and experience. For Austria, as Kneissl said in Bratislava, Gabčíkovo is an example of regional solidarity.³⁶

Austria's stance towards Central European partners regarding migration has evolved. Faymann accused the Visegrad Group of showing insufficient solidarity with the countries most affected by the migration crisis. Kern, after taking office in May 2016, has maintained Austria's critical narrative towards V4 in this respect. Additionally, since the V4 offer in the refugee crisis appeared insufficient for Austrian government, Kern has linked the fulfilment of the obligations such as acceptance of mandatory quotas of refugees with EU funds. As he stated in March 2017, "selective solidarity should result in selective payments."³⁷ This contrasts with the stance of Kurz's government, which sounds very much like the V4 countries. The common approach includes the need to reinforce the EU's external borders, and is coloured by scepticism towards mandatory migrant quotas and the relocation system.³⁸ Robust control of the European Union's external border is additionally supported by Central European Defence Cooperation,³⁹ which undertakes joint military training and actions to tackle illegal migration using civil and military security personnel.

Prospective Areas: Interconnectivity and EU Enlargement

Austria seems to be ready to use its central location at the continent's crossroads and in the Adriatic-Baltic corridor to support the development of transport infrastructure in Central Europe. During the S3 meeting in Brno in June 2017, Kern named infrastructure development as a key area of regional cooperation.⁴⁰ Austria currently participates in three trans-European transport network policy (TEN-T) corridors, the Baltic-Adriatic Corridor, the Rhine-Danube Corridor and the Orient/East-Med Corridor, and thus improves its prospects of building regional interconnectivity with the use of EU funds. This attitude also explains Austrian participation in the TSI, which aims to use EU instruments such as the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) to finance new regional infrastructural connections.

Energy infrastructure plays an important role in Austria's policy. Together with regional partners and the EU as a whole, Vienna accelerates the integration of gas markets in central and south eastern Europe. This was confirmed by the establishment of the High Level Group on Central and South Eastern Europe Gas Connectivity (CESEC)⁴¹ in February 2015. CESEC is a gas-related regional initiative focused on future and ongoing projects such as interconnectors. Austria is located in the north-south corridor, between the Baltic Sea LNG terminal in Świnoujście and the Adriatic Sea. Therefore, the possible creation of a long-planned gas terminal on the Croatian island of Krk has the potential both to improve Austria's strategic position as a transfer state and to raise the importance of the gas hub in Baumgarten. Improved gas connections will

³⁶ Štátny tajomník Korčok prijal novú šéfkú rakúskej diplomacie na jej prvej zahraničnej ceste, Slovak Embassy in Vienna, 9 January 2018.

³⁷ "Dann werden wir uns schwertun, Milliarden zu überweisen, *Die Welt*, 8 March 2017.

³⁸ "EU-Kommission hält weiter an Flüchtlingsverteilung fest," *Kurier*, 25 January 2018.

³⁹ Central European Defence Cooperation, created in 2010, consists of Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia.

⁴⁰ *Premiér Sobotka jednal v Brně s premiéry Rakouska Kernem a Slovenska Ficem o spolupráci v dopravě, Průmyslu 4.0 a vzdělávání a otázkách EU*, Government of the Czech Republic, 22 June 2017.

⁴¹ *Central and South Eastern Europe Gas Connectivity*, European Commission, 9 October 2017.

also be necessary due to country's rising gas consumption, already among the highest in the EU.⁴² For now, Austria's gas supplies are much more diversified than in other countries. In 2014, Austria's gas imports from Russia reached 113.6 bcm (51% of total imports), making it less dependent than Hungary (100%), Slovakia (95%), Poland (76%) and Slovenia (66%).⁴³ It should be kept in mind that, since the Cold War, Austria's energy cooperation with Russia has been a pillar of mutual relations and is still reflected in Vienna's policy. OMV was engaged in the abandoned project to build the Nabucco gas pipeline, and now Austria backs Nord Stream II (as it did with South Stream), and is likely to use this as a chance to intensify cooperation with Russia on energy supplies.

Even though Austria's energy policy decreases some of its neighbours' sense of security, Vienna is trying to integrate Central Europe and the Balkans by supporting the EU enlargement process. Austria has traditionally had strong ties with the Western Balkans and is seen as an advocate for this region's integration with the EU. This supportive approach was expressed on multiple occasions, including at trilateral meetings of Austrian, Croatian and Slovenian presidents. As former Austrian President Heinz Fischer stated in Budva, Montenegro, in June 2015: "European integration of the Western Balkans should not stop."⁴⁴ Thanks to the Berlin Process, an intergovernmental initiative promoting the economic, legal and institutional development of Western Balkans countries, cooperation with the region has been further formalised. It is no coincidence that the second summit of heads of state and government of Western Balkan countries was held in Vienna in 2015. Helping the Western Balkans in their EU accession efforts links Austria's interests to the V4 agenda. To support such efforts, Austria, Slovenia and the V4 countries established a Regional Partnership in 2001.⁴⁵ Among its key goals is the development of bilateral relations and cooperation within the Danube area. However, support for the aspiring Balkan countries does not extend to all states linked to enlargement policy. Austria has been among the strongest critics of Turkey and called for accession talks to be formally ended.

Central Europe as an Instrument of Domestic Politics

Austrian activities on the international arena are inspired to some extent by internal competition between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ). Artfully conducted foreign policy may yield positive results in the internal political competition. Kurz's ever stronger involvement in international affairs, especially in handling the migration crisis, has won him stronger support from voters. That was shown by his advances in the ÖVP, takeover as chairman in May 2017, and ultimate victory in the October 2017 parliamentary election. Before that, the SPÖ attempted to counterbalance his activities by engaging Kern in international affairs. Hosting the Slavkov Triangle and meeting with Macron gave Kern the opportunity to prove his organisational and diplomatic skills, and to show voters that he can deliver by resolving labour issues.

Central Europe is a common aspect of Austrian internal policy, especially during election campaigns. In the 2016 presidential campaign, FPÖ presidential candidate Norbert Hofer suggested that Austria might take action to join the V4 in the future. This was repeated by another FPÖ politician, Heinz Christian Strache, in the autumn 2017 parliamentary election campaign. After the ÖVP-FPÖ government was formed, no such statements were repeated. Strache, as Vice-chancellor, said during a press conference with Orbán in January 2018 that such an idea was "out of the discussion."⁴⁶ Integration with V4 countries served rather to support the argument that the FPÖ, as part of government, would lead the country to isolation. The transformation of the V4 into the V5 remains highly unlikely and would entail a threat to the coherence of the group.

⁴² B. Bieliszczuk, "Three Seas Initiative: Benefits for Regional Gas Markets and the EU," *PISM Bulletin*, no. 63 (1003), 30 June 2017.

⁴³ Croatia, with 0% of total imports, is less dependent than Austria on Russian gas.

⁴⁴ "Eurointegration of Western Balkans should not stop," *b92*, June 2015.

⁴⁵ T. Żornaczuk, "Polityka Polski wobec Bałkanów Zachodnich," *Rocznik Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej 2010*, Warsaw 2011, p. 232.

⁴⁶ "Pressestatement nach Treffen von Premier Orbán und Vizekanzler Strache," *Youtube*, 31 January 2018.

Conclusions

The notion of Austria as a “bridge-builder” hails back to its Cold War role as a venue for summits between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. However, as long as Central Europe is beset by conflicts of interest and divisions related to key issues such as the EU budget, it is a notion that remains mere words. This is also due to a lack of political consensus, exemplified by Van der Bellen’s statement that the V4 is well-organised and does not need a bridge.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, Austria is strongly embedded in the system of regional cooperation through its presence in multiple institutions and platforms. Even if Austria was not the initiator of new regional formats (the S3 was introduced by the Czech government, and the TSI was a joint proposal by Croatia and Poland), its presence in these groupings expresses Austrian decision-makers’ willingness to multiply foreign policy instruments. The country’s leaders seem to regard such instruments as necessary if Austria is to take a qualitative step up on the regional and European cooperation ladder. Regardless of political configuration, Vienna will keep trying to resolve the refugee crisis. Austria shows interest in complex interconnectivity in the fields of transport and energy infrastructure, the most promising areas of regional cooperation.

Ties between Austria and other Central European countries run deep. Vienna constitutes an attractive partner for Central European countries due to its location in Europe, its “Western” position, and currently because of the forthcoming EU presidency in the second half of 2018. Austria demonstrates a similar approach as Central European countries, particularly Visegrad states, when it comes to the integration of the Western Balkans and a tough stance on migration with underpinned by criticism of the quota system. Austria continues to be an attractive partner for both policy-makers and societies of other Central European countries, especially the Czech Republic and Hungary. In February 2018, the foreign ministers of these states expressed their wish for closer cooperation between the V4 and Vienna.⁴⁸ According to a Nézőpont Institute survey, Czechs and Hungarians see Austria as the favourite country with which to tighten political and economic connections. For Slovaks, Austria takes second place, right after the Czech Republic.⁴⁹

Sharp criticism of sanctions against Russia and a favourable stance towards the Nord Stream II gas pipeline place Austria in opposition to countries such as Poland. As Kurz stated during the 2018 Munich Security Conference: “we think that the Nord Stream II project is in principle a good one,” adding “it still means we must respect concerns of EU partners.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, Poland ought to take into account the willingness of its V4 partners to deepen relations with Vienna. It should also look for closer cooperation with Austria, in order to strengthen the consensus within the EU on policy towards Russia.

⁴⁷ “Slowakischer Präsident Kiska bei Van der Bellen in Wien: Anpassung der Familienbeihilfe ‘unfair’,” *Vienna.at*, 19 February 2018.

⁴⁸ Twitter account of Czech Foreign Minister Martin Stropnický, 1 February 2018.

⁴⁹ *Public opinion poll on crucial V4 issues and future perspectives of cooperation*, Nézőpont Intézet, 14 September 2017, pp. 38–47.

⁵⁰ Statements by Mateusz Morawiecki and Sebastian Kurz, *www.securityconference.de*, 17 February 2018.