

Project Report

“When **JAPAN** Meets *Central Europe*”



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Foreword

SCHOLARS FROM FOUR Central Eastern European (CEE) universities, representing various European Union (EU) member states and specializing in Japanese studies, gathered together in the framework of the EU-funded Erasmus+ Blended Intensive Programme (BIP). Taking it upon themselves to contribute to creating an educational program suitable for modern and contemporary studies of Japan, they set out with their students to compile a report that reveals the perspective of the younger generation of Europeans on relations between CEE and Japan.

For decades, Central European countries could have maintained their relations with Japan. The history of Japanology dates back to 1919 in Poland, 1927 in Hungary and 1947 in the Czech Republic. Conceived as a Japanese philology, the programme has mainly focused on Japanese history and culture based on written documents, giving primary importance to the study of the language and its written codes. However, recent events such as the gaining of membership in the EU by the post-communist countries, the crucial role of the region during the Russian aggression on the Ukrainian territory, and

the growing market of the CEE economies have contributed to a shift in the character of CEE-Japan relations. Being aware of the processes that are part of modern politics and the reshaping of the relationship between CEE countries and Japan, the scholars from Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Lithuania organized a project "When Japan Meets Central Europe" as part of the BIP Erasmus+ project to provide the students with first-hand experience and knowledge while meeting the key stakeholders that are shaping CEE-Japan Relations.

Students from SWPS University in Warsaw, Poland; Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic; Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Budapest, Hungary; and Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, Lithuania gathered in Warsaw to participate in the classes led by scholars, experts and politicians to understand the historical and contemporary context of CEE-Japan relations. Students participated in the meetings with politicians involved in shaping the process of Polish-Japanese relations, listened to lectures by scholars from Japan, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania and Czech Republic, as well as analysts from Polish Trade and In-

vestment Agency and Polish Institute of Foreign Affairs, all to discuss the contemporary state of relations between our region and Japan. They also visited places which many CEE nationals are not aware of that link our region and Japan. These include namely the warehouse at the National Museum (not usually open for public viewing) that houses unique items of Japanese culture and the Piłsudski Museum in Sulejówek, which tells the story of the Ainu people and the independence activities of Central European political representatives in Japan at the beginning of 20th century.

Students identified that the relations between the nations are based mainly on culture (especially fascination with Japanese culture) as well as history. Since most of the students were born in the European Union and actively participate in the life of our community, feeling they are equal members, as

well as being aware of the economic success of Central European countries, they proposed a new perspective and an attempt to streamline the shape of CEE-Japan relations. They argued the need for areas like green energy, national security, as well as new technologies to be developed collaboratively to a larger extent. None of the activities of Japanese NGOs was identified by the students, which is also an interesting finding.

It is hoped that at a time when teaching about Japan is focused mainly on the methods and themes grounded in humanities, this report provides a new methodological and topical perspective on the educational needs of students interested in Japan from the perspective of social sciences, and it will also serve as a first step toward a closer relationship between CEE and Japan.

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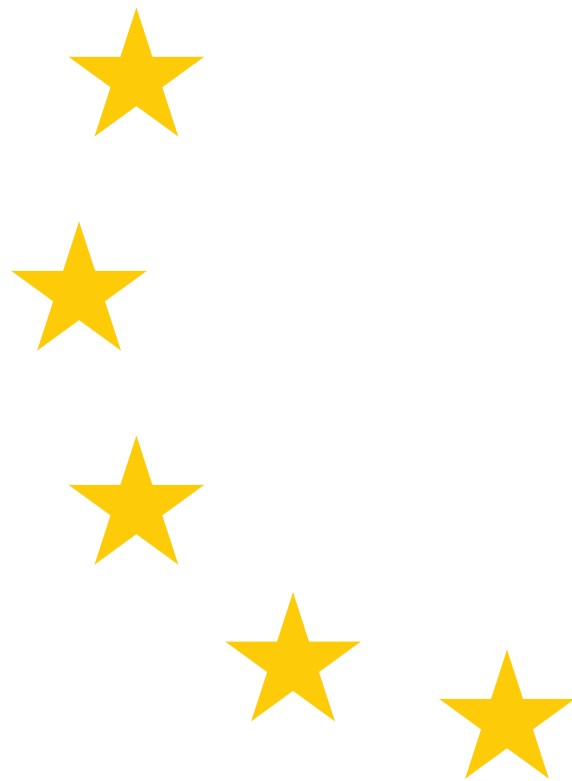


Executive Summary:

THE GROWING COOPERATION between Japan and the countries of Central Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Lithuania) is built on a strong tradition of mutual respect, shared democratic values, and a common commitment to regional and global stability. In recent decades, interactions between Japan and these countries have broadened significantly, moving beyond traditional cultural diplomacy to include collaboration in economic development, scientific research and education. Amid the current international transformations, the importance of cultivating closer ties has become increasingly apparent. Both sides share a deep interest in supporting sustainable economic growth, promoting technological innovation, strengthening democratic institutions, and enhancing mutual strategic cooperation within international frameworks. Building upon these shared interests opens multiple new opportunities for enriching bilateral and multilateral relations. This report offers a comprehensive overview of the historical background and contemporary evolution of Japan's partnerships with Central Europe provided

by the young generation - students focusing on Japan within their studies programs. It highlights major milestones, addresses emerging challenges, and proposes thoughtful recommendations aimed at advancing collaboration across political, economic, scientific, educational and cultural domains. The analysis underscores the importance of fostering cultural sensitivity, mutual understanding, and adaptability in building a resilient and forward-looking partnership.

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When Japan Meets Central Europe

Introduction Background:

We are students of Palacky University, Vytautas Magnus University, SWPS University, and Károli Gáspár University. Despite our various nationalities, there is one thing that brings us together: a shared interest in Japan that we aim to further develop by participating in the Blended Intensive Programme (BIP) within the Erasmus+ Programme. Our university studies are closely connected to Japan's history, language, culture, and its dynamic relationship with the rest of the world. In April, we had the opportunity to meet in person for the first time to further explore Japan's connection to Central Europe. During our time together in Warsaw at SWPS University, we worked on a project that allowed us to deepen our understanding of how crucial this relationship is for fostering growth, mutual cooperation, and cultural exchange between these two regions.

The purpose of this report is to analyze the development and current state of Japan's relations with selected Central European countries (Po-

land, Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovakia), with a focus on cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and deepening strategic cooperation in the domains of security and defense. This includes an overview of Japan's foreign policy objectives in the region, business expansion strategies, and cultural diplomacy led by institutions such as the Japan Foundation, cultural centers of Japanese embassies, or history-related museums. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of historical memory and the perception of Japan within Central Europe. The main goal is to explain how the relationship between Japan and Central Europe has formed, what it looks like today, and what challenges and opportunities might come in the future.

The bilateral relationship between Japan and individual Central European countries has been steadily growing, grounded in mutual respect, and expanding economic and cultural ties; from historical connections developed in the early 20th century,

like Japan's early diplomatic presence in the region, to the modern-day strategic partnerships formed in the 21st century. Most significantly, Japan's presence in Central European countries has grown through both governmental and non-governmental initiatives, investments, and cultural programs (such as the Osaka EXPO, material support and investments from Japan in numerous countries and growing diplomatic relations).

The methodology used in this report is based on content analysis of materials provided during the "When Japan Meets Central Europe" BIP (Erasmus+) project. For the purpose of this report, we have also drawn on the knowledge acquired from online lectures and presentations given to participants

by various experts involved in the project, as well as in-person interactions and discussions with specialists, such as a Japanese diplomat Daisuke Yamashita, Polish diplomat Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska, Polish politicians prof. Tomasz Grodzki, prof. Michał Sewerynski and Paweł Lewandowski, in addition to the representatives of Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and the Polish Trade and Investment Agency (PAIH). Furthermore, we visited the National Museum in Warsaw (Japanese collection section) and the Piłsudski Museum in Sulejów. Through workshops, discussions, and collaborative research, we gained new perspectives on the historical and contemporary ties linking Japan and Central Europe ●



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When Japan Meets Central Europe

Historical Context:

Japan's diplomatic and cultural ties with Central Europe – Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland and Slovakia – are rooted in a long history of mutual respect and values. The first contacts began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and they were often tied to larger political shifts such as the falls of empires and the aftermaths of world wars.

Hungary's ties with Japan began in 1869, during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which Austria, Czechia, and Slovakia were also a part of. Despite the two world wars and shifting alliances, the two nations rebuilt ties in 1959, leading to closer relations over the decades and peaking with Emperor Akihito's visit in 2002 not only to Hungary, but almost all Central European countries.

The ties between Poland and Japan can be traced back to the late 19th century. In 1892, Major Yasumasa Fukushima became the first Japanese person to enter Polish territories under occupation, traveling on horseback from Berlin to Vladivostok while gathering intelligence about European armies,

particularly Russia, Japan's emerging rival. During his journey, Fukushima met with Polish people and independence activists, and quickly recognized a potential strategic alliance: the Poles' resentment toward the Russian Empire mirrored Japan's own opposition. His intuition proved correct, as a few years later, Polish independence activists, including the famed Józef Piłsudski, began negotiating with the Japanese government, even proposing the formation of Polish legions in Japan to jointly counter Russian influence.

Formal diplomatic bonds strengthened after Poland regained independence in 1918. Japan's early recognition, humanitarian aid, such as rescuing Polish orphans, and shared wartime intelligence efforts established a lasting relationship. Ties intensified after 1989, leading up to a strategic partnership in 2015.

Japan's ties with Czechia, dating from 1920, were fully restored in 1957, marking a significant turning point in bilateral relations, and flour-

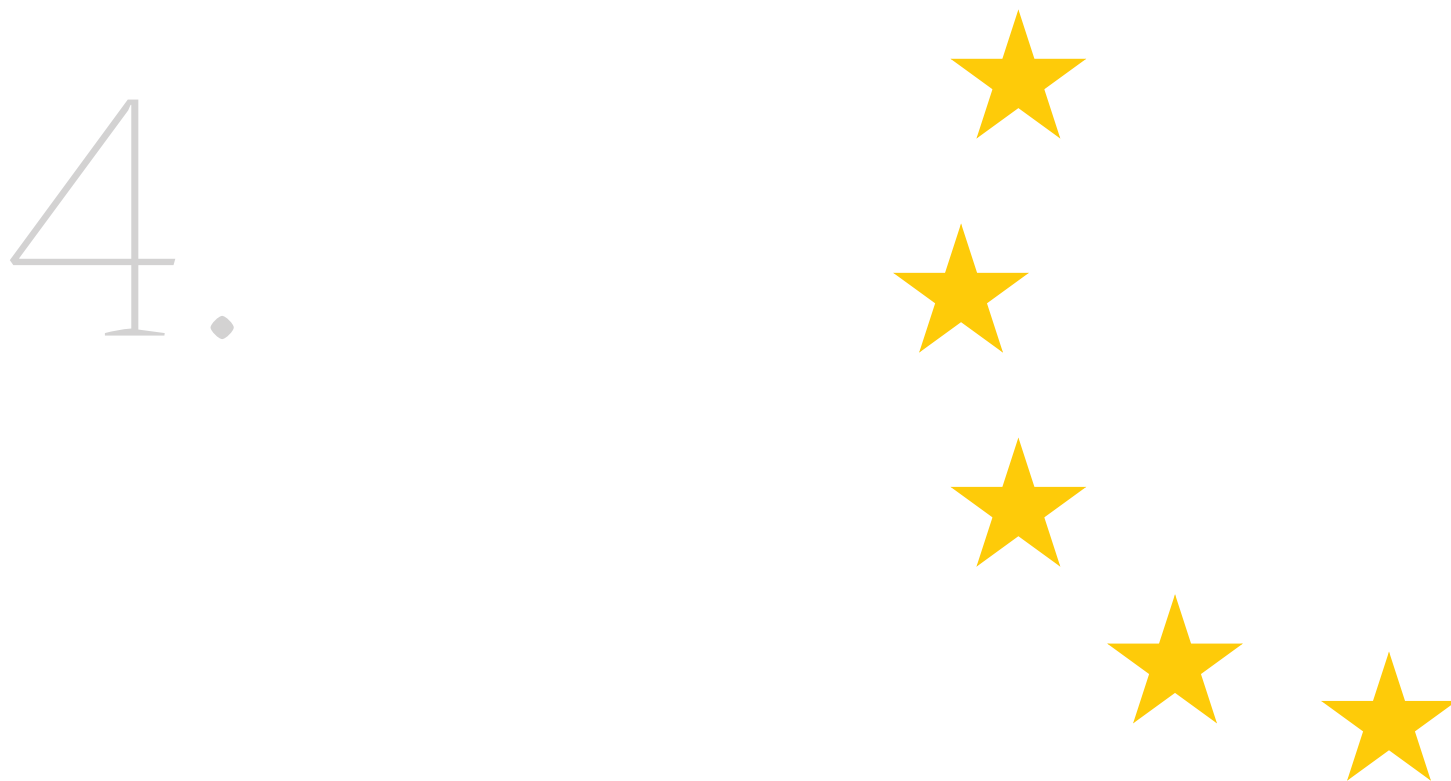
ished after 1989. Economic and technological cooperations deepened further with agreements such as the 2019 EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) and the 2024 Air Services Agreement.

Although official relations with Slovakia were only established after its independence in 1993, cooperation dates back to the early 20th century through Czechoslovak-Japanese ties and wartime support. Today, their partnership thrives through economic cooperation and high-level visits, highlighted by Prime Minister Abe's visit in 2019.

Lithuania's connection to Japan is forever linked to Chiune Sugihara, who saved thousands of Jewish refugees in Kaunas in the summer of 1940. His actions and legacy continue to inspire cultural and humanitarian cooperation between the two countries.

Together, the shared histories reflect Japan's great and respectful engagement with Central Europe, rooted in shared values of peace, innovation, and prosperity ●





Current State of Relations:

POLAND

Political relations between Poland and Japan are currently very close, marked by multiple high level visits, in particular by the meeting of Minister Sikorski and Minister for Foreign Affairs Takeshi Iwaya on 28.02.2025 that concluded in the signing of an action plan for implementing the Polish-Japanese strategic partnership. In terms of economic relations, as former Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki emphasized during his official visit to Japan in January 2020, Poland is very attractive for Japanese companies, as nearly 300 of them currently operate in Poland, employing about 40,000 people.

CZECHIA

Formal diplomatic relations were established in 1920 between Czechoslovakia and Japan. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the Czech Republic renewed these ties in 1993. There is a strong cooperation in the automotive, electronics, and engineering industries. Japanese companies, such as Toyota and Panasonic, have made significant invest-

ments in the Czech Republic, making Japan, with more than 50,000 jobs created, the second biggest foreign employer in the country. The country is attractive to Japanese investors thanks to its strategic location, skilled workforce, and EU membership. Student exchange programs, Japanese cultural festivals, and academic cooperation are also thriving.

SLOVAKIA

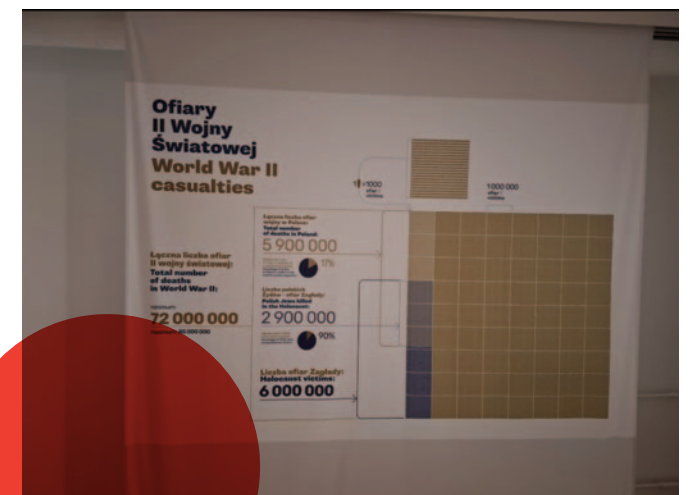
Slovak-Japan diplomatic relationships were formally established in 1993 after the separation of Czechoslovakia. Initiatives through the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (2019) have further opened trade and investment opportunities. Mainly automotive parts, machinery, electronics, and chemical products are exported from Slovakia to Japan, while vehicles and electronic components are imported from Japan to Slovakia. Japan is one of the significant non-EU investors in Slovakia. Major Japanese companies operating in Slovakia include: Panasonic, Yazaki and MinebeaMitsumi.

HUNGARY

Hungary and Japan maintain robust relations marked by high-level visits, including Prime Minister Orbán's 2019 trip to Tokyo and multiple ministerial meetings in 2022. Their cooperation spans nuclear energy, with agreements on small modular reactors and water management. Japan ranks among Hungary's top investors, especially in the automotive and electronics sectors, employing around 33,000 people, according to Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó. Cultural ties are strong, featuring several scholarship programs and over 600 Japanese students in Hungary, predominantly in medicine. Public perception is positive, bolstered by active cultural exchanges and sister city events.

LITHUANIA

Economic ties between Lithuania and Japan are relatively weak as of now — only around 16 Japanese firms operate in the country, and overall investments are low. However, according to Consultus Magnus consultancy company, over the past six years, Lithuanian laser exports have grown, with 10–25% of total production now shipped to Japan for use in the medical and aerospace sectors. What is more, political relations are growing stronger, with Japan becoming a strategic partner in the Three Seas Initiative. Interest in Japanese culture is also rising, with more cultural products reaching Lithuania yearly, while cultural exchange programs remain stable ●



Challenges:

Dependence on EU Trade: CE countries are highly dependent on trade within the European Union. Their economic policies and regulations are closely aligned with EU frameworks, including adherence to common rules and standards. That means Japan and other Asian countries must adapt their companies, factories or products to law regulations in the European Union, otherwise they can not invest in CE countries.

Challenges in the Japanese Market: Japan remains a relatively closed market, making it difficult for foreign companies to export there.

V4-Japan Cooperation at Risk: The Visegrád Group (V4) has historically engaged in joint cooperation with Japan. However, recent internal tensions and political disturbances within the V4 have weakened this format, diminishing its appeal and functionality from Japan's perspective. Also, the V4 group is not as attractive as the Three Seas Initiative (which includes more countries from Europe)

and the Japanese side prefers to cooperate with a bigger and stronger initiative.

Impact of New EU Regulations: The introduction of measures such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) extends the scope of environmental responsibility beyond EU-based producers. Companies that manufacture outside the EU but export to it are also affected, potentially complicating trade relations with Japan.

Geopolitical Concerns – Russia: Russia remains a historical and current rival for Japan, with unresolved territorial disputes keeping the countries technically at war. The majority of CE countries have also taken a stance in support of Ukraine against Russian aggression. A potential Russian victory in Ukraine would have serious geopolitical consequences and could indirectly influence Japan's policy toward Europe, including CEE countries.

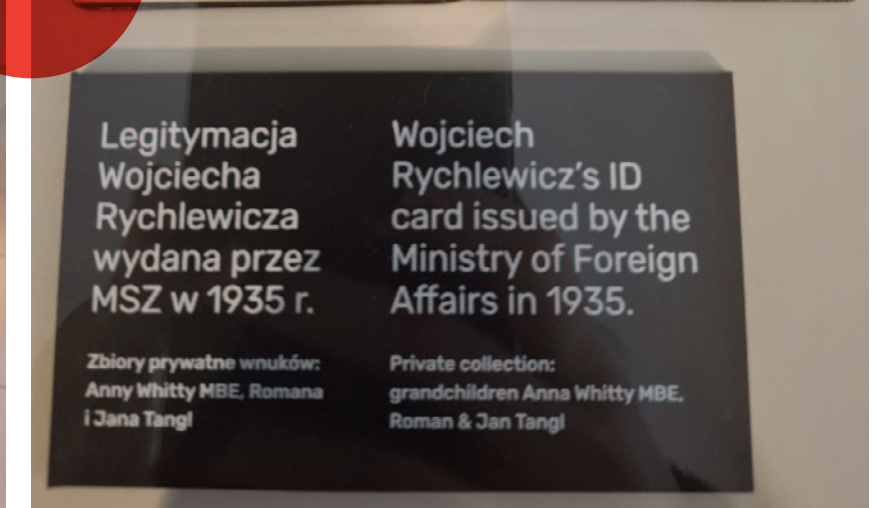
United States Dynamics: Under the Trump administration, US–EU trade relations have become more strained. Future shifts in US foreign and trade policy could impact both CEE and Japanese strategic interests, particularly if policies become more protectionist or unpredictable.

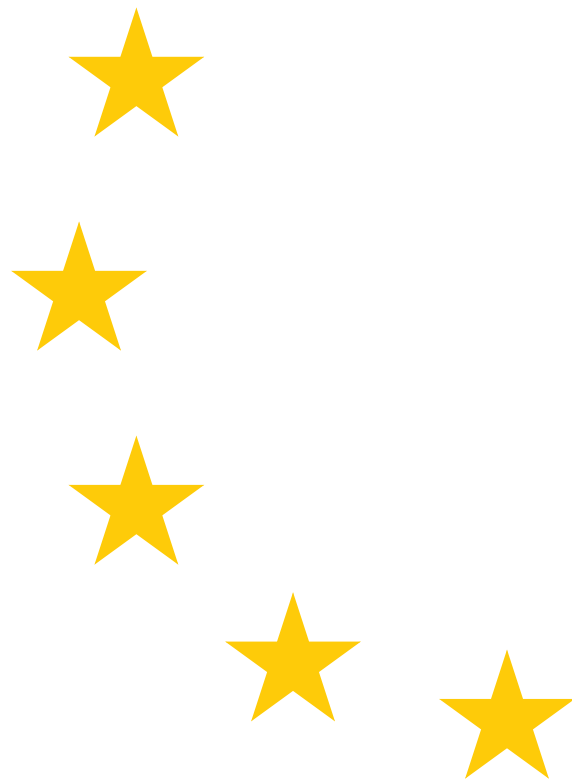
Natural Disasters and Disruptions: Japanese scientists have predicted a massive earthquake with an epicentre in Nankai Trough, which could easily paralyze the country (thousands deaths, colossal reconstruction costs). It would also have complex effects on Japan's global partnerships, including the CEE nations. Additionally, CEE countries have a high incidence of floods, which demolish infrastructure.

Business Culture and Corporate Behavior: Japanese companies often expect local em-

ployees to conform to Japanese working styles, which can lead to dissatisfaction due to differences in work-life balance expectations. Decision-making in Japanese companies tends to be slow and risk-averse. As a result, while CEE countries offer a favorable environment for investment, more aggressive players (such as South Korea or China) are quicker to capitalize on these opportunities. Japanese firms also often rely on indirect communication and have limited proficiency in foreign languages, which can hinder their collaboration abroad.

Cultural differences: may complicate deeper strategic or cultural cooperation. For example, Japanese culture is high context, whereas CEE countries' culture is low context by Edward Hall's model. This can lead to misunderstandings, making cooperation more difficult ●





Perspectives:

Japan and Central European countries have a lot in common. Both sides emphasize democratic governance, the rule of law, and regional security, particularly in response to threats such as the Ukraine conflict. Japan's cooperation with the EU and NATO goals also enhances its strategic compatibility with the region. Additionally, Japan's investments in infrastructure, education, and cultural programs in Central Europe reflect a strategic vision for long-term development, mutual growth and understanding. Initiatives such as the Japan Foundation Budapest (JFBP), which promotes Japanese culture in Hungary. The Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) is a governmental agency which actively supports the expansion of mutually beneficial trade and investment. In Croatia, the automotive company Yasaki represents the largest Japanese investment.

In Poland, over 367 Japanese companies operate across industries including automotive, food processing, energy, and information technology, with firms such as YAGI Poland (a metal components manu-

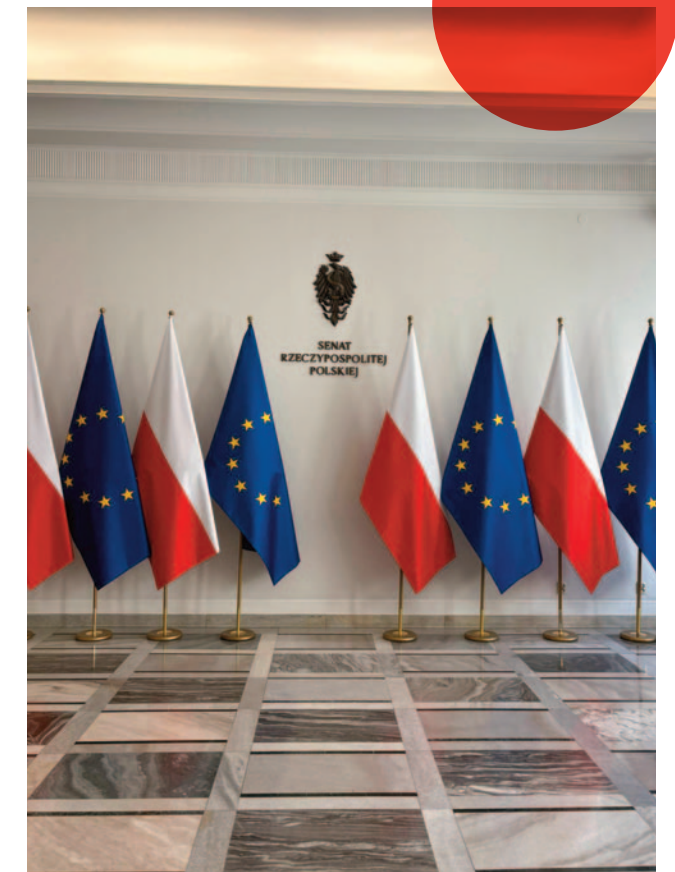
facturer with a 20-year presence). Furthermore, Japan has expressed its commitment to supporting the reconstruction of Ukraine through investments in infrastructure and cultural initiatives.

Despite these shared goals, divergent perspectives do exist. Japanese hierarchical corporate culture often deviates from the more individualistic and flexible work practices in Central Europe, sometimes causing misunderstandings in joint initiatives. Difficulty in communicating (even in English) and different management expectations are recurring challenges. Also, Japan's cautious economic expansion contrasts with the more aggressive strategy of other Asian actors, such as South Korea or China, overall affecting its regional visibility.

For the future, there are many promising opportunities for working together, especially in areas like green energy, national security, as well as new technologies. To make the most of this partnership, both sides need to understand and respect each

other's ways of thinking and working. Communication and cross-cultural awareness are the key to success in realizing the full potential of this partnership

and to avoiding potential loss of the Japan-Central Europe cooperation due to Japan's cautious nature and risk aversion ●



Recommendations:

Building on strong historical foundations, such as the humanitarian efforts of Chiune Sugihara in Lithuania and Tadeusz Romer in Japan during World War II, Japan and the countries of Central Europe (Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Lithuania) should focus on concrete initiatives to enhance cooperation.

One promising step would be the establishment of Japan-CEE Youth Innovation Forums, connecting young entrepreneurs, scientists, and policymakers in fields like green energy, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and healthcare innovation. Sector cooperation could expand based on the 2024 Poland-Japan memorandum on nuclear energy, covering clean energy, health resilience, and smart infrastructure. Public diplomacy should also be strengthened by promoting Japan's cultural and historical contributions in the region through new cultural centers, exhibitions, and joint projects that highlight humanitarian legacies.

Transforming shared democratic values into dynamic partnerships requires a multidimensional approach. Economically, a Japan-CEE Innovation Investment Fund could support renewable energy, smart manufacturing, and healthcare technologies, building on the presence of companies like Toyota, Panasonic, Denso, and Minebea. In science and education, joint R&D centers and dual-degree programs in nuclear energy, healthcare, and digital technologies could tackle demographic and environmental challenges.

Youth and cultural exchanges should deepen these ties. Programs like our “When Japan meets Central Europe” could showcase positive diplomatic engagement, including Sugihara and Romer's legacies, while promoting Japan's evolving image as a modern innovator. Building on existing initiatives such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme, new internships, innovation bootcamps, and cultural ambassador programs could offer young professionals opportunities for real en-

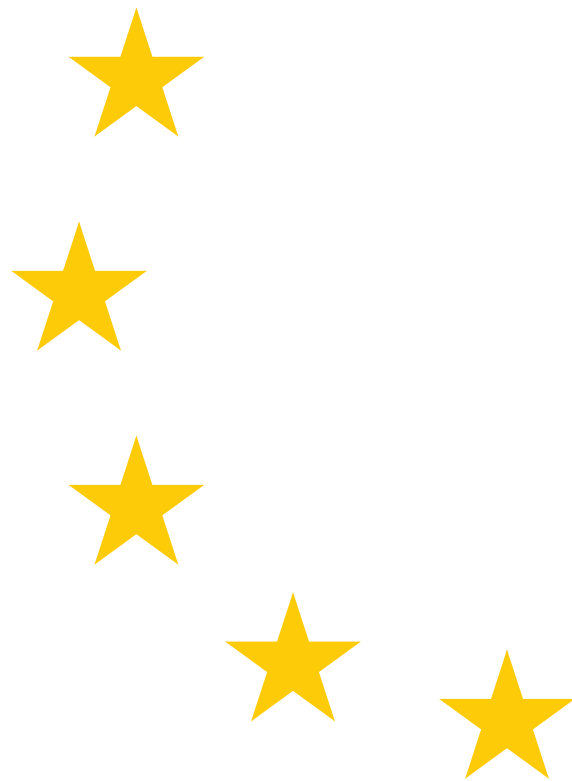
gagement. Storytelling projects, podcasts, and youth-led forums would further promote cooperation and foster resilient societal bonds.

Facing global challenges, Japan and CEE countries should strengthen political and security consultations, focusing on cybersecurity, supply chains, and counter-disinformation. A Japan-CEE Rapid Response Dialogue Platform could coordinate actions during crises, reinforcing shared support for Ukraine and the rules-based international order. In-

tercultural mediation programs in universities and think tanks could also prepare future diplomats to manage conflicts effectively.

Drawing from examples of resilience and solidarity, Japan and the countries of Central Europe can build a sustainable, flexible framework for future-proof cooperation. Empowering young leaders as cultural and economic bridges will be essential to ensuring lasting vitality in Japan-CEE relations ●





Conclusion:

The comprehensive analysis of Japan's evolving partnerships with Central European countries — Poland, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Slovakia — demonstrates that these relationships are built on a deep historical foundation, shared democratic values, and a growing commitment to regional and global stability. Japan's early diplomatic engagements with the region, from recognizing newly independent states to providing humanitarian support during the early 20th century, laid the groundwork for long-term trust and collaboration. Despite the disruptions of global conflicts and ideological divisions during the Cold War, ties were re-established and steadily strengthened in the post-communist era. Today, Japan is seen as a reliable partner, actively investing in infrastructure, technological innovation, education, and cultural programs across Central Europe. The current state of relations highlights a dynamic and promising cooperation across multiple domains. Politically, both sides emphasize democracy, the rule of law, and support for the rules-based international order. Economically, trade and invest-

ment flows continue to expand, particularly in areas such as automotive, green energy, and information technology. Culturally, exchanges have deepened mutual understanding, with initiatives such as student programs, language education, and joint cultural projects. However, several challenges persist, including differing management styles, language barriers, Japan's traditionally cautious economic expansion strategy compared to other Asian actors, instability in the Visegrád Group, regulatory pressures from the EU, and security threats linked to Russia, all of which could complicate future cooperation. We recommend a shift toward more dynamic, risk-tolerant, and youth-driven cooperation. Japan and Central European countries must prioritize building flexible, innovative frameworks such as youth innovation hubs, rapid-response political dialogues, and co-investment platforms in green energy and digital technologies. Business culture exchange programs should be expanded to bridge management differences. Language learning initiatives and cultural sensitivity training must be deepened on both sides to

overcome communication gaps. Japan must also adapt to faster decision-making models if it wants to maintain competitiveness in the CEE region. As young researchers we firmly believe that the future of Japan-CEE relations holds great promise, but only if new generations are empowered to innovate, com-

municate freely, and lead without being bound by outdated structures. Both sides must invest today in the flexibility, trust, and resilience needed in our current times ●



Key Considerations:

Japan-CEE relations have grown steadily year by year, driven by common interests such as trade, technology, and stability, which foster strong diplomatic ties between the countries. At the same time, both sides maintain mutual cultural respect. While occasional differences in foreign policy priorities arise, Japan and CEE countries continue to build a strong partnership grounded in shared democratic values, economic collaboration, and a mutual commitment to regional and global stability.

Economically, the V4 region is attractive to Japan, mainly due to its advantageous geographical location, skilled workforce, lower production

costs and membership of the European Union. Japanese companies have invested heavily in the automotive, electrical and mechanical engineering industries. Trade relations are also supported by the EU-Japan Economic Partnership Agreement, which entered into force in 2019 and has reduced trade barriers.

Cultural and academic ties also play a strong role. There are numerous exchange programs between the countries, interest in studying Japanese is growing, and Japanese culture festivals are regularly organized.

These relations may bring about several benefits, including economic growth, technology transfer, diversification of exports and supply chains, as well as cultural enrichment, although there are also challenges to face. The CEE countries are more dependent on Japanese investments than vice versa. Japanese investors tend to view CEE as a cost-effective manufacturing base near Western Europe, while CEE's skilled professionals seek deeper cooperation as higher-ups in Japanese companies. Language and cultural barriers or competition between the V4 countries themselves in the fight for Japanese capital can also be a problem. Language is more of a soft bar-

rier that affects deeper cooperation, especially in business and work culture. In addition, geopolitical tensions in the wider Asian region can also have an indirect impact on Central European countries.

Overall, however, relations between Japan and the countries of Central Europe are stable, promising, and with growing potential for the future ●

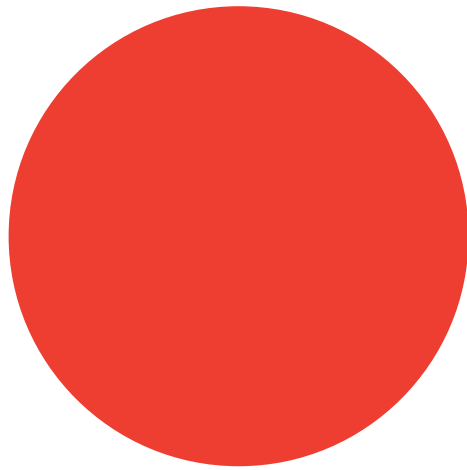
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