



The Future of the Visegrad Group

Ania Skrzypek, Maria Skóra (eds.)

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



Edited by:

Dr. Ania Skrzypek, Senior Research Fellow, Foundation for European Progressive Studies
Dr. Maria Skóra, Senior Project Manager, Das Progressive Zentrum

Project coordinators:

Dr. Lisa Kastner, Policy Advisor, Foundation for European Progressive Studies
Dr. Maria Skóra, Senior Project Manager, Das Progressive Zentrum

For her tremendous support, the editors owe special thanks to
Rosanna Bennett, Administrative Assistant, Foundation for European Progressive Studies.

Graphic design:

Krzysztof Łagutko

Published by:

Foundation for European Progressive Studies
Das Progressive Zentrum

Copyright:

Foundation for European Progressive Studies
Das Progressive Zentrum

Brussels/Berlin September–December 2017

ISBN 978-3-00-058825-9



European Parliament

This book is produced with the financial support of the European Parliament. The present paper does not represent the European Parliament's views but only of the respective author.

The articles collected in this book were written for the purpose of the “Future Scenarios for the Visegrad Group”, a joint project of Das Progressive Zentrum and the Foundation for European Progressive Studies. They do not represent the collective views of FEPS and DPZ views but only of the respective authors. The responsibility of FEPS and DPZ is limited to approving its publication as worthy of consideration of the global progressive movement.

Contents

Foreword	4
I. Mapping the Interests within the V4	
Czechia: From a V4-Enthusiast to a V4-Sceptic and Back Again	6
Tereza Novotná, Zuzana Stuchlíková	
Hungary and the Visegrad Four	13
Tamás Boros	
Poland's European Policy – Drafting Away From the Mainstream	18
Agnieszka Łada	
Slovakia: Squaring the Visegrad Circle	23
Radovan Geist	
II. Future Scenarios for the V4	
Diverging Visions for Europe: EU and Visegrad Group at the Midterm of Legislative Period 2014–2019	29
Ania Skrzypek	
Lessons from 26 years of Visegrad's History	38
Ireneusz Bil	
III. Possible Progressive Alliances	
Czechia: The Rise of Populism and the Crisis of Identity of Centre-Left	44
Miroslav Poche	
The State of Progressive Ideas in Hungary	45
Ildiko Lendvai	
Opinion on the Left in Poland	46
Sławomir Wiatr and Przemysław Potocki	
Slovak social democracy: focus on social issues	47
Ľuboš Blaha	
IV. Epilogue	
The Future of V4: Where Have All the Progressive Ideas Gone and When Will They Come Back?	49
Andrea Pető	
About the authors	54

Foreword: Future Scenarios for the Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group (V4) has lately been in the European spotlight. This once peripheral, regional alliance suddenly proved capable of single-cause impromptu mobilisation within the EU-framework. In times of the European “polycrisis”, when the EU community is facing a profound lack of consent which principles it should follow, we want to examine how sustainable is this alliance and how can it affect the European Union. What future scenario for the V4 we would wish for?

The Visegrad Group was founded in 1991 by the Presidents of the Czechoslovak Republic, Poland, and the Prime Minister of Hungary. After Czechoslovakia’s disintegration in 1993, the Group grew to four countries, including the two independent states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The V4 stood for eliminating the communist bloc’s remnants in Central Europe, overcoming historic animosities and succeeding in social, political, and economic transformation. Fostering European integration was an ultimate objective, as all four countries always believed in being part of the common European cultural, intellectual and historical heritage. This goal was reached in 2004 when they joined the European Union.

Today, the Visegrad group tries to play an active role in the European dialogue, however with different consequences for European integration. Its initial Euro-enthusiasm seems to have weakened as the political situation in the region developed: right-wing conservative backlashes and rising populism noticeable in Western Europe are also reflected in the V4 countries. When the massive influx of migrants to the EU exposed internal mismatches and the lack of a common approach, resulting in political crisis within the Union Community, the Visegrad Group opposed relocation quotas proposed by the European Commission and formulated the idea of “flexible solidarity”, suggesting a voluntary distribution mechanism. Simultaneously, in the debate on Brexit and its consequences, when facing anti-immigrant attitudes and the threat of cutting social benefits of foreign workers in the United Kingdom, the V4 (whose many citizens live and work in the UK) took a strong stand on highlighting the social dimension of European integration. The next opportunity to test the integrity of the Group presents itself in the emerging debate on European labour policies, triggered by the initiative of Emmanuel Macron to reform the posted workers’ directive.

The internal dynamics of the Visegrad Group are fluctuating too. The Group is not even institutionalized in the sense of a formal administration, but it strives to embrace many contradicting interests, which could successfully impair its internal cohesion: diverse attitudes towards Russia, cooling Polish-German relations opening spaces for other bilateral dialogues, strong national-conservative narratives emerging in some countries, not shared by others. Even if the impression of the ‘troublesome’ V4 was strengthened by Poland and Hungary, the Czech and Slovak attitudes towards the EU are not alike. In particular, Slovakia has significantly advanced integration with the EU by joining the Eurozone in 2009. Meanwhile, the centrist-populist Anó party has won the elections in Czechia. Now, the inner ambience of the V4 will most likely to change again.

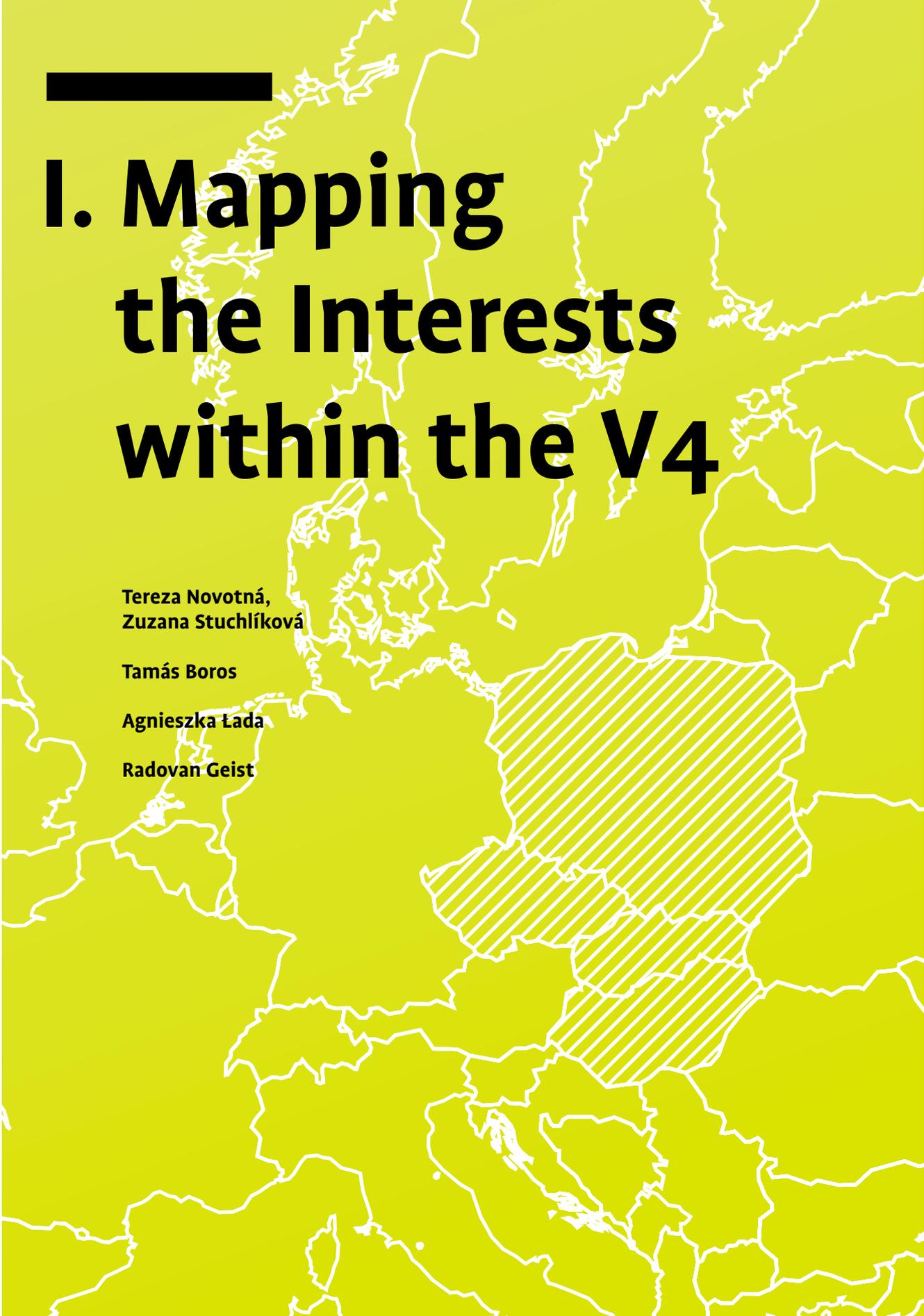
In order to capture that diversity and provide fresh, creative insights, in autumn 2017 the Foundation for European Progressive Studies in cooperation with Das Progressive Zentrum launched a joint project on the future of the Visegrad Group in the European Union. The objective of this initiative was to examine internal developments within the V4 as well as sketch possible scenarios for its engagement at the European level. Additionally, spaces for developing a common agenda to foster European integration and progressive ideas were identified. Thanks to the engagement of distinguished scholars and renowned political figures from the region, this collection presents a more holistic, trans-regional reflection on the Visegrad Group in the European context. The publication not only echoes the main threads of our analysis, but also presents forward-looking conclusions met during the debates held in Berlin and Brussels. We hope that it will help better understand the positions and interests of the four younger member states in question – for the benefit of the whole European Community.

Dr. Ania Skrzypek

Senior Research Fellow, Foundation
for European Progressive Studies

Dr. Maria Skóra

Senior Project Manager, Das Progressive Zentrum



I. Mapping the Interests within the V4

Tereza Novotná,
Zuzana Stuchlíková

Tamás Boros

Agnieszka Łada

Radovan Geist

Tereza Novotná, Zuzana Stuchlíková

Czechia: From a V4-Enthusiast to a V4-Sceptic and Back Again

When Jean-Claude Juncker, the President of the European Commission, presented his *State of the Union* speech in front of the European Parliament in September 2017, the divisions between “East” and “West” of the Union, and the ways in which he would want to see them overcome, were one of the key themes of his address. In his “sixth scenario” for the future of Europe, Juncker spoke about a Union of equals “breathing with both lungs”, East and West, where there are no second-class citizens, no second-class workers and no second-class consumers. This was not, however, what made the headlines in the Czech Republic. Instead, the Czech media focused on Juncker’s line about the Czechs not deserving less cacao in their chocolate, the Slovaks not meriting less fish in their fishfingers and the Hungarians less meat in their meals than their Western counterparts, echoing Central European (CEE) concerns about substandard quality of food in the region¹. In addition, the Czech commentators decried Juncker’s vision of an equal Union as an imposition of a nearly collapsing currency, the euro, upon the sovereign Czech state and Czech koruna².

Although Juncker’s speech could be criticized for a number of reasons, the public reaction in the Czech Republic is emblematic for its relationship with both the EU and the V4. On the one hand, the Czechs have always feared that the EU’s decision-making processes are skewed in favour of Germany and other large member states. Over time, this feeling of vulnerability turned into a sort of an inferiority complex vis-à-vis their colleagues in the West despite being a medium-sized rather than a small member state, impacting the Czech choices for Europe³. Moreover, any attempt to reform and deepen the European integration has usually been seen with a suspicion of serving the interests of the others rather than the Czechs or the EU as a whole.

On the other hand, the Czechs have been keen on emphasising their affinity with other V4 countries either on minor issues of lower importance or as a kind of defensive alliance against the other member states rather than a grouping which could positively influence further developments within the EU. As a result, instead of making the best out of the opportunity that the Commission wants to bridge the differences between the East and West and avoid the V4 being pushed out of the “core” of the EU, the Czechs rejoiced over Juncker’s decision to encourage national regulators to better check the quality of food which could have been done without any Brussels intervention.

This policy paper will therefore firstly argue that the Czech perception of the EU has been formed by the Czechia’s perceived rather than real weaknesses and by what the Czech politicians have been saying about the EU rather than by what the EU has actually been doing. Secondly, the authors suggest that instead of using the V4 as a force for putting forward constructive proposals where the EU should be headed, and therefore position the V4 countries as a source of positive collaboration, the Czechs (and the other V4 members) have been selectively using the V4 to protect themselves from alleged “attacks” by other member states and EU institutions, creating a negative image of the V4 as incurable nay-sayers among the rest of the EU. Thirdly, as much as the V4 cooperation has been failing at the political level, this policy paper shows however that the V4 has in fact been a successful platform for collaboration on technical low-key aspects and hence there is room for translating these achievements from low into high politics. Nonetheless, if this is not going to happen, the authors conclude that, for the Czechs, it would be more beneficial to look for other formats of cooperation with different groups of EU member states rather than sticking to the V4 set-up as the only alternative.

The policy paper proceeds further in these steps. The first section summarises the basic political and economic characteristics of the Czech Republic, while the second section focuses on a brief history of the V4 collaboration from the Czech perspective, including Czechia’s four V4 Presidencies and their priorities; it also details the most recent conflicts within V4 and the Czech stance towards them. The third section outlines

1 Aha!: Šéf Evropské komise: Čechům lepší čokoládu!, 14.09.2017, <http://www.ahaonline.cz/clanek/musite-vedet/138498/sef-evropske-komise-cechum-lepsi-cokoladu.html> (accessed on 20.09.2017)

2 Vladimír Píkora, Návod od EU, jak vespolek zchudnout, Reflex, 14.09.2017, <http://www.reflex.cz/clanek/komentare/81893/ekonom-vladimir-pikora-navod-od-eu-jak-vespolek-zchudnout.html> (accessed on 20.09.2017)

3 Tim Houghton, For Business, for Pleasure or for Necessity? The Czech Republic’s Choices for Europe, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2009, Vol. 61, No. 8, 1371–1392.

public perception of the V4 and the EU in the eyes of Czech citizens. To conclude, the policy paper compares and contrasts the Czech approach to the EU and the V4 and suggests other options as substitute possibilities for the V4 cooperation.

Basic Characteristics of the Czech Republic and the Role of the V4 in the Czech Politics

The Czech Republic is a European country with one of the most turbulent modern histories. In the past century, it went from one of the most prosperous interwar democracies to a hardline totalitarian regime within the Soviet bloc. Fifteen years after the Velvet Revolution of 1989, it joined the EU during the “Big Bang enlargement” of 2004, managing a friendly dissolution of Czechoslovakia in the meantime. By almost all the indicators, the Czech Republic is an average European country. With the number of inhabitants slightly over 10 million, it represents over 2% of the EU population and ranks eleventh among EU member states in terms of its size. With 78.9 thousand square kilometers, Czechia is the EU’s fifteenth largest member state. Measured by GDP per capita, the Czech Republic can be found in the middle of the list: ahead of its regional partners but behind “old” members of the EU⁴. In the V4 context, this is typical: Czechia has usually found itself above the V4 average, such as with low unemployment rates and economy that was fairly quickly transformed⁵ but still playing catch up with its Western colleagues.

Nonetheless, despite relatively good economic results and a medium rather than small size, the Czech perception of its own position has often been one of weakness and vulnerability, particularly vis-à-vis its largest neighbour, Germany, with whom the Czechs share the longest part of their border and a tumultuous and at times controversial history⁶. This, and its post-communist heritage, has been the main reason behind Czechia’s long-term support for regional cooperation, both in the late 1990s during the EU accession period and after its integration into the EU in 2004. In fact, population of the V4 combined is comparable to that of France which is viewed as giving the bloc a significantly stronger voice than individual V4 countries, including the Czech Republic, would have otherwise⁷.

The Czech government, and primarily its Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), is responsible for the making of Czech

foreign policy; the V4 cooperation is therefore in the hands of MFA with the help of the other sectoral ministries⁸. However, although the Czech government has the main say in formulating and executing Czech foreign policy, all three Czech presidents have so far overstepped their constitutional role of a representative figure and, for better or worse, their voices have been heard more loudly on various foreign policy issues, including the V4 cooperation.

On the positive side, the beginnings of V4 are closely linked with the late President Václav Havel. Havel believed that regional cooperation is crucial for strengthening the new democracies and a useful tool for convincing their Western counterparts that the post-communist states are indeed able to participate in the European and transatlantic integration projects⁹. On the other hand, Václav Klaus, the then-prime minister and, later, second president, was one of the most vocal critics of Havel’s value-based approach. Apart from his long-standing personal rivalry with Havel, Klaus’s “Czech Thatcherite”¹⁰ policies were based on his belief in the “invisible” power of a free market¹¹ and resulted in his scepticism towards any form of cooperation that would pursue other than economic goals. During Klaus’s term of office (1992-1998) as a prime minister, V4 cooperation (as much as EU membership in general) was far from being a priority for the Czech government. Instead, the Klaus government focused on creating the CEFTA, a Central European version of the Western EFTA, a loose economic cooperation project. Klaus also kept his distance to the V4 later throughout his presidential term (2003-13)¹². Even these days when Klaus’s views have further radicalised but might actually be converging on certain issues, such as migration, with the stances of some of the V4 leaders in Hungary and Poland, Klaus has not embarked on any closer collaboration with V4 politicians, preferring to engage with and campaign for the likeminded parties in Germany, namely the AfD¹³.

4 European Commission: Living in the EU, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/figures/living_en#tab-2-5 (accessed on 9.09.2017)

5 Jan Boček, 25 let Visegrádu. Jsme Západu blíží?, Czech Radio, http://www.rozhlas.cz/plus/dnesniplus/_zprava/1584261 (accessed on 9.09.2017), V. Dostál, Alleged Czech Discomfort, 19.12.2016, Visegrad Insight, <http://visegradinsight.eu/alleged-czech-discomfort/> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

6 Tim Haughton, For Business, for Pleasure or for Necessity? The Czech Republic’s Choices for Europe, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 2009, Vol. 61, No. 8, 1371–1392; Vladimír Handl, The Visegrad countries and Germany in the Russia-Ukraine crisis: between Differentiation and Closeness, submitted to German Politics for publication.

7 Jan Boček, 25 let Visegrádu. Jsme Západu blíží?, Czech Radio, http://www.rozhlas.cz/plus/dnesniplus/_zprava/1584261 (accessed on 9.09.2017)

8 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic: Visegrádská spolupráce, http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/cr_v_europe/visegrad/index.html (accessed 9.9.2017)

9 Václav Havel, The Visegrad Dream Still Relevant Today, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/havel-vaclav-the> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

10 Sean Hanley, The new right in the new Europe? Unravelling the ideology of “Czech Thatcherism”. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1999, pp. 163–89.

11 There is nonetheless a debate whether this was only Klaus’s rhetoric to shore up votes since privatization of banks and large industries did not take place under his watch, but rather later, under the Social Democratic government of Miloš Zeman, see e.g. John A. Gould, *The Politics of Privatization: Wealth and Power in Postcommunist Europe*, 2011, Lynne Rienner Publishers.

12 Pavel Šaradín, Visegrád, Klausův zásadní obrat, 12.11.2010, Referendum, <http://denikreferendum.cz/clanek/7242-visegrad-klausuv-zasadni-obrat> (accessed on 15.04.2014)

13 AfD Saarland: Václav Klaus: Die AfD braucht besonders in diesem Moment die Einheit, <https://afd.saarland/aktuelles/2017/07/vaclav-klaus-die-afd-braucht-besonders-in-diesem-moment-die-einheit/> (accessed on 20.09.2017) and Die Welt: Tschechischer Ex-Präsident Klaus unterstützt AfD-Wahlkampf, <https://www.welt.de/regionales/mecklenburg-vorpommern/article157790890/Tschechischer-Ex-Praesident-Klaus-unterstuetzt-AfD-Wahlkampf.html> (accessed on 20.09.2017)

Although Miloš Zeman, the current Czech President, has had a much friendlier approach towards the V4 (and the EU) and, in fact, was happy to encourage the V4 cooperation to the country's benefit while he led the government that had negotiated the largest part of the *acquis*¹⁴, the dichotomy between the government and president over who conducts Czech foreign policy has been clear since Zeman took on the presidential role in 2013. Since then, Zeman has deviated from the government's line on foreign policy on numerous occasions, leading to various clashes with Bohuslav Sobotka, the then Social Democratic prime minister. This split was especially profound after the Russian aggression in Ukraine and annexation of Crimea¹⁵ when President Zeman expressed his strong sympathies for the Russian position, going against not only his own government but also against other V4 countries, Poland in particular¹⁶.

History of the V4 Collaboration from the Czech Perspective

The creation of the V4 in 1991 was primarily a consequence of close ties among political elites at that time, the Pole Lech Walesa, the Czech Václav Havel and the Hungarian József Antall, who knew one another well from their previous struggles against the communist regimes¹⁷. Their main objective was to overcome historical animosities among the CEE countries through a regional cooperation¹⁸. However, as outlined above, during the early 1990s, particularly thanks to the Czech disengagement under Václav Klaus, the V4 group was not very active; it became relevant again once the CEE countries started their EU accession negotiations in 1998. The key idea was to cooperate in the pre-accession procedures, share progress and best practices and, to a certain extent, present itself as a group vis-à-vis the EU¹⁹. Particularly Slovakia benefitted from the other V4 countries' experience.

After the Slovaks voted out the government under Vladimír Mečiar, the new pro-EU administration more or less copy and pasted the laws that the others, especially the Czechs, implemented within their national legislations in order to speed up the *acquis* harmonisation²⁰. The Czechs, in contrast, used the fact that the "Big Bang" enlargement was unlikely to happen without Poland and during the final Copenhagen summit insisted on getting comparable financial conditions that the Poles had achieved²¹.

After all, four V4 countries became members of the EU in 2004, the question about the role of V4 cooperation came about again. It soon became clear that a certain degree of coordination within the EU would be useful, especially in the European Parliament (EP) where the region would often share similar interests. However, voting patterns in the EP in the end were mostly split along party rather than regional lines and, in addition to a lacking experience and contacts within the EU, the V4 non-cooperation rather than collaboration was also reflected in a poor representation in the high echelons of the EP²² with the overall V4 position slightly improving in the current legislative period.

Until 2009 when an official V4 group of heads of states and governments was established to meet before every European Council summit and to come up with a joint position²³, the V4 was barely functioning as an independent grouping at the highest EU level. This is mainly due to the fact that, apart from the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) that was established in 2000 to promote educational, research and civil society partnerships among the V4, political cooperation has had no formal structures. As a result, it has depended more on personal ties among the actors and hence on ad-hoc willingness to find a common ground among the V4 leaders.

Because of this lacking institutionalisation the V4 cooperation often ended up focusing either on low-level technical aspects or on a controversial topic.

Because of this lacking institutionalisation, as well as due to a number of topics where there was simply no consensus, the V4 cooperation often ended up focusing either on low-level technical aspects, such as a Visegrad Patent Institute and the current issue of the quality of the foodstuffs,

14 Tereza Novotná, *Negotiating the Accession: How Germany Unified and the EU Enlarged*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015.

15 Mateusz Gniazdowski, Jakub Groszkowski, Andrzej Sadecki, *A Visegrad cacophony over the conflict between Russia and Ukraine*, Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-09-10/a-visegrad-cacophony-over-conflict-between-russia-and-ukraine> (accessed on 9.09.2017); DTV: Zeman bránil před velvyslanci Visegrád a postěžoval si na NATO, 30.8.2017, <https://video.aktualne.cz/zeman-branil-pred-ceskymi-velvyslanci-visegrad-a-postezoval/r-03fb209c8d9b1e7bce3002590604f2e/> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

16 Edward Lucas, *Grappling with irrelevance*, Politico, 4.03.2014, <http://www.politico.eu/article/grappling-with-irrelevance/> (accessed on 9.09.2017); Vladimír Handl, *The Visegrad countries and Germany in the Russia-Ukraine crisis: between Differentiation and Closeness*, submitted to German Politics for publication.

17 Jan Boček, 25 let Visegrádu. Jsme Západu blíže?, Czech Radio, http://www.rozhlas.cz/plus/dnesniplus/_zprava/1584261 (accessed on 9.09.2017)

18 Václav Havel, *The Visegrad Dream Still Relevant Today*, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/havel-vaclav-the> (accessed on 9.09.2017); Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Visegrádská spolupráce*, http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/cr_v_evrope/visegrad/index.html (accessed on 9.09.2017)

19 Ibid.

20 See Milada Anna Vachudova, *Europe Undivided. Democracy, Leverage and Integration after Communism*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

21 Tereza Novotná, *Negotiating the Accession: How Germany Unified and the EU Enlarged*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2015, pp. 145-154.

22 I. Voller Sczenci, *The Visegrad Group in Brussels, 25 Years of the Visegrad Cooperation*, In Focus, No. 1, Antall József Knowledge Centre, pp. 54-55.

23 Ibid. Under Czech EU Presidency.

or on a controversial topic that was able to unite all V4 “against everyone else” as in the case of the refugee relocation scheme. So far at the political level, the V4 has therefore been unable to bring new ideas to the EU table despite having common interests (e.g. support for international trade, strengthening of the European Defense and V4 Battlegroup) and experiences (e.g. tackling cyber security) that could be of an interest to other EU member states.

Objectives and Priorities of the Czech V4 Presidencies after the 2004 EU Accession

Since the V4 countries joined the EU in 2004, the Czech Republic held the Presidency of the V4 Group four times: in 2003/2004, 2007/2008, 2011/2012 and, most recently, in 2015/2016. Each Presidency presents its programme which is then consensually adopted by all four V4 members²⁴. Nonetheless, the presiding country sets the agenda.

Since the Czech Republic was the first country to hold the V4 Presidency after EU accession, its key objective was to work out a new rationale for the V4 cooperation²⁵. The importance of continuing the V4 cooperation was confirmed by the Strategy of the Czech Republic’s Foreign Policy²⁶ for years 2003-6. This Strategy was adopted by the government of Prime Minister Špidla who was in power when the EU accession negotiations were finalised. Nevertheless, this governmental document does not further specify any priority topics for the future of V4 which corresponds with the fact that the V4 cooperation has never been formalised and hence issues of concern were defined along the way, once they became feasible or pressing. The Czech priorities for the 2003/2004 V4 Presidency²⁷ therefore focused on broad but vague goals of defining the future objectives and tools of the V4 collaboration, including the activities of the IVF. At the political level, the only more tangible area included a mutual support for the accession to the Schengen area which was another milestone on the road to the EU’s full membership that all V4 countries needed to work on.

The second Czech V4 Presidency (2007/8) revolved around the idea of deepening the V4 cooperation at the general level

(e.g. via better coordination within the EU and development of a V4 communication strategy) and sectoral level (i.e. cooperation among ministries responsible for individual policies such as foreign policy, transport, culture, trade and industry, environment, education, finance, social affairs, regional policy, tourism, agriculture etc.)²⁸. Although lower technical level cooperation brought some successes, including through the IVF, political cooperation did not move forward much.

The third Czech V4 Presidency (2011/12) was primarily spurred by two foreign policy challenges in the neighbourhood East and South of the EU that took place in the previous four years: the 2009 Ukrainian gas (and therefore energy) crisis and the 2011 Arab Spring. In addition, the Czechs also drew on their experience from their first EU Presidency in the former half of 2009²⁹. To some extent, the 2011/2012 programme³⁰ was Czechia’s first (and largely last) attempt to put a political flavour on usually bland technical presidency programmes. The Czechs therefore wanted the V4 to work closely on regional political priorities (the Eastern Partnership which was launched during the 2009 Czech EU Presidency, further enlargement towards the Western Balkans and energy security and infrastructure which was related to the Russian supplies via Ukraine), but also on wider foreign policy objectives, such as the Southern neighbourhood and strengthening of the transatlantic relations.

Given the creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), a new EU-level diplomatic service in 2010/11, the Czechs proposed mutual support for institutional personal candidacies even though this effort has not materialised, leading to under-representation of CEE countries within the EEAS, particularly in the leading positions³¹. Lastly, in addition to expanding the IVF to support V4 think tanks, the Czechs pushed for the creation of a Platform of European Memory and Conscience which was to be modelled on activities of the Czech Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, bringing together 55 public and private institutions from across the EU and the world to research, document and raise awareness about the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century³², which is one of the most promising and concrete V4 projects financed through IVF.

24 Michal Kořan, *Státy Visegrádské skupiny a Rakousko v české zahraniční politice, in Česká zahraniční politika v roce 2007*, Michal Kořan et al. (Praha: Ústav mezinárodních vztahů, 2008), pp. 115.

25 The results of these discussions were embedded in two documents that were adopted in Czechia’s city of Kroměříž in 2004: “Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrád Group countries after their accession to the European Union” and “Guidelines on Future of Visegrad Cooperation”.

26 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Koncepce české zahraniční politiky pro léta 2003-2006*, http://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/zahranicni_vztahy/vyrocní_zpravy_a_dokumenty/poskytnute_informace/koncepce_zahranicni_politiky_ceske.html (accessed on 9.09.2017)

27 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Programme of the Czech Republic’s V4 Presidency (July 2003 – June 2004)*, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/2003-2004-czech-110412> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

28 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (June 2007 – June 2008)*, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/2007-2008-czech-110412> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

29 Vít Benes, Jan Karlas, *The Czech Presidency*. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 48, pp. 69-80.

30 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, *Innovative Visegrad, Programme of the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2011-2012*, Official Webpage of the Visegrad Group, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidencyprograms/innovative-visegrad> (accessed on 15.04.2014)

31 Tereza Novotná, *Who’s in Charge? Member States, Eu Institutions and the European External Action Service*, ISPI Policy Brief No. 228, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/whos-charge-member-states-eu-institutions-and-european-external-action-service-11338%20> (accessed on 8.10.2014)

32 See the Platform’s official website: <https://www.memoryandconscience.eu/>

The latest Czech V4 Presidency (2015/2016)³³ had, perhaps a bit ironically, “V4 Trust” as its main motto. Although migration was not initially planned as one of its top priorities, the presidency coincided with the height of the refugee and migration crisis in Europe in the summer and autumn of 2015 and migration quickly became the most urgent topic. Given its chairmanship, Czech leaders were responsible for negotiating and formulating the bloc’s common V4 position on the issue³⁴. Although the rhetoric of the Czech government led by Sobotka has initially been less antagonistic than that of Hungary’s Viktor Orbán or Slovakia’s Robert Fico³⁵ (who was moreover facing the elections in March 2016) and the Czechs initially used a more nuanced language, public perception of the refugees and migrants were very similar in all V4 states throughout the crisis (and not too different from those in the “new” Länder in the East of Germany). In the end, the Czechs led the V4 hardline approach to the temporary relocation mechanism proposed by the European Commission, particularly disputing the “compulsory” rather than merely “voluntary” stipulations of it, even though they opted not to join Hungary and Slovakia in submitting their appeal to the Court of Justice of the EU against the mechanism³⁶.

On the one hand, this ultimate V4 opposition united all V4 countries around a single political theme in an unprecedented way which, as we observed before, had not happened before. As a result of sticking to the V4 position, the EU institutions and other EU member states have, for the first time, fully acknowledged the existence of the V4 grouping (and its Czech V4 Presidency). Yet the V4’s stubborn resistance towards the relocation scheme effectively created an image of V4 countries as perennial troublemakers, with Czechia losing the “trust” (as highlighted in its presidency slogan) of other EU member states. Nevertheless, even in such a problematic environment, the Czech Republic managed to pursue some of its original V4 Presidency priorities³⁷, including its emphasis on the Energy Union, Digital Agenda and combatting tax fraud and evasion that were, in turn, appreciated by the others even if overshadowed by the migration issue.

Most recently, political developments related to the rule of law in Poland and Hungary constitute a political challenge not only to the unity of the V4 group (and the EU), but also to the V4 policies of the Czech government. In this respect, the Czech line has been weak but consistent, i.e. to avoid any controversy at all costs. At worst, Czech politicians remain silent on issues such as the CEU and anti-NGO laws and judicial shenanigans in the neighbouring countries. At best, the Czechs attempt to present themselves as a bridge between the real villains (Hungary and Poland) and the rest of the EU. Nonetheless, if there is a V4 country that has a chance to serve as a conduit between both sides, or even to be a part of the “core” rather than outer circle of the EU, it is Slovakia with its membership in the Eurozone and Prime Minister Fico who has already declared that he wants the Slovaks to be in. The Czech Sobotka-led government tried to quickly save what it could with its bid for an observer status within the Eurogroup³⁸. However, with far-reaching reform proposals by French President Macron and re-elected German Chancellor Merkel, this Czech effort might be too little and too late.

Moreover, as a result of the Czech general elections in the late-October 2017, the incoming Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, a controversial billionaire who has been accused of defrauding the EU funds as well as collaborating with the pre-1989 Czechoslovak secret police, is set to lead a minority government that will for its confidence depend on two fringe parties, the Communists and a far-right anti-Islam and anti-immigrant SPD party. Even though Babiš, in contrast to other V4 prime ministers, has been considered much more of a pragmatist than an ideologue³⁹ and his ANO party has been a member of the EP’s ALDE liberal pro-federalist group, it is unlikely that he would advocate for more Czech solidarity in the migration question and will probably oppose the Czech Republic joining the Eurozone within his term of office. Although we may only speculate at this point what the new government’s approach to the V4 cooperation will be, if the Czechs are forced to choose between rejecting the Polish and Hungarian stances or moving towards the others, they may actually shift closer to the side of the V4’s two “rogue states” rather than opting for the mainstream as the Slovaks do, matching the Czech public opinion on migration and the EU as illustrated in the next section.

With V4, Against All? The Czechs’ Opinion about EU Membership and the V4

Although the Czech Republic (and other V4 states) have gained immensely from EU membership, public perception of the benefits of EU membership in the Czech Republic is

33 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Program českého předsednictví ve Visegrádské skupině v letech 2015-2016, https://www.vlada.cz/cz/evropske-zalezitosti/predsednictvi_cr_v4/program-ceskeho-predsednictvi-ve-visegradske-skupine-v-letech-2015-2016-132491/ (accessed on 9.09.2017)

34 Vít Dostál, Alleged Czech Discomfort, Visegrad Insight, 19.12.2016, <http://visegradinsight.eu/alleged-czech-discomfort/> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

35 Ibid.

36 Nevertheless, the Czechs may end up before the CJEU in any case given the fact that Czechia (together with Hungary and Poland but without Slovakia) is subject to the infringement procedure launched by the European Commission for not complying with the temporary emergency relocation mechanism. See here: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-1607_en.htm

37 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, Program českého předsednictví ve Visegrádské skupině v letech 2015-2016, https://www.vlada.cz/cz/evropske-zalezitosti/predsednictvi_cr_v4/program-ceskeho-predsednictvi-ve-visegradske-skupine-v-letech-2015-2016-132491/ (accessed on 9.09.2017)

38 EU Observer: Czechs want observer status in Eurogroup meetings, <https://euobserver.com/tickers/138772> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

39 Milan Nič, Vít Dostál, Andrej Babiš is not Central Europe’s Game-Changer, DGAPstandpunkt No. 15, October 2017, <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/30111> (accessed on 4.12.2017)

at best lukewarm. Various public opinion polls from Eurobarometer through independent foundations up to Czech pollsters show that the Czechs are the “nation of Eurosceptics”, often being more Eurosceptic than the Brits. For instance, in an FES study of the Czechs, Dutch, French, Germans, Italians, Slovaks, Spaniards and Swedes, the Czechs rank the lowest on questions related to EU membership: only 25% of them (in contrast to 64% of the Germans and 52% of the Slovaks) think that the advantages of EU membership outweigh the disadvantages which is in fact a jump by 12% since 2015 when the figure stood as low as 13%⁴⁰. Similarly, the Prague’s Sociological Institute (CVVM) has inquired whether the Czechs personally agree with EU membership. In June 2017, about 56% of the Czechs definitely or rather approved EU membership which is a majority of population but still far below the endorsement by other V4 citizens: 74% of the Slovaks, 82% of the Hungarians and 88% of the Poles⁴¹.

Analyzing the full range of reasons for such disaffection with EU membership in the Czech Republic would suffice for a separate article, here suffices to focus on issues related to the questions that were examined above. Firstly, the “communicative discourse”⁴² between the Czech elites and the public has always been tainted by the legacy of Václav Klaus (and his original party) who not only advocated for the British Conservative-style economic policies but also pursued an ambivalent policy and rhetoric towards the EU⁴³. Secondly, as much as the Czechs complained about being ruled “from Moscow”, since the EU accession, they have grumbled about being run “from Brussels” (which is supposed to be controlled by Berlin) without having any input into it. This misgiving is reflected in another poll from summer 2017: 76% of the Czechs believe that they do not have any influence on decisions and actions taken by the EU⁴⁴. Thirdly, as much as in other EU member states, the Czechs have had a hard time understanding how the EU works and what direct profits they receive. This is partly different among the youth which welcomes freedom to study (63% of the Czech youth) and freedom to settle and work in another EU country (60%) but other advantages, such as money from structural funds, are much less appreciated (37%), in contrast to for instance the

Poles (58%)⁴⁵, probably because of various Czech corruption scandals and an inability to use the EU funding in full.

Even though the Czech Republic has been hit neither by the Eurozone crisis nor by any terrorist attack nor has experienced any influx of refugees and migrants through its borders (as Hungary did in 2015)⁴⁶, in the most recent period, the Czechs have been linking their opinions about the crises with their views on the EU: for 76% of the Czechs, refugee policy should be the priority policy to be tackled most urgently by the EU (almost equally with the Slovaks at 75% but much higher than the Swedes with 54%, the Italians with 47% and the Germans at 30%)⁴⁷. In contrast to generally more positive views of the EU among younger generations, migration issues however create the same resentment across generations in the V4: 70% of young Czechs (and 75% of the Slovaks, 73% of the Poles and 72% of the Hungarians) claim that their country should not accept any refugees at all⁴⁸. While 65% of the youth in Czechia, 73% in Slovakia, 58% in Poland and 78% in Hungary⁴⁹ rather disagree with the proposition that migrants contribute to the economic growth and general prosperity in their country, clearly seeing free movement and solidarity as a one-way street.

The V4 youth starts linking the crises with their trust in the EU as such.

As discussed above, the refugee and migration crisis has brought the V4 cooperation closer together at the political level to the extent that has never taken place before; it has also seen the positions of the V4 publics converging. No matter our stance towards the efficiency of the EU asylum system, the disturbing aspect nevertheless is that even the young people in the V4 countries who have much more personal experience with four freedoms reject any protection for the refugees and doubt any potential benefits that migrants could bring to European societies. Moreover, perhaps even more worryingly, even the V4 youth starts linking the crises with their trust in the EU as such. At the moment, it therefore

40 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: What holds Europe together? The EU in the wake of Brexit – A representative eight-country study of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, conducted by policy matters, 2017, p.6, 7, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/13506.pdf> (accessed on 25.09.2017)

41 CVVM SOU AV CR: Názory na EU v středoevropském srovnání – léto 2017, summer 2017, pp. 1 https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4396/f9/pm170814.pdf (accessed on 30.09.2017)

42 Vivien A. Schmidt, Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse, *Annual Review of Political Science*, no. 11 (2008), pp. 303-26.

43 Tereza Novotná, The Eastern Enlargement of the EU: Czech and Slovak Experience, *Journal of Comparative European Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1, May 2007, pp. 51-63.

44 CVVM SOU AV CR, Názory na EU v středoevropském srovnání – léto 2017, summer 2017, pp. 2, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form2content/documents/c2/a4396/f9/pm170814.pdf (accessed on 30.09.2017)

45 Łukasz Wenerski: EU Benefits according to Young People, *Visegrad Insight*, 2017, Vol. 10, No.1, pp. 86.

46 Tim Haughton, Central and Eastern Europe: The Sacrifices of Solidarity, the Discomforts of Diversity, and the Vexations of Vulnerabilities. In Dinan, D., Nugent, N. and Paterson, W.E. (eds.) *The European Union in Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), 2017, pp. 253-68.

47 Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung: What holds Europe together? The EU in the wake of Brexit – A representative eight-country study of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, conducted by policy matters, 2017, p.11, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/13506.pdf> (accessed on 25.09.2017)

48 Bertelsmann Stiftung: Love it, leave it or change it? Junge Europäer in Mittel- und Osteuropa bekennen sich zur EU, sehen aber Notwendigkeit der Reformen, Policy Brief, February 2017, pp. 8, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/EZ_flashlight_europe_2017_02_DT.pdf (accessed on 25.09.2017)

49 Ibid., pp. 6.

seems that as much as it happened with the Czech (and other V4) politicians, the V4 publics have also formed an informal alliance “Visegrad against all” which might prove to be the most difficult factor to change in the future.

Conclusion: The Czech Republic and the Future of V4 Cooperation

The Czech relationship with its V4 neighbours has always been going through waves of passion and apathy, if not refutation. The Czechs started as V4-enthusiasts under Havel, then turned into V4-sceptics with Klaus in the 1990s and moved back to be avid V4-supporters in the last years. To some extent, the Czech-V4 connection matches the way in which Czech national leaders bond with the EU. Although there is only a minority of those who would advocate for a “Czexit” and even Klaus has clearly seen that for a country in the heart of Europe there was no alternative to EU membership, the Czech EU discourse is often spiced with populist and Eurosceptic appeals⁵⁰, fueling the view that “those at the top” in Brussels decide “about us without us”.⁵¹ This lack of interest and knowledge how the EU works among the Czech public is complemented by no real vision by Czech leaders of what they would like to accomplish within the EU and how these objectives could be achieved.

Similarly, in the V4 context, Czech politicians have always cherished the possibility of having a dialogue with other CEE countries. Nonetheless, they have primarily valued the sheer existence of such collaboration: the Czech V4 priorities have never been very explicit nor easy to identify. For the most part, the V4 cooperation has therefore been minimal at the political level despite producing successful projects particularly through IVF which currently has an 8-million-euro budget⁵², a large sum from the CEE perspective. It has therefore been a shame that, partly due to the Czech reluctance, the V4 countries have not been able to offer any significant positive agenda to other EU member states despite sharing similar views on issues ranging from international free trade through European defense and transatlantic relations up to cyber issues. A productive practical cooperation at the V4 level has not therefore transformed itself into unity at the political level – with the most recent exception of resistance against the asylum seekers quota system. However, as shown above, using the V4 as a platform for confrontation rather than for making constructive proposals is

Using the V4 as a platform for confrontation rather than for making constructive proposals is not the best way to portray itself as a trustworthy partner within the EU.

not the best way to portray itself as a trustworthy partner within the EU and, in the long run, goes against the interest of the Czech Republic.

The Czech Sobotka’s government took some steps in changing its direction on V4 and supported the so-called Slavkov or Austerlitz cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Republics and Austria. In fact, during his first visit to Central Europe, French President Macron met with the Czechs and Slovaks rather than the full V4⁵³, albeit giving the name of “Austerlitz”, a slightly unfortunate Napoleonic connotation. Similarly, the Czechs opened a strategic dialogue with Germany in 2015⁵⁴ and, in June 2017, the Benelux countries met with the entire V4⁵⁵, offering another potential alternative. Lastly, the Czechs can also look further to the East and South of their borders where Slovenia could be a convenient ally or, as in the case of Macron’s visit, team up with Romania and/or Bulgaria. Particularly if Poland and Hungary continue to drift away from the EU mainstream due to their domestic situation, the Czechs would therefore be well advised to look for other forms of regional cooperation than clinging to the V4. As it was the case in the past, it is perhaps time that the Czechs turn into V4-sceptics yet again. ●

50 For a distinction between “populism” and “populist appeals” as applied to the case of Slovakia, see K. Deegan-Krause and T. Haughton, *Toward a More Useful Conceptualization of Populism: Types and Degrees of Populist Appeals in the Case of Slovakia*, *Politics & Policy*, 2009, Volume 37, pp. 821-841.

51 Tereza Novotná, *The Eastern Enlargement of the EU: Czech and Slovak Experience*, *Journal of Comparative European Research*, Vol. 3, No. 1, May 2007, pp. 51-63.

52 Peter Dobrowiecki, *Interview with Veronika Antall-Horvath, 25 Years of the Visegrad Cooperation*, *In Focus*, No. 1, Antall József Knowledge Centre, pp. 48-49.

53 *Financial Times*: Emmanuel Macron wins eastern European support for EU labour reforms, 23.08.2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/2e49fbcc-8817-11e7-bf50-e1c239b45787> (accessed on 30.09.2017)

54 Vít Dostál, *Alleged Czech Discomfort*, *Visegrad Insight*, 19.12.2016, <http://visegradinsight.eu/alleged-czech-discomfort/> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

55 *The Prague Daily Monitor*: Visegrad Four-Benelux meeting was historic, PM Sobotka says, 20.06.2017, <http://praguemonitor.com/2017/06/20/visegrad-four-benelux-meeting-was-historic-pm-sobotka-says> (accessed on 30.09.2017)

Tamás Boros

Hungary and the Visegrad Four

Hungary: A Former Top Performer in the V4 is Falling Behind

It was in 1335 that King Charles I (also known as Charles Robert) of Hungary hosted a royal conference in Visegrád, to which he invited Casimir III the Great of Poland and the Czech King John of Bohemia. At the time, the Kingdom of Hungary was one of the leading economic powers in Europe and a rising political power in the region. In the nearly 700 years that have passed, Hungary was repeatedly robbed of its sovereignty and regained it over and over again; it has gone through cycles of economic collapse and resurgence; and it integrated into the western European economy only to be torn out of it again. During the period of state socialism following World War II, Hungary became a poster child of sorts for a different type of socialism within the Communist bloc, in terms of both its economic and political development. After regime transition in 1989/1990, Hungary managed to hold on to its status as the model pupil within the central and eastern European region: It appeared to incorporate the fundamental pillars of European liberal democracy into its own political system at astonishing speed and it created a stable political environment while it remained comparatively advanced economically – in terms of GDP per capita as well. When on 15 February 1991 the countries that were then known as the Visegrad Three adopted the Visegrad Declaration – which was signed on behalf of Hungary by the conservative prime minister at the time, József Antall – it seemed unequivocally clear that the

countries wished to fully rejoin the West, that is, the group of liberal democratic countries, as soon as possible.

In the 2000s, however, the excessively rapid and elitist transition to a market economy and to liberal democracy, which often simply disregarded the country's structural problems, coupled with a series of flawed economic policies and the growing social dissatisfaction that followed in the wake of these developments, ended up derailing Hungary from what had previously seemed to be its preordained path. Following Hungary's accession to the EU, economic growth stalled, domestic political conflicts intensified, the government and the state weakened while political extremists gained in strength. By 2016, the result was that, among the four Visegrad countries, Hungary experienced the lowest level of total GDP growth in the period since 1989, with only 40% growth, which is significantly below the level observed in the Czech Republic (51%), Slovakia (83%) and Poland (116%). Consequently, Hungary has now dropped to last place in the region in terms of GDP per capita; GDP per capita in Hungary is 68% of the EU average, in Poland it is 69%, in Slovakia it is 77%, and in the Czech Republic it is 85%. Not since statistics about the size of the Hungarian and Polish economies have been measured has it happened that an average Polish citizen was better off than his/her Hungarian counterpart. The situation is similar in terms of national debt and average salaries, although at the same time Hungary has the highest minimum wage after Poland.

	Population (millions)	GDP in 2016 (EUR billions)	Real expenditure per capita in 2016 (in PPS, in EUR)	National debt in relation to the GDP in 2016	Employment rate in 2016 (age group 20-64)	Human Development Index Rank
Hungary	9.9	112.4	19,500	74.1%	75% (including public workers)	43rd
Czech Republic	10.5	174.4	25,400	37.2%	76.7%	28th
Poland	38.5	424.3	20,100	54.3%	71%	36th
Slovakia	5.4	80.9	22,400	51.9%	72%	40th

Table 1, key figures of V4 countries¹

¹ See: Eurostat, GDP and main components (output, expenditure and income), http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=namq_10_gdp&lang=en (accessed on 19.12.2017)

As a consequence of the derailed economic policies of the left-liberal parties that governed Hungary between 2006 and 2009 and of the global financial crisis, Hungary was forced to take out an IMF-EU loan that required the government to introduce austerity measures, which further boosted public dissatisfaction with market economy, democracy and the “West” (that is, the free market, the slow process of decision making, and the protection of minorities) in general.

It was amidst this period marked by political and economic uncertainty that the right-wing Fidesz party led by Viktor Orbán won the election of 2010. The prime minister, who has been in charge ever since, broke decisively with his predecessors’ understanding of democracy as well as their foreign policies. He not only sensed the society’s growing ambivalence towards western values (free market, capitalism, liberalism) and increasing wariness towards the ideals that had inspired the regime transition in Hungary, but increasingly fostered such sentiments and fomented further unrest against the values that had served as the previous pillars of the political self-understanding of post-transition Hungary. Orbán scapegoated the institutions of the European Union and the IMF, along with liberal values, for the problems that Hungary was facing and proclaimed that the country would henceforth pursue a special Hungarian/central and eastern European model, in which the cooperation between Visegrad countries would play a preeminent role. At the same time, however, Orbán, who is far more nationalistic, confrontational, authoritarian, ambitious and in some sense also more talented than his predecessors, put the country’s economic macro indicators in order, accelerated the use of EU funds and put the country back onto a growth path.

Hungarian economic forecast		
Indicators	2017	2018
GDP growth (% ,yoy)	3.6	3.5
Inflation (% ,yoy)	2.9	3.2
Unemployment (%)	4.1	3.9
Gross public debt (% of GDP)	72.6	71.2

Table 2, Hungarian economic forecast²

Orbán dared and proved capable of implementing numerous economic reforms that would have brought his predecessors down. His rhetorical focus on nationalism and perceived enemies helped him distract the public’s attention from his basically neoliberal economic policies aimed particularly at benefitting the upper middle class. While so doing, he also rendered obsolete – without saying so outright – the key values underlying the Visegrad Declaration, which had been adopted 20 years earlier. The opposition to dictatorial

aspirations, the strengthening of democracy, Euro-Atlantic integration, and economic growth based on a free market economy are outdated ideas now.

The Orbán model has grown in popularity throughout the region for several reasons. In these countries, with their mere few decades of democratic experience and a pervasive disenchantment with the post-transition period, where the middle-class is weak and unaccustomed to standing up to the powers that be, politicians have found it easy to incite the public against the “free market”, “liberal democracy”, the “economic elites” or various social minorities. Politicians in the region began to imitate Orbán because they saw that it was easier to win elections and stay in power if they resorted to populist rhetoric, restricted political competition and created enemies instead of making new economic promises.

Overall, after severe economic and political crises, Hungary transformed itself from the westernised model pupil of the V4 region into a stable but by no means extraordinarily successful country economically, and a backward-oriented one politically, and it has positioned itself firmly against democratic values and social progress. The Orbán government, which has committed itself to a peculiar brand of central European values that diverges both from the western European and the eastern European social model, apparently wishes to remain a part of the European Union as it designs its own right-wing/illiberal model of development, which it seeks to “export” into the other countries of the Visegrad region.

Hungary and the European Union: With You but Against You

In the 1990s and early 2000s, Hungary’s European integration was the most sought-after objective for the entire Hungarian political elite. EU accession and convergence with the West played a preeminent role especially in the communication of left-liberal governments. Correspondingly, the speed of accession talks accelerated at the time; Hungary joined the Schengen Zone, and among the 27 member states of the EU, Hungary was the first to ratify the Lisbon Treaty. Nevertheless, following EU accession in 2004, the increasingly deteriorating economic situation rendered hopeless the prospect of Hungary joining the Eurozone as well, while at the same time it also led to a disillusionment in the Hungarian public concerning the EU. The overwhelming majority of the Hungarian population had hoped that joining the European Union would lead to a convergence in their standards of living to the European average. Hungarians wanted to live like Austrians, but instead – for completely unrelated reasons – the country’s economic indicators plummeted within a few years of Hungary’s EU accession. There was a widespread perception that the *West had failed Hungarians – as it had often done throughout history*. Ever since 2010, the Orbán government’s communication has both

² See: European Commission, Economic forecast for Hungary, <https://ec.europa.eu/info/node/10158> (accessed on 19.12.2017)

echoed this sentiment and sought to spread it. The government continuously conducts communication campaigns that try to convey the message that the EU institutions are hostile towards Hungary, that “Brussels” forces its will on the Hungarians, and that the European Union is in a deep crisis. Nevertheless, the government is also aware that Hungarians are sceptical towards the EU but definitely not hostile to it. Hence, no member of the cabinet has ever publicly raised the idea of quitting the European Union. All the more so because EU subsidies provide one of the key engines of Hungarian economic growth. Even as it spends millions of euros on communication campaigns aimed at denigrating the European Union, in practice the Hungarian government complies with almost all EU economic requirements and is one of the most effective in terms of drawing on EU funds. Within a few years, Hungary has cut the budget deficit, set public debt as a percentage of GDP on an improving trajectory, and the government/governing parties’ representatives in the European Council and the EP generally tend to vote in line with the expectations of the European People’s Party on all major issues.

As an open economy that is heavily dependent on German (automotive) investments and exports and imports, Hungary cannot afford to distance itself from the European Union. At the same time, however, the right-wing populist government wishes to sustain a general sentiment that the country is under continuous attack from the West (that is, from EU institutions or from liberal democracies such as the U.S.) and that Fidesz must defend Hungary from this attack. Consequently, whatever the demands of economic rationality, anti-EU campaigns won’t stop any time soon.

Moreover, the Orbán government’s criticisms of the EU reached a new level when the refugee crisis began in 2015. At the time, Fidesz’s popularity was at a long-time low, and the government identified the mass appearance of refugees in Europe as a chance to boost its battered popularity. Fidesz began to agitate against refugees early in the year, when the refugee numbers were still relatively low compared to their peak later in the year. Subsequently, it cast itself as *Europe’s defender*, a political formation that would protect the European Union from terrorist immigrants and Islamisation. A symbolic element of this policy was the fence built at the Schengen border between Hungary and Serbia. The refugee crisis was the first major European issue on which the Orbán government opposed the European Union’s – and primarily Germany’s – policies not only rhetorically but also in action. As we noted, previously the Hungarian government had combined an anti-EU rhetoric with decidedly pro-European actions, a position that distinctly set it apart from the Szydło government in Poland.

The Orbán government construes the refugee question (as well) as an issue of Hungarian sovereignty: they argue that no one can tell Hungarians whom they must admit into their country.

Despite the efforts of the governing Fidesz and Jobbik, the overwhelming majority of Hungarians want Hungary to remain a member of the European Union.

Orbán’s vision of Europe is in any case a lot closer to a Europe of Nations framework. Such an EU would not have supranational institutions and would essentially operate as a free market of sorts, but would nevertheless have a common army and, of course, tons of subsidies for Hungary. Over the past three years, this position has emerged as a central tenet in the party’s identity, and as a result the conflicts with Germany and EU institutions are likely to become more intense in the near future. If the EU were to take further steps to shift the issue of refugee quota – or the admission of refugees and immigration in general – into the realm of common policy, then it is easy to imagine that Orbán will further distance Hungary from the EU, and deliberately take his country to the periphery of the community.

The country of pro-European people and Eurosceptic government

In a country in which nearly two-thirds of likely voters opt for staunchly EU-sceptic parties, one would expect that a significant share of the population eagerly awaits Hungary’s departure from the European Union. However, despite the competing efforts of the governing Fidesz and the largest opposition party, Jobbik, to criticise the EU as vehemently as possible, the overwhelming majority of Hungarians, roughly three-fourths, want Hungary to remain a member of the European Union. Few trends are more illustrative of the complexity of the current political situation in Hungary than this.

Despite the euro crisis, the economic crisis, the refugee crisis and increasing terrorism, and despite the relentless campaigns of the right-wing parties to keep these issues on the public agenda, a vast majority of voters continue to take a positive or, at worst, a neutral view of the EU. According to a Eurobarometer survey, an equally large group of respondents took a positive or neutral view of the EU (40% each), while only every fifth Hungarian has a negative opinion about the European Union. Thus, Hungary is one of the most pro-EU countries in the European Union³.

A New Right-Wing Identity for the V4

Up until 2010, institutional relations between Hungary and the other members of the Visegrad Group were seen as being

3 Tamás Boros, The Country of Pro-European People and Eurosceptic Government, Das Progressive Zentrum, 26.09.2016, <http://www.progressives-zentrum.org/hungary-the-country-of-the-pro-european-people-and-a-eurosceptic-government/> (accessed on 19.12.2017)

of marginal importance for Hungarian foreign policy. Soon after taking power in 2010, the Orbán government sought to tighten this loose cooperation between the Visegrad states, but the real shift in their relations only began after 2015. By this time, the cooperation between the four countries was helped by the fact that right-wing populist parties had ascended to power as either the leading parties in government or at least as junior coalition partners in their respective ruling coalitions. The issue of immigration and refugees, and the opposition to admitting refugees/immigrants, emerged as the first issue on which these countries took a unified stance against the mainstream position in the EU, thereby demonstrating that there are some European issues on which they are capable of cooperation and of coordinating their policies. As a part of this emerging cooperation, they fought for strengthening the external borders of the Schengen Area and for rejecting mandatory refugee quotas within the EU⁴. This joint policy of the Visegrad states, which stands in marked opposition to the EU's official line, is especially important in terms of the cooperation within the V4 because there is currently no other topic on the EU agenda where the Visegrad countries demonstrate such unified and combative resolve. For the Orbán government, the joint "alternative" refugee policy adopted by the Visegrad Four was a major success on two grounds. For one, it allowed Orbán to spread his anti-Merkel/anti-*Willkommenkultur* policies beyond Hungary, while it also allowed him to keep the migrant issue, which has given the governing a party a massive boost in popularity, on the political agenda. At the same time, the revival and resurgence of the V4 made it possible for Viktor Orbán to break out of the diplomatic isolation in which he had been held by the vast majority of EU member states in recent years. Orbán wants the V4 to fill a unique role: it is meant to serve as a counterweight to the western European states; to shift the European Union's powers towards intergovernmental decision-making mechanisms; to put a full stop to immigration from the Muslim world; and to keep the level of structural and cohesion funds high⁵. Instead of *more Europe*, Orbán seeks the assistance of the other V4 states in working towards a *strong Europe made up of stronger nations*.

This is also manifest in Hungary's agenda for the rotating presidency of the V4 in 2017. The agenda openly stresses that the Hungarian presidency wishes to *strengthen the role of member states within the Union*; that *instead of more Europe we should focus on creating a better and stronger Europe*; and the EU should respect national and regional

diversity. Correspondingly, the Hungarian presidency would strengthen the role of the European Council against the European Commission and the EP, and to submit more decisions in the EU to consensus requirements. Still, there are some areas where the Hungarian V4 presidency is not pushing for further disintegration. Among these are the single common market and common defence policies. The Hungarian government is also pro-integration with respect to allowing the EU accession of potential Balkan member states, which is logical considering Hungary's interest in protecting the Hungarian minority in Serbia and in promoting trade ties between the two countries.

Though the V4 states appear unified, in reality their motivations differ substantially when it comes to numerous key issues.

Though the V4 states appear unified on refugee policies, regional subsidies and the strengthening of the role of nation-states, and have at the same time also apparently increased their influence on EU decision-making, in reality their motivations differ substantially when it comes to numerous key issues. Among these issues are their relations to Russia and Germany, respectively. The Hungarian government is characterised by increasing cosiness with Russia, while Poland – for historical reasons – has been traditionally critical of Moscow. At the same time, however, these two V4 countries are on the same page when it comes to their critical stance towards Germany, since their populist, anti-Western and illiberal policies are directed against the EU's most important western power. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, however, employ a far more restrained rhetoric towards Germany and the European Union – even though the populists are on the rise in these countries, too – and these governments have also not evinced the strong interest in illiberal democracy that their Polish and Hungarians counterparts continue to display.

A further internal dividing line is that while Slovakia has joined the Eurozone, the other three countries have retained their national currencies and do not appear keen on introducing the common European currency any time soon. This will also make it more difficult for them to coordinate their economic and fiscal policies. Moreover, international competitiveness in these countries rests primarily on cheap and skilled labour, and the introduction of the Euro would lead to a sharp increase in labour costs. Thus, even Poland, which is in a more stable position economically, seeks to delay the Euro accession date as far as possible⁶.

4 Tamás Boros, Ernst Stetter (ed.), *Good Neighbourliness?*, Policy Solutions-FEPS, 2017, http://www.policysolutions.hu/userfiles/elemzes/271/good_neighbourliness_all_web.pdf (accessed on 19.12.2017)

5 See: The Visegrad Group official website, Programme of the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2017/2018, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/hungarian-v4-presidency>

6 See: Máté Csicsai: *Kihívásokkal teli egymásrautaltság*, Kitekintő.hu, 29.04.2014, http://kitekinto.hu/europa/2014/04/29/kihivásokkal_teli_egymasrautaltsag

The V4 in the opinion polls

Although for the Hungarian government the Visegrad Group is of pre-eminent importance, the overwhelming majority of Hungarian citizens are not even aware of this cooperation between the central and eastern European states. Based on a 2015 public opinion poll by the Hungarian public opinion research company Tárki, only 26% of the population said that they are aware that the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Slovakia form a community called the “Visegrad Group”. This is higher than the 17% who indicated the same in Poland, but it is lower than the corresponding figure of 37% in the Czech Republic or 54% in Slovakia. Though no one, neither in the general public nor among the political parties, opposes the V4 cooperation, only 40% see the cooperation as useful. The survey in question was conducted before the refugee crisis, and it is hence no surprise that the majority of Hungarians (who are aware of the Visegrad Group) primarily see the importance of the V4 in terms of its impact on the economy and trade (53%), while only few respondents believed that cultural cooperation is important (22%).

Poles had the most favourable view of Hungarians among the citizens of the three other Visegrad states, both with regard to the cooperation of their country with Hungary and in terms of their assessment of the level of democracy in Hungary. A very high percentage of Hungarians (58%) evinced trust in the Poles, while their levels of trust in Slovaks and Czechs was also not low (40%).

Interestingly, this feeling is not fully reciprocated in the other Visegrad states. Hungarians were least popular among respondents in all of the other three V4 countries. Still, in the case of Poland, sympathies for Hungarians were very high at 61%, but among Slovaks it was low at 30%, and among Czechs it was only slightly higher at 37%.

At same time, Hungarians have very limited relations with the other countries: Only 31% have ever visited Slovakia, 21% have been to the Czech Republic and 18% to Poland. This limited interaction with the other V4 countries can also be explained by the distinct nature of the Hungarian language, which separates Hungarians from the Slavic speakers in the other countries of the V4, as well as the fact that Hungarians do not travel abroad much because of their low levels of income⁷.

Conclusions: From V4 to V2?

Overall, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, a process has begun during the last few years that would give the V4 a new, right-wing identity. In fact, it seeks to push the entire European Union in a more right-wing – to wit, more nationalistic and anti-federalist – direction; it would regard cheap

labour and a free single market as the pillar of economic development; while it would increase military expenditures and prevent the EU from accepting refugees. This new identity has undeniably rendered the V4 more visible in international politics. Nevertheless, the future of a politics based on swimming against the mainstream in the EU is highly questionable, especially since there are increasing signs that the Czech Republic and Slovakia would prefer the so-called core Europe to sticking with the Polish-Hungarian duo. If that turns out to be the case, then within a year or two the V4 will become more of a theory than a reality, and in practice this right-wing-populist line will be followed only by a “V2”, that is Orbán and Kaczyński.

Overall, under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, a process has begun that would give the V4 a new, right-wing identity.

All in all, Orbán has touted the V4 cooperation as the most promising prospect for the success of Hungarian foreign policy. He argues that under his leadership, the eastern European states can form a united bloc against western encroachment on their autonomy. And while that may be far-fetched given the weak institutional underpinnings of the V4, the refugee issue has indeed created a heretofore-unseen unity among these countries. Nevertheless, this unity remains fragile and is mainly held together by the widespread xenophobia in the region. And while the Fidesz model of creeping authoritarianism probably appeals to many politicians in the region, most of them will probably not risk alienating Germany, France and other important western players (and de facto donors) over the right to suppress the opposition. Orbán keeps pushing the V4 issue, but there is no depth yet to the underlying relationships, it is purely a cooperation based on intersecting interests, most importantly on the refugee question. It is up to the EU and the European progressive parties to offer an alternative that will highlight the differences in the social, economic and political visions of the governments of the eastern European member states rather than hardening their joint rejection of the dominant EU paradigm. ●

7 Source: Olga Gyárfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov, G The 25 Years of the V4 As Seen by the Public, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, 2016, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/essays-articles/25-years-of-the-v4-as>

Agnieszka Łada

Poland's European Policy – Drafting Away From the Mainstream

Introduction

It's already been two years that the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) government came to power in Poland, taking the country step by step away from the mainstream of the European integration. Its domestic policy is strongly criticized abroad, including running European Commission's procedure against undermining democratic principles in Poland. With flat rejection of the refugee quotas and ideas of giving more power back to national states, the Polish government seems to stand alone in the EU.

Key Interests and Positioning of the Country within the European Union

The official European narrative by the ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS), that holds the majority in the Polish parliament, has been largely shaped by domestic considerations. It is, first and foremost, a backlash against criticism coming from the EU as a response to the government's attempts to dismantle democratic checks and balances, exemplified by neutralising the Constitutional Tribunal. Furthermore, the government's policy on Europe does not create consistent visions of reforming the EU and Poland's role in Europe. The two biggest opposition parties: Civic Platform (PO) and Nowoczesna are clearly pro-European and pro-democratic. At the same time, they do not have any power to change the political situation at the moment, as the PiS party controls both chambers of the parliament and can count on the president, backing almost all their bills. The next national elections planned in 2019 are not expected to bring any big changes, as in the polls the Law and Justice gets even more than 40% (November 2017 – 43%), whereas Civic Platform – 19%, Kukiz'15 – 11%, liberal Nowoczesna – 9%, the social democrats (SLD) – 6%, Peasant Party (PSL) – 5% and the new left party RAZEM – 4%.¹ The opposition is, furthermore, weak and divided.

In the recent months the attacks of PiS government on the judiciary were criticized by the Venice Commission, the Council of Europe and the European Commission – (which issued its recommendations, largely ignored by the government) – as well as various other international organizations. The situation

in Poland was also a subject of debates in the European Parliament. In summer further steps were taken to the rule-of-law procedure against Poland. After judiciary reforms were voted in the Polish parliament, EU commissioners decided to launch the “infringement procedure” for violating European Union law (this infringement however does not affect the ongoing rule-of-law dialogue with Poland, launched by the Commission in January 2016)². Polish answers to the Commission's concerns were not assessed as satisfactory and as a result in September the European Commission “maintained its position that the Polish Law is incompatible with EU law because by introducing a different retirement age for female judges (60 years) and male judges (65 years), it discriminates against individuals on the basis of gender”³. In June 2017, the European Commission launched infringement procedures against Poland for non-compliance with its obligations under the 2015 Council Decisions on the relocation of refugees. Earlier this year, the Commission sued Poland also at the European Court of Justice (ECJ) over logging in the Białowieża forest, a Unesco World Heritage site. In summer, the court ordered Poland to immediately halt the logging, but its decision has not yet been implemented by the Polish government.

All these open struggles with Brussels influence the Polish public debates to the extent that for the first time in over two decades, the EU is presented as a threat, not as an opportunity.

Still, Polish public support for the EU membership remains relatively strong. Despite the lack of a common Polish narrative on the desired future of Europe, withdrawal from the EU (so-called “Polexit”) is still considered one of the untouchable

¹ See: election poll from 27 November 2017: <http://www.parlamentarny.pl/sondaze/sondaz-zjednoczona-opozycja-nie-ma-szans-w-starciu-z-pis,236.html>

² European Commission, Press release. Independence of the judiciary: European Commission takes second step in infringement procedure against Poland, 12.09.2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-3186_en.htm (accessed on 15.09.2017)

³ Ibid.

topics in public discourse. Over the last decade, the support for European integration has never dropped below 70% in national polls, reaching a peak of 89% in 2014⁴ and dropping only slightly to 88% in April 2017. At the same time, only three percent of Poles supported a hypothetical withdrawal from the EU, whereas 41% were for deepening integration and 32% wanted to maintain the status quo⁵. In some other polls, the support for “Polexit” is 8-10%. Poles believe that the EU membership is good for them due to the free movement of workers, the availability of external funds, strengthened security as well as Poland’s stronger role in Europe⁶. However, the available empirical data show that the majority of citizens oppose certain crucial aspects of Poland’s membership, such as refugee quotas or the adoption of the euro. Very low turnouts in the European elections over the years (2004 – 20,87%; 2009 – 24,53%; 2014 – 23,83%)⁷ also show, that pro-European attitudes do not turn into concrete activities.

The most recent polls have shown that the vast majority of Poles (72%) are against adopting the euro, as the common currency is associated with the EU’s economic problems and higher prices. The topic hardly exists in the Polish public discourse, is a non-issue for the Law and Justice government⁸, nor is it stressed in the policy documents of the biggest opposition party, Civic Platform, even if its leaders support joining the Eurozone. Both parties know that introducing the euro will meet with strong objections among society and therefore they avoid this question. Only the Nowoczesna party claims entering the Eurozone is inevitable and that one should take serious steps towards this move. At the same time, the party admits it can only happen when the PiS government loses power.

For Poland to stay outside the Eurozone is currently even more dangerous than it used to be. Due to Brexit, Poland loses a strategic partner in this field, since the UK was the only large non-euro state in the EU. Furthermore, speeding up the talks about reforming European Union (which are expected after the German election), will be another challenge in this respect. For Poland, which remains outside the Eurozone, any visions of a multi-speed Europe pose a threat because they can lead to marginalization of the non-euro states. While these threats are recognized by both the government and the opposition as well as constitute one of the few unifying factors in the Polish narrative, ideas how to respond to this

challenge are different. The ruling party has called for opening of the Treaties to revise EU’s institutional framework, for instance by strengthening the national parliaments and weakening the European Commission. On the contrary, the opposition and many experts claim that the only solution for Poland is stronger integration.

Polish Key National Interests in Different Policy Areas at the EU Level and the Coherence with Other V4 States

The main problem for the Polish government in the upcoming Brexit negotiations was the status of the EU citizens in the UK. Since 2004 many young, well-educated Poles have left the country and have been living in the British Isles. Including the children born to Polish parents, there are approximately one million Poles living in the UK; making them the largest group of EU citizens living in Britain. Their rights after Brexit are not only a major issue, but also a test for the Polish diplomacy, still calling the UK an important and close ally. Similar challenges concerning their citizens are faced by other EU states, like Slovakia, Romania and the Baltic countries. They have also experienced significant emigration of their citizens to the UK. Of all V4 states the Czech Republic is less involved, as the number of Czech citizens per capita who emigrated to the UK is not especially high (for Poland – 24,1 per mill Slovakia – 17,2 per mill, Hungary – 8,3 per mill and Czech Republic – 4,2 per mill)⁹. By underling one voice with the European Commission, the PiS government joined the assessment that these questions had to be negotiated together by all 27 member states in order to reach a satisfying solution. The reached agreement between the European Commission and United Kingdom in this matter is satisfying for Poland.

Brexit, furthermore, influences another important sphere of the Polish interests in the European Union, namely the upcoming budget negotiations and the future division of the structural funds. Poland is the biggest recipient of EU funds (82.5 billion euros for the years 2014-2020), with quite good absorption quotas. European infrastructure programs are in particular appreciated by the society. That makes the future of structural funds – as well as agricultural support for farmers (23,5 billion euros for the years 2015-2020) – an important challenge for the upcoming multiannual financial framework negotiations. Even more so, as one of the latest proposals of the European Commission suggests cutting funds to the countries that violate the commonly accepted rule of law. In the negotiations, one can expect Warsaw to

4 Barbara Badora, Wybory do Parlamentu Europejskiego, Komunikat z badań 40, Centre for Public Opinion Research, Warsaw 2014.

5 Beata Roguska, Jakiej Unii chcą Polacy?, Komunikat z badań 50, Centre for Public Opinion Research, Warsaw 2017.

6 Beata Roguska, 10 lat członkostwa Polski w Unii Europejskiej, Komunikat z badań 52, Centre for Public Opinion Research, Warsaw 2015.

7 See: European Parliament, Election Results 2014, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/elections2014-results/pl/turnout.html>

8 There is also no campaign planned. In 2017, the Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for introducing the euro and the Office of Polish Integration with the Eurozone in the National Bank were closed.

9 Office for National Statistics, Population of the United Kingdom by Country of Birth and Nationality, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/datasets/>; Eurostat, Population of the United Kingdom by country of birth and nationality, Population on 1 January – author’s calculations, <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

launch fierce fight over continuation of the current regional and agricultural policy (and generous funds flowing into Poland). Konrad Szymański, the secretary of state responsible for European policy, has already warned that Warsaw is ready to block decisions foreseeing any budget that cuts funds for Poland. At the same time, if the Polish government keeps on weakening democracy at home, opposes further integration and does not show any signs of solidarity in migration policy, its options for obtaining support among potential partners could be limited. The success from the last MFF's negotiations when Poland managed to bring together 15 states in the so-called "friends of cohesion" coalition – countries whose aim was to preserve the significance of structural funds – will rather not be repeated. Warsaw, with its anti-European rhetoric, is less and less perceived as a trustworthy and desired partner by other capitals.

Another area where Poland rejects the European Commission's proposals is the posted workers directive. Poland is especially vocal on this issue, as such contracts are favoured by the Polish companies (nearly half of them in the whole EU-28 account to Polish business). According to some estimates, around 400,000 Poles will lose their jobs under this directive. If one also adds people coordinating posted worker services working in Poland, the number can rise even up to 800,000¹⁰. Until late spring 2017 both in Poland and in the other Visegrad states a strong conviction could be heard that this issue will unite the V4. The French president's tour last summer across many countries in Central Europe, except Poland, has proven that here also the Visegrad Group does not speak one voice. Macron won the backing of Slovakia and the Czech Republic, scoring a symbolic victory over the Eurosceptic governments of Poland and Hungary, which oppose the reform.

Migration policy remains the heaviest field of conflict, particularly the compulsory refugee relocation scheme that Warsaw so loudly rejects. Until now Poland, like Hungary, has not relocated a single person. Instead, Poland has lobbied for increased assistance for refugees in their countries of origin and supports the idea of treating the root causes of the "refugee crisis". The previous government of Civic Platform had agreed to admit approximately 7,000 people, although knowing it would be a controversial decision. As it happened, the Law and Justice party warned at the peak of the election campaign that Poland was in severe danger of a massive inflow of Muslim immigrants, and that only the PiS party was able to prevent it. Jarosław Kaczyński incited fear using tabloid arguments that migrants would bring "all sorts of parasites and protozoa, which [...] while not dangerous in the organisms of these people, could be dangerous here." At the same

time, the other parties (including the left-wing ones) avoided taking a clear position in the defense of accepting refugees into Poland¹¹. This approach has not changed during subsequent months, with the current leader of the main opposition party, Grzegorz Schetyna (PO), claiming in May 2017 that Poland should be against accepting refugees¹². A few days later, however, he changed his mind, calling on the government to show solidarity and avoid marginalizing Poland in the EU¹³. Also, the opinion of the Catholic Church is not clear on the issue, with some bishops calling on parishes to invite refugees and creating "humanitarian corridors" and others opposing any idea of allowing refugees in the country, whom they associate with terrorism and a negative influence on the local, catholic culture. Ultimately, the government, which has still not allowed any refugees to enter Poland – neither voluntarily, nor within the framework of the relocation system – announced in May 2017 that it is considering the option of opening such corridors¹⁴. Nevertheless, the issues disappeared quickly from the media debates and as no concrete actions have yet been taken. The European Commission commenced legal action against Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, due to refusing refugee quotas. Still, even after the European Court of Justice had dismissed complaints by Hungary and Slovakia, the PiS government declines to change its policy. This position is backed by the Hungarian government.

These ambiguity results from the fact that the majority of Poles oppose the admission of refugees (54%)¹⁵, amplified by the emotional anti-immigrant discourse led by some politicians. Seventy percent of Poles believe that the presence of refugees could increase the risk of terrorism in Poland. Furthermore, the majority also thinks that they pose a burden on the host country, taking away jobs and social benefits (75%)¹⁶. Young Poles are especially sceptical, with 73% rejecting hosting refugees and questioning the assumption that immigrants bring any social benefits for their country¹⁷.

10 Łukasz Osiński, Eksperti podzieleni ws. projektu unijnej dyrektywy o pracownikach delegowanych, Onet.pl, 9.12.2016, <https://m.onet.pl/biznes/kraj,hyme19> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

11 Justyna Segeš Frelak, Migration climate, discourse and policies in Poland, in: Globsec: Migration politics and policies in Central Europe, Globsec, Bratislava 2017, pp. 20.

12 Newsweek.pl: Wolta Schetyny w sprawie uchodźców. Przypominamy, co jeszcze do niedawna o ich przyjmowaniu mówiła PO, 10.05.2017, <http://www.newsweek.pl/polska/polityka/po-nie-chce-uchodzcow-schetyna-zmienia-zdanie-po-i-uchodzcy,artykuly,409937,1.html> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

13 Onet.pl: Schetyna: chcę rozmawiać z premier ws. przyjęcia uchodźców, 23.06.2017, <http://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/schetyna-chce-rozmawiac-z-premier-ws-przyjecia-uchodzcow/xvm3p83> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

14 Agnieszka Kazimierczuk, Premier: jesteśmy na etapie analizowania korytarzy humanitarnych, Rzeczpospolita, 19.06.2017, <http://www.rp.pl/Rzad-PiS/170619123-Premier-jestesmy-na-etapie-analizowania-korytarzy-humanitarnych.html#ap-1> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

15 Centre for Public Opinion Research: Stosunek Polaków do przyjmowania uchodźców, Warsaw 2017, http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2017/K_001_17.PDF (accessed on 15.09.2017)

16 Pew Research Center: Europeans Fear Wave of Refugees Will Mean More Terrorism, Fewer Jobs, July 2016, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/07/11/europeans-fear-wave-of-refugees-will-mean-more-terrorism-fewer-jobs/> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

17 Jacek Kucharczyk, Agnieszka Łada, Akceptacja, reforma, rozstanie. Młodzież z sześciu państw członkowskich Unii Europejskiej wobec integracji europejskiej, Instytut Spraw Publicznych, Warszawa 2017, pp.16-18.

The idea of further integration in security issues is another area where mixed voices could be heard in Poland. Warsaw is concerned about creating any European structures that might be perceived as competitive or even parallel with NATO. That is why the Polish government did not immediately support the idea of stronger European integration on security issues. Apart from concerns about creating alternative security structures, Poland is also worried about the negative effects for its arms industry and competition with Western European factories. Nevertheless, Poland ultimately supported launching the so-called permanent structured cooperation in defense (PESCO) at the EU summit in June 2017 and joined the declaration in November.

Perception of the Visegrad Group and Its Relevance

The Visegrad Group (V4) is the initiative that the current Polish government puts emphasis on in its foreign policy. Regardless of political affiliation of the government in power, it has always been considered by the Polish politicians a good tool for coordinating activities – consultations and sharing information, especially if successfully pushing Polish interests within the EU. The Visegrad Group has never been an institutionalized or formal structure, but the Law and Justice government stresses the single voice of all four states much more than the other partners (and the previous Polish government). It is so to show some opposition weight towards the Franco-German cooperation and to stress Polish importance in the region. In reality, the Group is not united in every matter. Currently Poland would like to be seen as the Group's leader, although this desire has not met with the acceptance of other countries. They expect consultations and understanding of their positions. Additionally, the leader would have to represent their interests (and not only its own) towards the bigger players. Bringing projects to their fruition would prove that the leader can deliver. Meanwhile, when Warsaw speaks out as the V4 representative without consultation, it rankles the other countries. Furthermore, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia more voices have begun to emerge that close association with anti-European Poland and Hungary is more of a burden rather than an advantage. However, differences in the countries' European policy are natural and have – more or less – always been present. Today the main challenge is not the difference of opinions, but the position of the Group and its members in Europe. As the current opposition parties and the pro-European circles in Poland assess, by concentrating on its domestic political challenges, the country has lost its position as an important European player and marginalized itself, similarly to Hungary. The question is how the new elected Czech government will position itself.

There is no evidence that Poland can count on other V4 member states while pushing towards its interests. Actually, exactly the opposite can be expected – unpredictable activities of Warsaw will not win any support. The vote on the extension

The V4 has never been an institutionalized or formal structure, but the Law and Justice government stresses the single voice of all four states.

of Donald Tusk's term as the President of the European Council was a prime example: neither the Czech Republic, nor Slovakia or Hungary made a declaration of their vote in advance. Although the Polish delegation to the very last moment held on to hope that they would support their counter-candidate, all three countries voted for Tusk. They did not see the need to rebel against the majority in the EU. They also appreciated that this leadership position was filled by a person from their region. Furthermore, the three capitals are convinced that Tusk represents the interests of the region well. Such an approach – voting not in line with Poland – could be repeated in the upcoming months if the interests of the V4 countries differ. The Polish government explained support for Tusk to have resulted from the strong German influence on the other V4 countries and their reluctance to oppose Berlin. The case is minimized in the PiS rhetoric, while small success stories are stressed.

Further Conflicts of Interests Between Poland and Other Visegrad Members

There are even more differences among the Visegrad states. The main dividing line of the Visegrad Group is the approach to the further European integration. Specifically, Slovakia is the only V4 member who joined the Eurozone, willing to be part of the “first speed” of integration, adapting its attitude to the majority of member states instead of cooperation with Poland in this field. With the Czech Republic hanging somewhere in between, Poland shares the views on the future of the EU with Hungary.

The Visegrad countries also differ with regards to security issues. For Poland, it is Russia that remains the main threat and NATO that is believed to be the only real protection (the statement that NATO is necessary for the security of their country is supported by 91% of Poles, 81% of Hungarians, 75% of Czechs and 56% of Slovaks)¹⁸. The pro-Russian approach of the other V4 countries has always been, regardless the governing coalition in Warsaw, the biggest divergence of views in the Group. The very critical approach towards the Nord Stream 2 project is, however, shared with Bratislava as also Slovak energy interests are endangered because of the new pipeline.

¹⁸ GLOBSEC: GLOBSEC Trends 2017: Mixed messages and Signs of Hope from Central and Eastern Europe, Bratislava 2017, pp.15, <http://globsec.org/globsec2017/news/globsec-trends-2017-mixed-messages-and-signs-of-hope-from-central-and-eastern-europe> (accessed on 15.09.2017)

Conclusions

Even though the Law and Justice government underlines the single voice and similarities in policy areas of the V4 countries, it stands more and more alone, drafting to the EU-peripheries. So, it is a paradox, as not being left on the peripheries used to be the Polish reason of state. Enduring popularity of the EU membership with simultaneous Eurosceptic rhetoric of the current government seems to be another paradox of the current European policy of Poland. It all requires a rather nuanced explanation. One should note that the appreciation of the benefits of membership goes hand in hand with a growing dissatisfaction with some aspects of integration, such as refugee quotas or the adoption of euro, which are both opposed by the majority of citizens and can easily be explored by the Law and Justice. Furthermore, the Polish society is satisfied with the social reforms of the Law and Justice, giving more money to families with two or more children and reducing the retirement age. Antidemocratic moves of the government or the fear of marginalization in the EU seem neither as important nor dangerous for a statistical Pole who is constantly confronted with the government's rhetoric, explaining that the ruling party is actually fighting for the strong position of Poland in the EU. Prime minister Szydło stressed several times that the government had never planned to take Poland outside

the European Union. This strong voice can be understood as a reaction to all opinion polls where the Polish society supports the European integration. The activities of the government, however, stay in clear contradiction to this declaration. The anti-European rhetoric of many PiS politicians or the media and commentators sympathizing with PiS also lead in the opposite direction. In the meantime, consensus can be found among pro-European experts in Poland that, in the long-term perspective, all that can in fact end up with the Polish decision on withdrawal from the EU. The UK's pattern is possible – starting with putting every EU's decision into question, calling for more rights for national states through criticizing EU-institutions and Brussels' hegemony up to the Polish government blocking further integration steps. When the EU will only be shown as an enemy who does all to humiliate Poland, then even the pro-European citizens can slowly change their minds. This scenario is as likely, as it is still stoppable. ●

There is no evidence that Poland can count on other V4 member states while pushing towards its interests.



Slovakia, which often appeared to be the most enthusiastic supporter of the Visegrad cooperation, now seems to be ready to sacrifice it for the sake of the participation in the “core Europe”. Does it signal a strategic re-positioning, or is it merely political rhetoric? The article analyses the role of the Visegrad cooperation in the Slovak political discourse and practice, especially in a wider European context.

Quarter a century ago, European integration, or a “return to Europe” as it was termed, looked like a dream widely shared by both political elites and the public in the Visegrad countries.

Looking at political developments in Poland, Hungary, and to some extent in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, one gets an impression that the idea of European unity is losing its appeal.

Even the Visegrad cooperation, whose main original aim was to help integrate three (later four) countries to the Euro-Atlantic structure, is acquiring an “anti-European” (or at least EU-critical) connotation.

Today, Visegrad countries are sometimes perceived as “trouble-makers” in European politics. Viktor Orbán talks about “illiberal democracy”, and places Brussel (alongside Vienna and Moscow) among the oppressors of “Hungarian sovereignty”. The Polish government, run in fact by Jarosław Kaczyński, is on a collision course with the EU institutions. Other politicians in the region are accusing the EU of interference with their “internal affairs”. In countries where the public used to be on average more Euro-optimistic than in “old Europe”¹,

¹ This shift becomes apparent through the comparison of Eurobarometer surveys from the first and second decade of this century. In Spring 2008, citizens in all four countries “tended to trust the European Union” above the EU average (SK: 67%, CZ: 59%, PL: 59%, HU: 52%; compared to EU27 average 50%). In Spring 2017, however, this trust was already much lower; in the Czech Rep. even markedly below the EU average (HU: 46%, PL: 44%, SK: 43%, CZ: 30%; EU28 average: 42%). Source: European Commission: Standard Eurobarometer 87, Spring 2017, First results, pp. 16, and European Commission: Eurobarometer 69, First results, pp. 21-22.

voices calling for a weakening of European integration are growing louder – sometimes even in the political mainstream².

The paper will argue that:

- The representation of the Visegrad cooperation in the political (and public) discourse is not the same thing as (and often does not correspond with) the real role of this cooperation in the political and economic field.
- The way the Visegrad cooperation was presented by political elites often reflected their interests in domestic politics, rather than international/European considerations.
- The practical impact and importance of the Visegrad cooperation, and its presentation in political discourse, could be analysed – and indeed make practical sense – only in the wider context of European integration.

General Characteristics of the Country

Over the twenty-five years of its existence, the Visegrad cooperation has played diverse roles and inspired varying expectations in Slovak political discourse. These moved between three distinctive positions:

1. Visegrad as a reference framework: During the 1990s, Slovakia was the weakest and poorest economy in the region, and a laggard in the EU accession process (more on this later). Back then, it had been popular practice for analysts, politicians, the media, and even citizens to resort to benchmarks like socio-economic performance, quality of democracy, level of foreign investments, pace and quality

² By now, three of the Visegrad countries have parties in parliaments that call for referendums on EU membership. In the Czech Republic it was Usvit – Narodna koalicia, KSCM (Communist party) as well as president Miloš Zeman (even though he supports EU membership), in Hungary it's Jobbik, in Slovakia it's Kotleba – LSNS. Governments in Poland and Hungary are supporting a looser European cooperation under the banner of the “Union of nation states”. See: Radovan Geist, Kotleba, Le Penová, Wilders, Zeman: kto žiada referendá o členstve v EÚ, Euractiv.sk, 16.12.2016, <https://euractiv.sk/clanky/buducnost-eu/kotleba-le-penova-wilders-zeman-kto-ziada-referenda-o-clenstve-v-eu/> and Susi Dennison, Dina Pardijs: The world according to Europe's insurgent parties. European Council on Foreign Relations, June 2016, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_181_-_THE_WORLD_ACCORDING_TO_EUROPE'S_INSURGENT_PARTIES.pdf (accessed on 15.08.2017)

of integration with the EU, and/or any other reference value capable of indicating that Slovakia was lagging behind (or coping better) compared to its Visegrad neighbours.

2. At times, Visegrad was seen as a group of the closest allies: From the EU accession process to recent talks about becoming an autonomous power block in the EU. This is how Prime Minister (PM) Fico saw the V4 as recently as in November 2016: It represents 65 million people and is much stronger than any individual country alone. Even if there are many areas where the four countries do not agree, “when they agree, their voice must be listened to”³.
3. Last but not least, Visegrad cooperation was looked at as a potential problem vis-à-vis other EU partners, or the integration process as such. This has not started with Robert Fico’s turnaround in summer 2017, when he said that for Slovakia membership in the “EU core” is much more important than the V4⁴. Already at the end of the 1990s, the Czech government considered itself a “champion of the EU accession process”, and was rather sceptical about the added-value of the Visegrad cooperation.

At the structural level, attitudes of Slovak political elites (and, secondary, public opinion) towards Visegrad are shaped by three sets of specific conditions.

Geographically, Slovakia lies in the centre of the Visegrad group. Except for a short border with Austria, and the Ukraine as a non-EU member state, it is surrounded by Visegrad countries. This also means that its connection to other EU macro-regions (Germany, northern Europe, South-East and Southern Europe) is predominantly moderated by one of the Visegrad countries.

Historically, Slovakia has a long common political, social and cultural history with two of its neighbours – Hungary and the Czech Republic. Their shared history opens up many opportunities for both agreement and potential conflicts.

Politically speaking, Slovak attitudes to the Visegrad members were (and still are) influenced by its peculiar path to EU membership. Slovakia was a latecomer in the accession process. At the end of the 1990s it was not clear whether it would be included in the planned first wave of EU enlargement in 2004. The country had signed the Association Agreements already in 1993, shortly after gaining its independence. But authoritarian tendencies of

the second and especially third Mečiar government (after 1994) had strained relations with the EU. Slovakia was invited to accession negotiations only at the Helsinki summit in 1999 – two years later than seven other post-Communist countries. During those years, comparisons with other Visegrad countries, and their relative advances in the EU/NATO accession processes, helped to augment anti-Mečiar opposition.

These difficult years have influenced the public perception of EU membership, as well as the role of cooperation with neighbouring countries. Growing Western criticism of the increasingly autocratic second Mečiar government (1994-1998) and withering EU membership prospects led Mečiar to coquet with “alternative foreign policy”: If not welcomed by the West, Slovakia would play the role of a bridge between East and West. Regardless of whether this was ever a real alternative, the risk of being marginalized in the EU integration process helped unite and strengthen anti-Mečiar opposition. It was also one of the chief uniting factors of the ideologically divided first government of Mikuláš Dzurinda⁵, who replaced Mečiar in 1998.

At that time, Visegrad cooperation was perceived as something that could help Slovakia to catch-up with the “integration train”. Simultaneously, by the end of the 1990s the question of EU (and NATO) membership became politicised in Slovakia to an extent unrivalled in other Visegrad countries. It became one of the contentious points between “pro-European modernisers” and “nationalist traditionalists”. However, this politicisation revolved nearly solely around the question of membership itself; it has never developed into a debate on what kind of Europe Slovakia wants. Once the change of government unlocked the accession process for Slovakia, even these debates died out. By May 2004, all major political parties, including Mečiar’s Hnutie za demokratické Slovensko (HZDS), the nationalist Slovenská národná strana (SNS), and the communist Komunistická strana Slovenska (KSS), were supporting Slovak membership in the EU. An amphibolic pro-European platform united Slovak political elites⁶.

Slovakia and the EU: Right in the Heart

Once an integration laggard, Slovakia now is “the most deeply integrated” country in the V4 – the next main objective being membership of the Eurozone. After a “Eurosceptic interlude” in 2015/2016, its political elites have re-discovered

3 During the conference “V4 and the Future of the EU”, co-organised by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung at the Comenius University in Bratislava, 22.11.2016. For a short conference report see EurActiv.sk: EÚ pomôže, ak budú viac počúvať svojich občanov, tvrdí premiér, <https://euractiv.sk/clanky/buducnost-eu/eu-pomozte-ak-bude-viac-pocuvat-svojich-obcanov-tvrdi-premier/> (accessed on 2.09.2017)

4 See EurActiv.sk: Maďarské médiá: Orbánov dôležitý spojenec Fico nečakane vycúval, 17.08.2017, <https://euractiv.sk/clanky/vysehradaska-skupina/maďarske-media-orbanov-dolezity-spojenec-fico-necakane-vycuval/> (accessed on 5.09.2017)

5 The first Dzurinda government was composed of the reformed-Communist-turned-Social-Democrat SDL, social-liberal SOP, conservative-liberal SDK (itself a coalition of different parties: Christian Democrats, Liberals, Greens and Social Democrats), and the Hungarian minority party: a motley crew united around EU membership and liberal economic reforms that would under different circumstances hardly survive through its mandate.

6 Vladimír Bilčík, Juraj Buzalka: Slovakia. In: Donnacha Ó’Beacháin, Vera Sheridan, Sabina Stan (eds.): *Life in Post-Communist Eastern Europe After EU Membership: Happy Ever After?* Routledge, 2012, pp. 55-72.

the attractiveness of European integration. Unlike Orbán or Kaczyński, who are calling for a weaker EU and stronger nation states, the Slovak PM Fico is openly proclaiming that Slovakia's place is in the “core of Europe” and that his government is ready to “pay the price”⁷.

This strong pro-European turn (at least at the rhetorical level), in stark contrast to Fico's statements in 2015/16, is motivated by external and internal factors. Internally, it is part of his strategy to shift the political discourse in Slovakia from domestic problems (like corruption, problems with the education system, etc.) to a field that he can dominate more easily, to isolate part of the political opposition (especially the Eurosceptic party Sloboda a Solidarita – SAS), and to limit the appeal of his current ally, the nationalist SNSy, which is traditionally more EU-critical. Externally, it was probably provoked by intensified European discussions about EU reforms, multi-speed integration, and the creation of a European core that would leave out (some) of the new member states⁸.

Experience shows that political rhetoric can be subject to abrupt changes and twists, especially when it stems from tactical manoeuvring rather than deep convictions – and Fico's party Smer - Sociálna Demokracia (Smer-SD) itself set a good example for this when it oscillated between soft Euroscepticism in 2002-2006, a position of “good Europeans” in 2008-2015, outright EU criticism in 2015/16, and moving back to the pro-European stance of today. However, the above-mentioned factors underlying the latest turn to the EU might be more durable. Moreover, the pro-integrationist stance corresponds to long-term trends of Slovak EU policy, as well as structural economic needs.

Supported by a nearly universal consensus of its political elites⁹, Slovak diplomacy has ever since maintained a generally pro-integrationist course in the EU. Slovakia was never very active in proposing new political initiatives; it was rather a team-player, participating in coalitions and stressing the need for cooperation and consensus. With rare exceptions concerning EU domains, such as justice and home-affairs as

well as social and tax policy¹⁰, Slovakia has rarely blocked new legislation or policies since its accession to the Union.

Economically, Slovakia, just like other Visegrad countries, is closely tied to the EU. Multinational companies from Western Europe have established a strong presence in the region. Relocation of some manufacturing activities to Central Europe has been an important part of their industrial strategies – especially for German industries. Virtually the same situation repeated itself in the banking and infrastructural sectors (electricity, gas, water supply). Moreover, all four countries developed open economies, with strong export sectors, with both exports and imports being dominated by Germany¹¹.

To an extent, strong economic links with the West preceded Slovakia's EU membership. The accession process has substantially strengthened the growing economic dependence on Western Europe (see Becker, 2016)¹², but the trend had already been set as early as the 1990s. With some variations (Slovakia during two governments of Vladimír Mečiar, 1993-1998, attempted at creating a home capitalist class that would be the driver of a more autonomous economic development) by the turn of the century, all four countries enthusiastically opted for FDI-driven growth, a privatisation process open to international investors, and liberalised economies (from banking to trade to labour markets).

Just like its neighbours, Slovakia has developed an economic model that relies heavily on the single European market (on the “four freedoms”, especially on the freedom of movement of goods and services) and the ability to attract investors, including those relocating manufacturing activities from Western Europe. This might explain rather negative views on the potential harmonisation of tax policies (resisting especially any moves on the harmonisation of corporate taxes), or deeper integration in social policies – in the Slovak case at least until recently¹³. The ability to retain wage differentials vis-à-vis Western Europe, and to offer favourable regulatory regimes to investors, is an important remnant of the dependent market economy model¹⁴.

Given the overall trend of Slovakia's European policy, what is the role of the Visegrad cooperation?

7 On September 10th, 2017, R. Fico effectively supported common European income tax rate, European minimum wage, and common social standards. TA3 TV: V politike. 10.09.2017, <http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1112465/napate-vztahy-v-koalicii-aktualne-politicke-dianie-zdravotnictvo-po-novom.html>

8 When the new French president Emmanuel Macron met Visegrad leaders in Brussels at the margins of the June EU summit, Fico distanced himself from negative Polish and Hungarian reactions, bluntly saying: “I am entirely convinced that Germany and France will gear up and will demand deeper cooperation and integration, especially from the Eurozone members. I support that we should be part of it”. In August 2017, Slovak and German ministries of foreign affairs signed a memorandum on structured cooperation on EU policies, creating a platform for dialogue and coordination on political and expert levels. See for example EurActiv.sk: Fico sa prihlásil k Macronovi, ostatní lídri V4 ho ďalej kritizujú. 23.06.2017, <https://euractiv.sk/clanky/vysehradaska-skupina/fico-sa-prihlasil-k-macronovi-ostatni-lidri-v4-ho-dalej-kritizuju/> (accessed on 5.09.2017)

9 Vladimír Bilčík, Juraj Buzalka: Slovakia. In: Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Vera Sheridan, Sabina Stan (eds.): *Life in Post-Communist Eastern Europe After EU Membership: Happy Ever After?* Routledge, 2012, pp. 55-72.

10 These traditional “red lines” are closely related to two long-term sources of Euroscepticism in Slovakia: cultural conservatism and economic liberalism. Here, Visegrad countries have several things in common. For more on this, see Radovan Geist: *Die Visegrad – Länder in der EU: ein abweichender Fall?* In: *Kurswechsel* 4/2016.

11 Germany is the main export and import partner for all Visegrad countries and trade with Germany substantially outweighs the intra-regional trade.

12 Joachim Becker: *Europe's other periphery*. *New Left Review* 99, May-June 2016, pp. 39-64.

13 See reference 7.

14 This model was theocratised for example in Andreas Nölke, Arjan Vliegenghart: *Enlarging the Varieties of Capitalism: The Emergence of Dependent Market Economies in East Central Europe*. *World Politics*, Vol. 61, Issue 4. August 2009 (Princeton University Press).

Visegrad: Useful but Dispensable?

A survey conducted by the European Council for Foreign Relations in 2016 found out that “(m)ore frequently than other groups the Visegrad Four act as a political coalition within the European Union”¹⁵. Country data shows a strong correlation of preferences among the four countries and very similar pattern of voting in the Council¹⁶.

This could be partly explained by similar positions and interests of those four countries in many areas: from the internal market, economic and social policy, to foreign and security policy. But it also shows deliberate coordination of positions and voting behaviour.

However, this seemingly positive assessment of Visegrad cooperation calls for two important caveats. First, there are some areas, politically important, where positions of Visegrad countries diverge. One of the examples is the position to Russia and the current regime of Vladimir Putin. While the Polish nationalist-conservatives are strongly anti-Russian, Viktor Orbán defends – at least rhetorically – a normalisation of the relations with Russia¹⁷.

Differences are visible even in cases where Visegrad tried to forge a united front. In September 2015, all four countries refused to participate in the refugee relocation scheme and strongly criticised the decision adopted in the Council by means of QMV. This position was sometimes presented as a sign of transformation of the V4 into a more united “group of allies” in EU politics.

Nevertheless, from the very beginning there were differences. At the beginning, Slovakia and Hungary were leading the opposition to the relocation scheme – they voted against it in the Council, challenged the decision before the Court of Justice, and their leaders loudly attacked the “dictate from Brussels”. After the change of guards in Warsaw, Poland adopted a similar position (the previous government of Civic Platform abstained from voting on the relocation scheme). The Czech Republic, while critical to relocations, did not join the legal action. In summer 2016 – with the approaching Slovak EU Presidency, and influenced by domestic political developments¹⁸ – the Slovak government adopted a more conciliatory tone. In Autumn 2016, as the country holding the presidency of the

EU Council, Slovakia tried to present a compromise proposal termed “flexible solidarity”, later “effective solidarity”. In fact, this attempt was refused both by Italy, which demanded application of the relocation scheme, as well as by Hungary.

Gradually differences within Visegrad grew even larger. The Czech Republic and Slovakia pledged to relocate some asylum seekers from Greece (maintaining that they are doing it on a voluntary basis) and eventually even accepted a limited number of refugees. At the same time, governments in Poland and Hungary refuse to participate completely.

Another important caveat concerns qualitative differences: cooperation on concrete policies and similar positions on specific issues do not necessarily imply convergence on strategic issues. With growing pressure to reform the EU and to continue with integration in other areas – in smaller groups, if necessary – Visegrad countries formulated different positions. As discussed above, unlike Orbán or Kaczyński, Fico signed up to the participation in the “European core”, even appearing to be ready to cross some traditional red lines of Slovak EU policy, such as tax harmonisation. The current Slovak position was summarised well this June by the current state secretary to the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, and a seasoned diplomat Ivan Korčok: “If we really want to discuss, if (we should choose) the European Union or V4, then I say now without any hesitation – the Union. (The) V4 is only a pragmatic instrument. When and where it suits us all, we are trying to increase our weight and influence.”¹⁹

On 23 October, right after the Czech general elections, which shot controversial Andrej Babiš to power, Fico said that Slovakia remains “the only pro-European island in the region”. All three highest representatives – the President, Prime Minister, and the President of the Parliament – signed a declaration supporting western integration. However, questions persist, and they are not related only to the real positions of the nationalist SNS²⁰.

Paraphrasing the words of one of the Smer-SD representatives, Robert Fico’s support for the “core Europe” concept is “a strategic choice”: if something like that develops, Slovakia would like to part of it. But Fico is not any Euro-federalist²¹.

Under current conditions the Slovak position to Visegrad is subordinated to its interests in the EU: Visegrad cooperation is useful as long as it is not obstructing it.

15 ECFR: EU Coalition Explorer. Results of the EU28 Survey on coalition building in the European Union, p. 16, http://www.ecfr.eu/page/ECFR209_EU_COALITION_EXPLORER_2017_V2.o.pdf (accessed on 20.07.2017). It is important to note that the study was based on interviews with civil servants and policy experts, and the field research was concluded in 2016.

16 For country reports, see: Czech Rep.: p. 26; Hungary: p. 33; Poland: p. 41; Slovakia: p. 44 in ECFR: EU Coalition Explorer.

17 A useful overview is provided in Jacek Kucharczyk, Grigorij Mesežnikov (eds.): *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States’ Reaction to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, Prague and Warsaw, 2015.

18 Especially the electoral success of the fascist LSNS party and the fact that the leading opposition party SaS adopted a more radical Eurosceptic platform. More on the shift of position of Smer-SD on the issue of migration in Zuzana Gabrizova, Radovan Geist: *Migration und die Linke: die Slowakei*. In: Peter Broening, Christoph P. Mohr (Hg.): *Flucht, Migration und die Linke in Europa*. Verlag J.H.W. Dietz, 2017.

19 See EurActiv.sk: Ivan Korčok: Ak si máme vybrať medzi Úniou a V4, vyberieme si Úniu, 19.06.2017, <https://euractiv.sk/clanky/buducnost-eu/ivan-korcok-ak-si-mame-vybrat-medzi-uniou-a-v4-vyberieme-si-uniu/> (accessed on 9.09.2017).

20 Radovan Geist: Slovak political elites: Between EU and Russia, Euractiv.com, 24.11.2017, <http://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/slovak-political-elites-between-eu-and-russia/>

21 This argument was used during the public discussion “Will the core Europe be social?”, organised by the Progressive Forum in Bratislava, on November 15th, 2017.

To sum up, under current conditions the Slovak position to Visegrad is subordinated to its interests in the EU – which today means an ambition to participate in future deeper integration. Visegrad cooperation is useful as long as it is not obstructing that goal. Officially, Slovakia still stands behind the Visegrad cooperation, sometimes even presenting it as useful to the rest of Europe, bringing “trouble-makers” in the V4 closer to the European mainstream²². In realpolitik, the “unity of Visegrad” does not figure among strategic interests²³.

Trust Your Neighbours

In May-June 2015 the Slovak think-tank Institute of Public Affairs organised a poll in four Visegrad countries to map out the public perception of the V4 cooperation²⁴. The survey partly preceded the migration crisis and the refusal of Visegrad countries to join the relocation scheme, which had increased public visibility of the V4 in the region.

Based on the survey, the awareness of the V4 cooperation was highest in Slovakia, with 54 % of the respondents saying that they have heard about it before (compared to 37 % in the Czech Republic, 26 % in Hungary and 17 % in Poland). According to the authors, this reflects a stronger presence of the regional cooperation in Slovak political discourse, dating back to late 1990s.

Besides being “more informed”, the Slovak public seemed to be more enthusiastic about V4 than its neighbours; 70 % of the respondents saw Visegrad cooperation as meaningful and important, compared to 50 % of the Czechs and approximately 40 % of the Poles and Hungarians. In none of the countries did the V4 cooperation face any significant public opposition.

It is important to note that in all four countries, respondents showed a preference for economic and trade cooperation. Reasserting common positions in the EU came only third/second. Here, the Czechs (44 %), Slovaks (40 %) and Hungarians (39 %) were visibly more enthusiastic about Visegrad than the Poles (27 %).

A more positive image of the Visegrad cooperation in the Slovak public is probably rooted in a combination of political and cultural factors. As argued above, Visegrad played an important political role in the 1990s, when the country was a “transformation/integration laggard”, and neighbouring countries were role models to follow. Also, all major political

parties are formally in favour of the V4 cooperation and neighbouring countries are frequently identified as “closest allies” in their political programmes²⁵.

Some of the cultural factors were mapped out by the survey quoted above. From the four countries of the V4, Slovaks were reporting the most intensive personal contacts in neighbouring countries: 43 % have relatives in the Czech Republic, 14 % in Hungary, and 4 % in Poland, while 62 % reported friends in the Czech Republic, 23 % in Hungary, and 16 % in Poland²⁶.

Moving Apart?

What does the future of Visegrad cooperation look like from the Slovak point of view? The answer needs to be judged against two counteracting tendencies. On the one hand, cooperation with Visegrad members is deeply embedded in political and public discourse, as well as the mainstream political consensus. While the V4 did not develop robust administrative capacities, government bureaucracies – especially at the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs – have created formal and informal structures of cooperation and coordination with the Visegrad partners.

On the other hand, the importance and efficiency of Visegrad cooperation was strongly interwoven with the Slovak interests in the EU. Currently, Visegrad countries are trying to re-establish a fragile political equilibrium between two distinct routes. Poland and Hungary are governed by nationalist conservative forces that dominate the national political landscapes. Slovakia and the Czech Republic are governed by ideologically diffuse coalitions of mainstream “responsible” parties.

While the contours of the future “EU core” are still unclear, nor is it the only feasible scenario, if some EU countries proceed with deeper integration in areas like economic & social policies, or taxes, membership in the Eurozone would probably be an important factor dividing ins and outs.

It is currently not conceivable that Hungary and Poland would opt for EMU membership, or commit to a specific entry date. In the Czech Republic, the future EU strategy will be influenced by the general election results, and the composition of the next government. If pro-European parties in Slovakia maintain their current fragile political prevalence, they might face a situation when maintaining a semblance of close cooperation in Visegrad, and active participation in the “EU core” would amount to the political squaring of a circle. ●

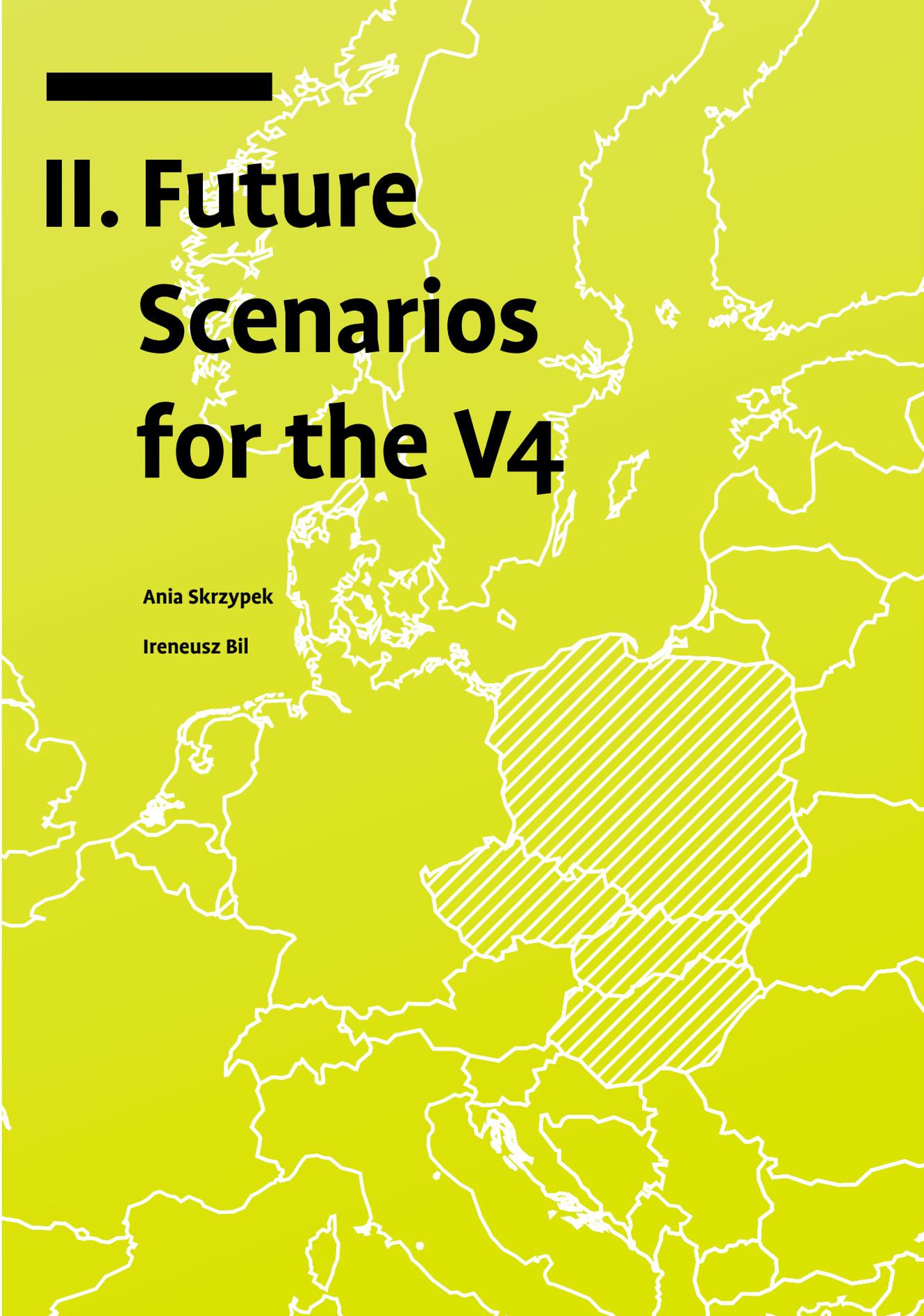
22 As one of the top Slovak bureaucrats involved in Slovak EU policies pointed to the author of this text, Slovak diplomacy played an important role in conciliating Polish officials before the EU summit in Rome in Spring 2016, when shortly before the summit, Warsaw threatened that it may refuse to sign the joint declaration. Without passing judgments on the real role played by Slovakia in this case, it's an illustrative example how some Slovak decision-makers try to reconcile their pro-European stance, and their striving for keeping unity in V4.

23 This was probably one of the reasons behind the Slovak initiative to “drag the Czech Republic more” into the discussions on the future of the EU. See for example EurActiv.sk: Fico chce Čechov vtiahnuť do debát o „jadre“ EÚ, 4.09.2017, <https://euractiv.sk/clanky/buducnost-eu/fico-chce-cechov-vtiahnut-debat-o-jadre-eu/> (accessed on 9.09.2017)

24 Oľga Gyarfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov: 25 rokov V4 očami verejnosti. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2016

25 For example, in 2016 at the general elections, all political parties considered the Visegrad Group as a platform that multiplies the influence of Slovakia in the EU and which helps coordinate positions. Only the representative of KDH was very critical of the role of the Visegrad Group at the EU level recently. See: Zuzana Gabrižová, Radovan Geist: Rozšírenie bojového poľa? Analýza postojov a programov slovenských politických strán pre voľbami do Národnej rady SR 2016. EurActiv.sk, February 2016.

26 Oľga Gyarfášová, Grigorij Mesežnikov: 25 rokov V4 očami verejnosti. Inštitút pre verejné otázky, 2016, p. 24, 25.



II. Future Scenarios for the V4

Ania Skrzypek

Ireneusz Bil

Ania Skrzypek

Diverging Visions for Europe: EU and Visegrad Group at the Midterm of Legislative Period 2014–2019

The ambition of this paper is to analyse the relationship between the European Union as a whole and the network of the four member states from Central and Eastern Europe, which are known as “Visegrad” or “V4” Group. The underpinning question here is embedded in the debate about the future of the European Union, namely in how far evidently divergent ideas coming respectively from “Brussels” and from within the region could be cohered. More specifically, this article seeks to find out in how far the EU can rely on having V4 countries’ collective commitment to both safeguarding its fundamental values and designing policies, which could ensure a better, fairer and more prosperous future for everyone across the continent.

In order to provide an answer, it is necessary to apply a somewhat experimental methodology. Whilst the EU is a community, of which objectives and operations are regulated by, among others, the respective Treaties – the V4 reflects the efforts of the countries of the Central European region to work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration¹. As such it is not an official structure, or even an EU’s sub-group, which would have a prerogative to speak together internationally or devise any specific legally binding agenda, towards which the EU could or would have to have a specific strategy. This means that a formal relationship, understood in contractual terms, cannot be assessed. Instead however, it is possible to evaluate a number of political situations that were created in the past two and a half years by one or more of the V4 countries (while referring to the *Visegrad umbrella*) and consequently the impact that these had on the EU policy. This is the reason why the paper will focus on selected case studies for drawing more general conclusions.

Indeed, the resonance of the diverse individual or collective acts by the V4 countries has been reaching an extent by which they have started animating European public opinion. That has been happening especially around the summits.

With the EU still at the crossroads and itself still uncertain about ways in which divided community can be brought together, it is of a great relevance to try to foretell what can be expected from four states when it eventually comes to deciding upon a common vision for the future. While they are located at the geographical centre, two of them particularly show a tendency to exempt themselves from the mainstream, to wave a threat vetoing and to seek seclusion at the peripheries of EU politics. The impact of that is bound to go beyond the domestic level. It will affect the key decisions ahead: such as the ones regarding Social Europe, Multiannual Financial Framework or institutional reform. The way they will play will remain meaningful by the next European Elections of 2019 that are key in providing the pro-EU reformers with the legitimacy needed to pursue the dream of the Union for the times to come.

The Principle Approach of the Visegrad Group Towards the European Integration

It has been twenty-six years since the renewed Visegrad Group was established. By that time, a quarter of a century ago, when Lech Wałęsa, Václav Havel and József Antall sat around the same table reviving the somewhat nostalgic motion of the Visegrad Congress 1335, the countries that they represented were still undergoing fundamental changes of their systems². Hence the unifying agenda was one of four pillars, which included: elimination of remnants of the communist bloc; desire to overcome historic animosities; conviction that jointly it will be easier to accomplish greater goals – such as joining the EU (and NATO); and finally, proximity of experiences that would create a sense of intellectual-political community among the leaders³. In other words, the initial motivation was: commitment to democracy, peace, European integration and regional cooperation, all four of which reflect the founding pillars of the European Communities.

¹ See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about> (accessed on 22.10.2017)

² And one of them was even to still see a split – between the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

³ See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/about/history> (accessed on 22.10.2017)

Since the revival, the intensity of connection within the Visegrad Group seems to have depended mostly on two factors⁴. The first relates to the state of affairs that would make such a regional alliance pertinent. This also explains why after the initial momentum connected with the establishment, there was a certain decline of the cooperation – which then picked up again by the end of the 1990s, when the negotiations ahead of the ‘great enlargement of 2004’ were entering into their decisive phase. The second factor has to do with the question of leadership. For some of the heads of state, the Visegrad Group has been more important than for others. And that is what can explain the prominence of the Visegrad group – the countries engaged in it over almost three decades could be presented through a graph of a sinusoid. It is evident that its recent peak has been the last three to five years, which coincides respectively with the electoral victories of Victor Orbán’s Fidesz in Hungary and Jarosław Kaczyński’s Law and Justice in Poland. Consequently, this is also why so many commentators wonder in how far the result of the recent parliamentary elections in Czech Republic can provide a further boost to it.

The combination of both – communality of interests and respective personal attention of leaders – is in fact the underpinning reason because of which the cooperation within the V4 is not dependent on politics in ideological sense of it. It is strategic, of which priorities are temporary⁵ and dictated not by the political principles, but by the needs of the moments. To exemplify that it is worth recalling that when Visegrad alliance came to matter *again* at the break of the centuries, the issue at stake was a question of accessing the EU – which was a process finalised by the Progressives in three out of those four countries. But then again, the recent intensification of exchanges was prompted by the initiatives of the respective national leaders – among whom: two were Progressives⁶ and two others represented the right and far right respectively.

That may also partially explain why it is necessary to be looking at a two-fold agenda within the Visegrad group. The first layer of it is constituted by the *more formal* agreements, of which record is available through the relatively robust V4 website. The second is the informal part, which may take a multilateral shape (involving all four) or be bilateral (gearing up action of only two from within the group). That later includes also all the gestures aimed at showing *support and solidarity* to one another. The example of that one is the *silent* – assumed by commentators – deal between Poland

The cooperation within the V4 is not dependent on politics in ideological sense of it. It is strategic, of which priorities are temporary and dictated not by the political principles, but by the needs of the moments.

and Hungary, whereby the bond between the two countries means standing up for one another in case the EU attempts to introduce any sanctions against one of them. It is an extremely powerful aspect of the cooperation, as with the need for unanimity required in case of those EU penitentiary procedures, presupposed veto of one practically excludes any possibility for the EU to take consolidated action.

Coming back to the issue of the content, the body of the documents would suggest that in the past two and half years (that are in the scope of this paper), the Visegrad cooperation was devoted mainly to the matters of: defense⁷; migration; neighbourhood and enlargement policies; issues of innovation, reindustrialisation and cohesion. This is the picture that emerges from looking at the index of the topics signalled by the diverse leaders’ summits’ declarations, and especially the very instructive text of the *Joint Statement of the Visegrád Group Countries* from Brussels from 17th December 2015⁸. That separate communication was issued *on the margins of the European Council* and while it endorses the focus of the debate on the future of Europe as extremely necessary, it points to a somewhat different understanding of the challenges and the ways to face them than what the conclusions of the Council, itself taking place then, would indicate. To offer two telling examples: first, the *Joint Statement* indicates the fear that the way the EU plans to address the issue of intensified migration may pose a threat to Schengen and hence the policy agenda should focus much more on tightening of the external borders. And second, whilst the heads of government seem to fully back the drive towards an Energy Union and call for prompt implementation, they see it first and foremost as a matter of national security. Nowhere in two paragraphs that deal with the issue do they refer to the overall EU policy guidelines, which would include parameters of sustainability, change of production-consumption models or environmental policy etc. Instead, they rather speak about *reduction of energy dependency and diversification of sources, suppliers and routes*⁹.

4 In that sense this article complements the argument made in the paper by I.Bil in this volume, in which the author proposes a typology of 6 phases of the cooperation within the V4.

5 Namely: chosen ad hoc, dictated by the moment.

6 In other words: from the political parties belonging to the PES – Party of European Socialists.

7 As indicated in the Budapest Declaration of the Visegrad Group Heads of Government on the New Opening in V4 Cooperation from 24th June 2014, see: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/budapest-declaration-of> (accessed on 22.10.2017)

8 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-151221-1> (accessed on 22.10.2017)

9 Ibidem.

To that end, it is legitimate to say that the optics of the V4 in general terms are not focused on what belonging to the Community would mean or what the *Future of the European Union* as a whole should be about. That was the approach at first, which then evolved making the V4 opt for more self-centered strategic approaches based on seeking to firstly safeguard the fulfillment of their own needs. While it may just be stipulated *now and then* across the different statements, it becomes quite apparent when reading, for instance, the *Joint Statement of the prime ministers of the Visegrád Group Countries on the 25th V4 Anniversary* signed in Prague and dated on 15th February 2016¹⁰. It states that: *Recent developments – whose common denominator is the challenging of peace, security and prosperity of EU citizens – demand a joint response from all European allies. We draw the lessons from our own experience of how dangerous weakening of European unity may be. We want European integration to help its member states to achieve their objectives. This is why we actively work to keep the European Union dynamic and flexible based on its traditional quality of “unity in diversity”. That is how the V4 countries understand the deepening of the European integration – which makes them supporters of an idea closed to the historical concept of the Union of Nations/States. Within such a framework they see their regional cooperation as vital, claiming: We want the European Union to be strong and a stronger European Union needs a strong Visegrád Group.*

The Debate on the Future of Europe and the Multiple Clashes

Following what has been described in the previous section, it would seem that the intensity of the V4 cooperation depends on two factors: the communality of interests of the participating countries in the given moment and the commitment of the leaders to make it work. To that end, the agenda is frequently modified to serve the needs of the moments and remains two-fold, with the first layer being the cohered position on the political issues, and the second providing leaders with the comfort of mutual support when it comes to the EU. At this stage, they see the Union as being on the crossroads and they would see that the solution is pursuing a kind of Europe of strong nations (states), where first and foremost the particular interests of the members would be catered to.

The V4 leaders see the Union as being on the crossroads and they would see that the solution is pursuing a kind of Europe of strong nations (states).

This is, in fact, key to understanding the positioning of the Visegrad Group vis-à-vis the European Union and what kind of changes (policy proposals) they would eventually support in the context of the ongoing debate on the *Future of Europe*. While it would be tempting to look at diverse issues, the scope of the paper requires a strict selection – which following the priorities mentioned especially in the diverse leaders' declarations would incorporate the questions of: migration, environment, social Europe, democracy and legislative appointments. The article will further provide a general overview of the V4 positions on them (or when appropriate V2, V3 stands) and what these countries' approach has meant so far in the larger context of the EU decision-making processes.

Migration – defining paradigms of solidarity and security

The EU migration and asylum policies have been issues that the V4 leaders and respective ministers have been discussing extensively since 2015. The political line they collectively chose became a subject of disagreements with “Brussels”. The conflict has been escalating ever since, seeing the European Court of Justice involving itself with ruling on Hungary and Slovakia, and the EU threatening Hungary and Poland especially with fines. What could be seen as a core of the dispute in the incongruities is on what is the meaning of solidarity and what provides security respectively.

The leaders of V4 addressed the questions of migration and refugee policies directly for the first time in their declaration presented to the public on 15th February 2016¹¹. It was issued at the occasion of the extraordinary summit in Prague that was to mark the jubilee of 25 years of Visegrad cooperation. To begin with, they expressed their support for all the actions of the EU that would aim at securing the external borders. They shared a concern that more should be done in neighbouring countries – especially those in Balkans – so as to avoid raising tensions. This message further emphasised that whichever actions there were to be taken, the core preoccupation should be a need to safeguard what V4 heads of governments called “cornerstones of the European integration”: namely *Schengen and the principle of free movement*. To that end, they repeated their negative stance on automatic permanent relocation mechanism. They argued that instead, attention should be paid to the factors that prompted more migration in 2015, whereby they considered that more could be done by EU, NATO or even ‘when appropriate’ bilateral cooperation, in terms of humanitarian policies to “manage migration flows”.

Articulating this narrative had continued, bringing the V4 interior ministers to a meeting in Warsaw on 21st November 2016. There, another joint statement was issued, reaffirming

10 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the>

11 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-on>

that when it comes to the so called “migration situation”¹² the Visegrad countries continue having a coherent, unifying position¹³. The ministers acknowledged that the situation called for enhanced cooperation and “delivering results-oriented solutions”. These in their opinion should first and foremost focus on reducing the influx of illegal immigrants and hereafter regaining the “control over the management of mixed migration flows”. In order to do so, they believed it was necessary to address root causes of illegal migration to the EU by 1) providing assistance to third countries hosting large numbers of migrants; 2) supporting effective processing of asylum claims, including by tackling the phenomenon of the abuse of international protection for the purpose of unjustified illegal entry into the EU; as well as 3) improving return and readmission rates of migrants not eligible for international protection in the EU.

Furthermore, the ministers underlined that solutions introducing mandatory relocation of migrants, whether based on an ad-hoc decisions or a permanent mechanism, cannot be considered as effective measures to address such influx. The EU has shown inability to implement such measures and their introduction has even led to unnecessary divisions among the member states. They argued that relocation of migrants who do not qualify for international protection constitutes an additional pull factor for irregular migration. For these reasons they said they must reject mandatory relocations of illegal migrants or a similar permanent mechanism becoming a part of the EU’s response to the migration crisis.

These two statements capture the position of the V4, of which countries described the overall EU approach as *dividing member states*. They discussed the notion of “solidarity” as applied by the Union, stating that instead it is a *flexible common policy framework* that would be a true expression of both that and the respect for the members¹⁴. To show their own commitment and willingness to find what they labeled as *unequivocal solutions*, they announced that following their earlier debates¹⁵ they would establish Migration Crisis Response Mechanism (MCRM). It would be a network enabling better cooperation and exchange of information, which they saw as instrumental in further identifying priorities for action. The MCRM would see coordinators elected and also the budget (deriving from the resources made available by the participating states) – while the overall responsibility for the Mechanisms would be entrusted to Poland.

The most recent Joint Statement by the V4 prime ministers from their meeting in Budapest on 10th July 2017 only hardens the position, which is one of readiness to contribute

to the EU solutions supposedly provided that they are in the line of the Visegrad countries’ common approach. The prime ministers underline that whilst the migration situation remained an unresolved challenge in Europe and the flows through the Mediterranean even increased, they themselves can take pride in helping to mitigate the arrivals of the refugees and migrants through the Balkans. They insist that the EU policies need to be reviewed to make it possible to distinguish easier between the asylum seekers and any other displaced persons. In relation to that, they believed that the efforts should be directed at dealing with cases of migration, since so little could be done to “help” at the “end-point” of Europe. To that end, they also state that *mandatory and automatic relocation has not contributed to the migratory pressure on Europe. The relocation scheme did not provide the answer we are looking for, it even generates an additional pull factor. Almost two years after the adoption of the debated decision, which is still challenged at the European Court of Justice and is going to expire in September 2017, the overall rate of implementation by member states as a whole is only 13%. The Visegrád countries are of the view that the general EU strategy has to be reviewed and based on consensus based actions.*

Within that general framework, the V4 countries took different actions. Hungary and Slovakia challenged relocation quotas in the European Court of Justice¹⁶ – this claim was dismissed, causing a fury in Budapest and Bratislava – which echoed in the words of Peter Szijarto, Hungarian Foreign Minister, who said that “politics has raped European law and values”. And then, both these states, as well as Poland explicitly reaffirmed that they were not ready to acknowledge the rulings and would continue opposing the relocation nevertheless. The EU threatened with sanctions, but this warning was only further used in the domestic contexts by the governments of the V4 to showcase that the EU applies unilateral approach “without the concerns for fears of the citizens of the member states”.

What the dispute around the migration question shows is the mismatch between what would be a common, pan-European solution and what the V4 perceived the policy answer should be in order to safeguard their own strategic interests. Clearly, there was a different idea of what the founding principles translate into in that context – which is where the conflict arose, especially about how to understand *solidarity*. To that end, while the Visegrad group spoke a lot about a need to distinguish between migrants and asylum seekers, paradoxically their own statements suggest that the inclination to mix migration, the question of refugees and freedom of movement

12 From the statement quoted below.

13 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-v4> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

14 Ibidem.

15 “of senior officials” in Jugowice on 29–30 August and in Prague on 19 October 2016.

16 See: James Crisp, Matthew Day, European divisions over migration brutally exposed by EU court judgment on refugee quotas, *The Telegraph*, 6.09.2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/06/eu-court-rejects-refugee-quota-challenge-hungary-slovakia/>; Cynthia Kroet, ECJ rejects Slovakia, Hungary refugee challenge, *Politico.eu*, 9.06.2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/ecj-rejects-slovakia-hungary-refugee-challenge/> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

within the EU. Dangerously too, they were talking about the need to activate humanitarian aid and address the root causes at the departure points, but the rest of the processes they would see in the very narrow dimension of security, sealing the external borders¹⁷ and fighting security threats. If anything, this contributed to creating a feeling among their citizens that is described as the syndrome of a “fortress under siege”¹⁸.

Environment – discussing sustainability and modernisation

What may come as a surprise, taking into account the overall perception, is that the environmental policies have constituted a relevant point of the Visegrad cooperation. The deliberation could be essentially categorized into two groups – the first concerns the questions of energy security, and the second refers more to the new models of production and consumption.

Within the analysed period, by 18th June 2015 there was a relevant common position issued by the Ministers of Environment within the V4. They gathered in Tatranska Lomnica and exchanged views in the presence of the representatives of the United States. The main conclusions were that the V4 should focus its funds on what they called boosting a *circu-lar economy*, which in their view could create business opportunities and subsequently help in bringing about green jobs, socio-economic-environmental development and enhance international competitiveness. The V4 efforts would focus on exchanging information and best practices to search for new opportunities in the areas of: *energy efficiency and renewable energy, waste management including mining waste and contaminated sites, and water management*. In a nutshell, the declaration remains quite general and refrains from addressing any questions that could be potentially controversial – such as the overall EU commitment to de-carbonisation.

Furthermore, there is a noteworthy declaration by the Visegrad Group ministers on the question of gas transit through Ukraine¹⁹, which was adopted at the conference in Ostrava on 17th September 2015. The text is declarative, but effectively addressed the European Union as a whole. It calls on the principles of solidarity and demands that the EU defines an effective approach in the tri-lateral relations, ensuring that the gas deliveries through Ukraine will remain uninterrupted especially ahead of the upcoming winter. The statement may surprise, but taking into considera-

tion the previous experiences – the perspective of yet another interruption and energy crisis from the Baltic Sea to the Balkans was in fact a realistic prospect.

And indeed, energy security tended to remain the pre-occupation – which subsequent Joint Declaration of Agricultural Ministers of V4 (signed together with their counter partners from Bulgaria and Romania) from 21st September 2017 indicated²⁰. It also incorporated another relevant insight, showcasing the V4 countries’ commitment to certain preservations of their production-consumption models. In the Declaration, which, in the title refers to the EU Renewable Energy Directive beyond 2020, the ministers state that they share the assessment on what the law changes would mean in terms of the agricultural sector. They insisted that the *utilisation of the renewable energy sources of agricultural origin enhances energy security and plays an important role in the sustainability of Europe*. In that sense they oppose the efforts to phase out biofuels, saying that it would *reduce European feed security, will result in even lower rural incomes, will force investors to flee Europe, in addition to making the attainment of climate goals more difficult*. That is why they argued that the actual level of the renewable energy sources of agricultural origin should be maintained or, if possible, increased after 2020 and called on the European Commission to again ‘comprehensively analyse the issue’, and on the presidency to discuss the agricultural aspects of the proposals at the Council level.

The questions around the standards and guidelines of production and consumption marked another disagreement that soon developed to the extent which ensured its mentioning in the 2017 State of the Union²¹ in the following words: *In a Union of equals, there can be no second class consumers either. I cannot accept that in some parts of Europe, in Central and Eastern Europe, people are sold food of lower quality than in other countries, despite the packaging and branding being identical. Slovaks do not deserve less fish in their fish fingers. Hungarians less meat in their meals. Czechs less cacao in their chocolate. EU law outlaws such practices already. And we must now equip national authorities with stronger powers to cut out these illegal practices wherever they exist*. It was an answer to the earlier protest articulated by the V4 prime ministers, who issued a statement on 19th July 2017, while meeting in Budapest²². They stated there that it is unacceptable for consumers in the EU to be treated differently and the practices observed were against the key principle of non-discrimination of the common market.

17 See the ideas behind construction of the border fence in Hungary, <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2017/09/16/hungary-builds-a-wall-cuts-illegal-immigration-by-over-99-per-cent/> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

18 See for example the speech by the Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło in Sejm on 24th May 2017 in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, when she called EU to “raise from knees”, <https://www.wprost.pl/kraj/10056334/Mocne-slowa-Szydlo-w-Sejmie-Dokad-zmierzasz-Europa-Powstan-z-kolan-i-obudz-sie-z-letargu.html> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

19 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-declaration-of> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

20 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/selected-events-in-2017-170203/joint-declaration-of-the> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

21 President Jean-Claude Juncker’s State of the Union Address 2017, European Commission, Brussels, 13.09.2017, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm (accessed on 7.11.2017)

22 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

To recapitulate, while environment may not have been the most evident spot for further disagreements between the EU and the V4, it effectively became a floor for mutual disappointments. On one hand, the approach of the V4 brought the region into a collision course with the European policies aimed at fighting climate change and ensuring sustainability. With prominence here are the reluctance of especially more agriculture-oriented Visegrad countries to enable any changes that would impact this sector, even if at the same time they agree that the circular economy and the prospects of green jobs should be explored. On the other, there is an obvious differentiation in understanding of what environmental and energy security would mean for in the future. For the V4 it is first and foremost a question of strategic approach, which would, for example, ensure that the region is not deprived of its gas deliveries from Russia. But while that is the case, reading of the subsequent statements proves distressing, seeing how little has been achieved in terms of looking at how to innovate, decarbonise and seek new energy resources. To that end, the most pertinent, controversial issues remain unaddressed – such as, for example, the nuclear power plants that used to cause frictions within the V4 themselves.

Social Europe – diverging on welfare, prosperity and competition

The more recent attempt of the EU to advance on the social issues has also been a focal attention point for the Central and Eastern region as a whole, and therefore naturally also for the Visegrad Countries. There persists a clear divide in the approaches here between West and East, which starts from the unsolved distributional conflicts and ends with the unwavering stand when it comes to another understanding of what fair competition within the EU means. While the overall philosophy of the EU, pretty much since the year 2000 and the introduction of the Lisbon Strategy, has been to become the most prosperous knowledge based economy of which gains benefit to improvement of living and working conditions for all – until quite recently the CEE countries would insist on competing in purely economic terms, which would make them argue for the country of origin principle and other measures, enabling to provide, for example, cheaper labour force.

And this is part of the reasoning why the V4 has been reluctant to endorse any further changes in the dimension of Social Europe. A very telling example that can be used as an illustration is the process around amending of the Posting of Workers Directive²³. The joint statement of the prime ministers of V4 from 11th May 2017 calls the attempt to change the law *premature*. Their motivation is that: *Nature of posting*

of workers is directly linked with a fundamental issue such as free provision of services together with integrity of the internal market. It is one of the pillars of the internal market, which is truly beneficial for the whole European Union. Proposed revision of the Directive 96/71/EC introduces provisions, which, in our opinion, will most likely hamper European economy and affect global competitiveness of the European Union alike. The new rules on remuneration, subcontracting and postings lasting more than 24 months would impose a disproportionate burden on cross-border service providers, undermine price competition and increase the costs of providing services in the European Union. As a result, many companies, especially small and medium ones, would be eliminated from the internal market to the detriment of prosperity of the European Union as a whole²⁴. Furthermore, they state that it is in our common interest to ensure rights of the workers in the posting situations, tackle frauds and illegal practices. But we need to strike the right balance between freedom to provide services and protection of workers. (...) Ultimately, we aim to safeguard freedom to provide services as enshrined in the Treaties against protectionist practices infringing fundamental rules of the internal market. Adoption of the amendment to the Posting of Workers Directive and extension of the new posting of workers rules to the transport sector would bring even more restrictions in the internal market and would legitimate return to protectionism.

This encapsulates the core of the distributional conflict, which, as mentioned, keeps on tearing the EU into East and West. The former liberalised and opened up its economies in parallel with the transition of their political systems, orientating themselves to perform as far as growth and strictly economically understood competitiveness is concerned. But while Poland and Czech Republic exceeded in that sense, followed by Slovakia that reached a level allowing it to join the European Monetary Union – the problem of these countries citizens being kind of second class workers within the EU internal market (when it comes to salaries, social security, social mobility or training) remained unsolved. While the debate progressed, the V4 joined the eleven countries that triggered the yellow card procedure to block the revision of the Directive²⁵. In the end however, after the lengthy negotiations, two out of V4 reversed their position – seeing Slovakia and Czech Republic voting in favour of the change.

This, alongside with what happened in couloirs of the debate on the European Pillar of Social Rights showed that when it comes to Social Europe issues there are preoccupations shared by V4, which do not ensure that at the end of the day they would act together. This offers a tiny glimmer

23 Directive 96/71/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 1996 concerning the posting of workers in the framework of the provision of services

24 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/selected-events-in-2017-170203/joint-statement-of-the>

25 See Asociácia zamestnávateľských zväzov a združení SR, Slovakia voted for rule reform on posted workers, 25.10.2017, <http://www.azzz.sk/en/2017/10/slovakia-voted-rule-reform-posted-workers/> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

of hope that within this dimension it would be possible to reach further progress on the EU level at the upcoming Social Summit for Fair Growth and Jobs in Gothenburg²⁶.

Democracy – the strength of principles versus an electoral legitimacy

Deliberating on the divergent approach of the EU and the V4 to the questions of migration, environment or Social Europe has been possible while using the empirical material deriving from the official statements made by the V4 leaders of the countries respective ministers. Two subsequent issues that this paper aims at analysing (questions of democracy and top jobs appointments) belong to the other, informal layer of the cooperation. It frequently pulls in only some countries, prompting a fair question in how far they are in fact “Visegrad issues”.

It is a general belief that two out of the four Visegrad countries – Hungary and Poland – went on the path that would see them becoming what Fareed Zakaria labeled²⁷ as *illiberal democracies*²⁸. This term refers to a system in which the elections are taking place, but citizens are cut off from the knowledge about the proceedings of those holding power, face cut down when it comes to civil liberties and find themselves more and more a part of what is the opposite of the “open society”. And that is naturally a great preoccupation for the rest of the EU, which as a Community was founded on a principle agreement that democracy is the ideal the Members would both collectively and individually pursue as a contractual obligation.

Hungary was out there first. Since Victor Orbán assumed the position of prime minister in 2010, he put in place subsequent measures that would deconstruct the constitutional order and effectively limit individual freedoms. Step by step he succeeded in establishment of what commentators labeled as “Orbanocracy”²⁹, of which core elements have been control of media and recently also an attempt to seek political supremacy over education. The EU had been sending numerous warnings for a while, which many thought would not prove particularly persuasive – but then on 17th May 2017 an unprecedented vote took place in the European Parliament³⁰, which sent a clear and straightforward message that *enough is enough*. The most direct trigger of it was the amendment that Prime Minister Orbán proposed to a bill on a Higher Education. Enacting of it would mean, for example, the closure of

the Central European University, which quite quickly became a symbol of the resistance. Arriving to Brussels to argue for his case, Victor Orbán stated that there is *no base for the accusations* and that a *solution could easily be found*. In the end, his rhetoric took the course of defying the EU for stepping over its mandate and interfering in the internal affairs.

A similar tone is being heard from the side of the Polish government since the very first crash about the reform of the Polish Constitutional Court in winter 2015/2016. The understanding of the EU was that the changes that the ruling Law and Justice was proposing would threaten the independence of the judicial system – that it would heavily undermine the capacity to act by the only body that the National Constitution empowered with a prerogative to judge what is and what is not legal when it comes to adoption of any new laws. Consequently, Prime Minister Beata Szydło appeared at the European Parliament to explain the case on 19th January 2016³¹. She gave a passionate speech, which was evidently first and foremost addressed to the audience back home. Similarly to her Hungarian counterpart, Szydło argued that the proposed changes have primarily political and not legal consequence, and as such they are effectively an internal matter that she would be ready to discuss with the opposition at home. To that end, the prime minister also underlined that the mandate to propose and execute such political decisions derives from the support that her party obtained in the democratic elections. In other words, that they have legitimate power to reform as they please within the country they rule.

Conclusively, there are three issues on the table. First of all, there seems to be a retreat from democracy within the countries that only a generation ago were overwhelmingly convinced that it was a system they wanted to turn to, build in and develop. The interesting thing is that this shift is not a matter that would be related to economic performance of the country, which some analysts tried to argue in the case of Hungary. While there is evidence to suggest that it was the economic crisis that influenced voting patterns there, this would not work elsewhere – since Polish and Czech figures constitute counterevidence. This why the reasons for the shift have to be explained looking at the complexity of different factors, among them socio-economical³² and also cultural ones. Secondly, there is a profound disagreement about what democracy is and what it takes to preserve it. The governments in Hungary and Poland seem to claim a very hybrid

26 See EC Social Summit for Fair Jobs and Growth, Gothenburg, <https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/content/ec-social-summit-fair-jobs-and-growth-gothenburg> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

27 Fareed Zakaria, The rise of illiberal democracy, *Foreign Affairs*; Nov/Dec 1997; 76, 6; ABI/INFORM Global pp. 22-43, http://www.closer2oxford.ro/uploads/2012/06/12/The_Rise_of_Illiberal_Democracy.gfiruw.pdf (accessed on 7.11.2017)

28 partial democracy, low intensity democracy, empty democracy, hybrid regime.

29 See: Daniel Penev, Hungary was once a democracy: Now it is an ‘Orbanocracy’, *EURACTIV*, 5.04.2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/freedom-of-thought/opinion/hungary-was-one-a-democracy-now-it-is-an-orbanocracy/> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

30 See: Eszter Zalan, MEPs vote to start democracy probe on Hungary, *EUObserver*, 17.05.2017, <https://euobserver.com/political/137943> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

31 See European Parliament News: Poland: is rule of law at risk in the country?, 19.01.2016, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/security/20160118STO10406/poland-is-rule-of-law-at-risk-in-the-country> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

32 The thought here is that the GDP is not enough to illustrate the socio-economic situation and hence the citizens’ positioning within a country. All 4 states have been pursuing liberal course in post-1989 reality, which most evidently did not provide security for all. Potentially, what could be a hypothesis that the run behind the economic growth through flexibilisation of policies made these countries compete on the costs of production and trade, exempting the concern about the social impact and pressures on living/working standards.

understanding, whereby they use the argument of democratic electoral legitimacy to their benefits and reject principles of transparency and accountability towards the European Community their countries belong to. And finally, there is a power struggle at hand. Whilst the EU goes frontal, warning Budapest and Warsaw about possible consequences of their actions, those countries' Heads of Government argue that the EU is weak³³ and its elites are lost in terms of sense of direction, priorities and possibilities to actually make a difference.

The EU top jobs – striking the balance between national action and keeping the region together

The last crunch moment that the paper wish to shed some light on is the Summit of 2017 and the reappointment of Donald Tusk as the President of the European Council. Primarily, entrusting President Tusk with the job on 30th August 2014 was and wasn't a surprise. "Was" as there were difficult negotiations around the post, with a view to 2017 and the concern of how to keep the political balance among the key positions in Europe to safeguard the personal underpinning of the functioning of the Grand Coalition. "Wasn't" as Tusk was a long serving prime minister of a large Central and Eastern European country, where his party still held a majority at that point in the parliament. Poland under his rule seem to have averted any negativities of the economic crisis, and was even presented as an example to the others in terms of being a modernising, blossoming economy. Moreover, Tusk had been enjoying good relationships with Berlin, which at this point was also an asset.

This all played in his favour at the moment of the nomination. After assuming the position, Tusk was frequently a subject of criticism especially from within the Brussels based circles. Although he spent the first month learning English, his communication skills at the beginning were not strong enough to enable building any direct relations. After Herman Van Rompuy, it would seem that he would be rather a 'job keeper' than a 'job transformer' – and Council after Council it would seem that indeed he wasn't to take too much of initiative. But on the other hand, there was nothing major that would stipulate that he wasn't fit for the post. This kind of ambiguity around him wasn't new – at least not to the Polish audience – who, if to base oneself only and solemnly on the external reviews – would agree that this was the Donald Tusk they knew.

Therefore, the corridor conversations ahead of the summit were not entirely excluding replacing Donald Tusk – and some more specific names were even being thrown into the hat. Among them was Helle Thorning-Schmidt, which would in theory rebalance the EPP and S&D³⁴.

But when it came to the European Council, it was none of the major players that would then set the fire – but to the contrary that was the Polish government, who came with a counter-proposal³⁵. Although the official communication of Jarosław Kaczyński, who seldom makes these kind of statements, was along the lines of political ethos – the fact remained that the action was based on purely personal hate and the way it was conducted exposed Poland as an inexperienced, disoriented state when it comes to the EU politics and diplomacy.

And here comes the point perhaps most relevant for this paper about the Visegrad cooperation when it comes to the EU. It is of course not documented in how far Warsaw was in contact with Prague, Bratislava and Berlin before – but it was vastly speculated that they were hoping at least to get the backing from Victor Orbán. Such an act not only did not happen, but also was excluded by additional visible signs that Hungarian Prime Minister sent out. He appeared at the Summit on the 9th March 2017 with an EPP bag, which of course could have been a pure coincidence – but was instead read as a sign that in the end he would vote with the other leaders from the European People's Party that Fidesz belonged to³⁶. Herewith also the EU, unlike before (for example in the case of negotiations with the UK ahead of that country's referendum), decided to stand strong and not allow one member to keep it hostage³⁷.

When the decision was taken and Donald Tusk entrusted with the prolongation of his mandate, the Brussels commentators wrote that: *Poland's opposition to Tusk opened a serious rift in the so-called Visegrád Four of the central European nations, with Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic backing Tusk and praising him as an ally of the emerging powers*³⁸.

But even if Warsaw was bitterly disappointed about lack of backing from the V4 states for its anti-Tusk policies, Beata Szydło herself underlined the willingness to move on – reflected in the following statement: *We have prepared together a document that we want to serve as the basis of discussions [on the future of Europe] in Rome. We will soon have another Visegrád meeting in Warsaw to discuss innovation.* While Czech Republic and Slovakia remained silent, Victor Orbán did not wait long to reply from his side that otherwise Hungary is still committed to "protecting Poland" and that his *respect for Poland and friendship towards Kaczynski has not changed.* It was a signal that though challenged, the Visegrad cooperation would survive the pressure test and the leaders from the region would move on.

33 See the speech of Beata Szydło in Polish Sejm, source: Express.co.uk, 27.05.2017, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/809779/Poland-prime-minister-Beata-Szydlo-o-rage-Europe-EU-leaders-Manchester-bombing>

34 See: Jorge Valero, Tusk reappointment highlights EPP monopoly of top posts, Euractiv.com, 9.03.2017, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/tusk-re-election-highlights-epp-monopoly-of-top-eu-posts/>

35 See: Lidia Kelly, Jan Strupczewski, Poland to oppose Tusk's re-appointment as EU leaders' chair, Reuters, 28.02.2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-eu-tusk/poland-to-oppose-tusks-re-appointment-as-eu-leaders-chair-idUSKBN1671U3>

36 See: Aleksandra Eriksson, Polish trolls target Orbán over Tusk re-election, EUobserver, 10.03.2017, <https://euobserver.com/beyond-brussels/137200>

37 See France24: Poland threatens to block Tusk's reappointment to European Council, 09.03.2017, <http://www.france24.com/en/20170309-eu-leaders-back-tusk-eu-council-president-opposition-poland>

38 See: David M. Herszenhorn, EU leaders defy Warsaw to reappoint Donald Tusk, Politico, 3.09.2017, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-leaders-reappoint-donald-tusk-as-council-president/>

So What Can Be Expected Ahead of 2019?

The five selected case studies provide an important overview, which can help in understanding the nature of the Visegrad cooperation. That is even if looking at other interests addressed within the developing collaboration (such as neighbourhood policies, Eastern Partnership, Digital Agenda etc.) could most naturally offer further nuances. The five main conclusions are as follows.

First of all, the cooperation within the V4 has been increasing within the last years. There are two key factors that now (as much as before) have been the incentives of it: the communality of strategic political priorities, and the opinion of the leaders from those four countries that such a network matters. This is also why it is quite interesting what the next phase would be, taking into account the outcome of the recent elections in Czech Republic on one hand, and on the other the clear commitment of the Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico – who declared that the path for his country leads through heart and not the peripheries of Europe³⁹.

Secondly, the number of the V4 statements and meetings on one hand, and on the other the commitment to provide funds and establish concrete mechanisms (such as the one on the field of migration policy), are the obvious signs of consolidation. But at the same time, the agenda is still defined by the selected issues and the common declarations are not always binding until ‘the end’ (as it was the case during the vote on the Revision of the Posting of Workers’ Directive). This means however that there is certain recognition of existence of V4 on the EU level (such as by President Jean Claude Juncker in meeting this regions’ leaders for dinner ahead of the Summit)⁴⁰ and even if the Visegrad leaders try to coordinate statements ahead of the Council, there is always an option that in the midst of negotiations they would see strategic gains separately and will act individually.

Thirdly, the emerging tensions derive from clearly different understanding of the core values, principles and what the political priorities for the EU should be. In the context of migration it was clearly visible on the canvas of the discourse on solidarity, in terms of environment this comes down to interpreting sustainability – and the examples could be multiplied. That means that it will be that much harder to unite the V4 behind a new vision for the future of Europe, especially that while the debate on the meta, pan-EU level continues – it is also being led among the four. It would not seem that any of them would essentially seek opting out from being members, but at the same time two or three among them can choose to remain on the peripheries (naturally

here depending on what Community will be at stake – one or multi-speed Union).

Fourthly, the examples show that what is causing most distress in the EU – V4 relations are the questions of: security, sovereignty (subsidiarity) and the right to self-determination⁴¹. In their context, it is relevant to stress that the dispute between EU and Poland and Hungary on the democracy is not the one of the EU – V4, but what triggers certain unofficial support among two out of the four states involved. It cannot be therefore explained by ‘specificities of the region’, but is a principle matter. To that end, even if Slovakia and Czech Republic would not be involved, what on the other hand the policies of all four have been inducing is a certain idea of a threat that the EU policies would bring – when it comes to migration, labour rights, environment etc. These insecurities influence the general social mood and are reasons to worry about the prospects for the next European elections in 2019.

Although the V4 may be the most exposed, it is not the only region or the set of the only member states in Europe that is inclined to behave in protectionist, self-centered way.

Fifthly and lastly, the V4 cooperation is based on an idea of strategic alliance and is not dependent on the political colours of the respective governments of that region. This is why it was possible among two right and radical right-wing prime ministers and their two Progressive colleagues. Having said that, it is relevant to note that the focus of the cooperation changed. When the Visegrad Group was revived into its modern shape over a quarter of a century ago, the focus was democracy, peace, regional cooperation and the EU integration. Since then the interest shifted towards elaborating strategies to safeguard own respective interests within the EU, resorting to blocking pan-EU policies when so seen fitting. Although the V4 may be the most exposed when it comes to this approach due to noted outspoken, sometimes even aggressive way of presenting their standpoints – it is not the only region or the set of the only member states in Europe that is inclined to behave in protectionist, self-centered way. This is also perhaps why the herewith provided study should prompt one core reflection which is about how to bring a sense of solidarity, a mutual responsibility and hope in the EU as a project for prosperous future for all across the continent.

39 See: Tatiana Jancarikova, Slovakia’s future is with core EU, not eurosceptic eastern nations: PM, Reuters, 15.08.2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-politics-eu/slovakias-future-is-with-core-eu-not-eurosceptic-eastern-nations-pm-idUSKCN1AV1YY> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

40 See Visegrad Post: Juncker negotiates with the V4, 21.10.2017, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2017/10/21/juncker-negotiates-with-the-v4/> (accessed on 7.11.2017)

41 That is if one can talk about such crossing point, remembering that V4 is not a treaty-based organization towards which the EU could have an official, strategic approach.

Ireneusz Bil

Lessons from 26 years of Visegrad's History

Contrary to what might be intuitively assumed, the history of the Visegrad Group has rather been a record of (often undisclosed) conflicts and tensions, not a symbol of cohesion. The triangle of Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia was inaugurated in 1991 as an attempt to see whether the three countries could consult on, and coordinate their actions at the time of the search for their new geopolitical setting in transforming Europe. Quite soon it turned out that some members (Czechs in the first instance) believed that they would reach their objectives sooner and better individually. This became especially evident when individual accession talks with the European Union approached the decisive phase; Poland found itself in a position of the *arrière-garde* and was sometimes treated by other Central Europeans as an unnecessary ballast. Also, when Mečiar's Slovakia was deprived of the possibility to join NATO, this did not prevent its partners from proceeding on their own path. In consequence, the 1990s saw the Visegrad format frozen, literally, for several years. The intensiveness of the co-operation again lessened, starting with the first Law and Justice government in Poland; this happened in the wake of differing approaches to new EU institutional arrangements enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty and the acceptance of the Charter of Fundamental Rights (Poland and Václav Klaus' Czech Republic vs. Hungary and Slovakia), Warsaw's confrontational policy vis-à-vis Russia and its general aspiration to play a special regional and European role – which evoked distrust among other V4 members. One can therefore have an impression that occasionally the co-operation within the Visegrad Group has decelerated and the divisions have been transferred to the European forum¹.

As a matter of fact, today the Visegrad countries have homogeneous positions only on refugees and migrants. There is no unanimity with regard to other crucial issues:

- the future of the EU: Jarosław Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán have announced a conservative *cultural counter-revolution* and a need to return to *a Europe of nations*², while

governments and all significant political parties in the Czech Republic and Slovakia share the view that the European process should advance;

- the role of Germany: Poland's present government is clearly critical to Berlin's position and policy, Czechs and Slovaks do accept the latter's role as the major player who has special responsibilities; Hungary, although not always in full consent with Angela Merkel, maintains good relations, and certainly would be Germany's reliable partner (Fidesz is a member of the European People's Party – EPP, as is CDU);
- the Eurozone: Slovakia endorses the tightening of ties within the zone, Poland and – less radically – Hungary declare no intention to join, the Czech Republic seems to be open to accepting the common currency, if it proves beneficial;³
- the question of energy: Budapest has a close co-operation with Russia, Prague is interested in receiving gas via the Nord Stream pipeline; Warsaw and Bratislava, for different reasons, used to oppose the investment in Nord Stream 2;
- sanctions against Russia: Poland and the Czech Republic are opting for their continuation until the conflict in Ukraine is resolved in a satisfactory manner, Slovakia is not that rigid in this respect, Hungary would be eager to lift the sanctions.

The Visegrad members also attach varying meaning to different problems. Slowing down the EU's involvement in avoiding dangerous climate change is a priority for Poland, whose industry and energy production is based on coal. To the others this is not an outstanding issue. The free flow of people – workers, the self-employed and micro-companies in the first place – is another Polish top preoccupation, while the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia attach much less importance to the issue. Budapest's foreign policy is oriented towards the West Balkans, Warsaw is looking to the East (Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and other Eastern Partnership countries).

¹ Adrian Chojan, Grupa Wyszehradzka w polityce zagranicznej Polski – między współpracą a rywalizacją, Zakład Europeistyki, Instytut Nauk Politycznych Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Biuletyn Analiz i Opinii, Warsaw, No. 04/2016, pp. 9.

² See TVN24: Kaczyński i Orban zapowiadają „kontrewolucję kulturową” w UE, 6.09.2016. (<http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/forum-ekonomiczne-w-krynicy-dyskusja-jaroslaw-kaczynski-viktor-orban,674234.html> (accessed on 18.09.2017))

³ See Prague Monitor: Prime Minister Sobotka: Next government to decide on euro adoption, 19.05.2017, <http://www.praguemonitor.com/2017/05/19/pm-next-government-decide-euro-introduction> (accessed on 18.09.2017)

In fact, the realm of V4's objective common interests certainly is much wider. They all have greatly benefited from membership in the European Union; raising the EU integration to a higher level would give them all new opportunities. As NATO border states (with the exception of the Czech Republic), they share security interests. Since their levels of development are comparable, they would profit from elaborating unified economic and social specific approaches or maybe even solutions (in fields not covered by the Single European Market).

Even in questions where there seem to be purely antagonistic attitudes, the compromise might be fully possible. The Group's members differ with regard to their perception of energy security interests, but in reality they would all satisfy their needs if a common EU liberalised energy market was created or if Russia was made to become a reliable supplier who would see gas and oil as commodities not as foreign policy tools (which is highly unlikely in foreseeable future, though). They could also diversify their sources using the recently created infrastructure, as the Świnoujście LNG terminal, if enough interconnectors were built. Since the populations of the four countries are well educated, but generally lag behind in innovations, they could together focus their policies on reshaping their economies by attributing to them features of a knowledge-based economy. It would also be in their joint interest if – in a distant future – Ukraine and (democratic) Belarus joined the EU, thus moving problems characteristic for “front-line” regions away from the Visegrad area.

There is a strong correlation between the ideological orientation of the ruling quarters in the Central European states on the one hand, and their European policies and the V4 perception on the other. Right-wing governments tend to put “the Nation” at the heart of their policies, emphasise national interests, stick to a very traditional concept of sovereignty and demonstrate scepticism towards the European process; as a result, they seek other allies than those in the “mainstream” of the integration, in particular Germany and France⁴. They tend to turn to the V4 in an attempt to convince partners thereof to subscribe to this line. This is also visible in the recent Polish effort to promote the illusive “Three Seas” initiative, which would embrace a number of other Central and Eastern European countries aside from the V4.

Progressive and liberal governments, on the contrary, are open to seeking common European solutions. They treat the Visegrad format as an additional forum, secondary to the EU as such, where they can consult positions and initiatives. Since the internal politics in the four states is still quite unstable, the whole construction is in a permanent swing.

These general observations need to be taken into account in any projection of the Visegrad's future scenarios.

Mid-Term Perspective

In the mid-term perspective, i.e. as long as populist governments are still in power in Hungary and Poland (results of Czech 2017 October elections are not known yet) and new European solutions are not found, the Visegrad Group will function as it has done it for the past two years: taking positions in selected, not numerous, areas where consensus is attainable, and abstaining from actions where diverging views prevail.

In the mid-term perspective, the Visegrad Group will function as it has done it for the past two years: taking positions in selected areas where consensus is attainable and abstaining from actions where diverging views prevail.

The common line regarding the issue of refugees will surely be continued. The V4 will take no part in the solution of the problem and will reject any attempts to include the four countries into the relocation regime. This will be a visible sign of their co-operation that may give the impression of consolidation of the participants. Visegrad's meetings will continue to be quite frequent. The case against the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland will be considered by the Court of Justice of the EU.

Contrary to that, no common positions will be worked out as concerns the evolution of the EU, closer integration within the Eurozone, relations with Russia, settlement of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, climate policy, energy security, etc.⁵ Negotiations on the new EU Multiannual Financial Framework will constitute a test where risks of unveiling the differences will be serious.

The Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland will refrain from acceding to the Eurozone until they are forced to do so. As a result, the V4 will continue to be the most integrated formation practically outside the new core of the Union. The majority of its members will be deprived of the common currency's benefits, and from sketching new regulations, mechanisms and institutions that will eventually affect the whole of the EU. Their protests against the multi-speed Europe are highly possible. Slovakia may become an active Eurozone country, but its engagement will have a national character and will have little in common with the rest of the Group. On the other hand, Bratislava may serve as an anchor not allowing the whole of the Central Europe to float away.

4 Przemysław Grudziński, Państwo inteligentne. Polska w poszukiwaniu międzynarodowej roli, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2008, pp. 123–124.

5 Hungarian analysts, D. Bartha and M. Ugródsy have proposed a range of possible topics where the current Hungarian V4 Presidency could search for consensus, but this vision seems over-optimistic; see: How Visegrad Really Connects?, <http://ceid.hu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/How-Visegrad-connects.pdf>

The reputation of the Group will further suffer due to accusations of Poland's and Hungary's governments concerning the breaches of values and principles enshrined in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union, as well as European practice, customs and traditions of democracy, the rule of law, fundamental rights and a well-organised and well-functioning modern State. This burden will continue to discourage those partners who are free of this risk of alienation from a more intensive involvement in Visegrad's activities⁶.

In general, in the foreseeable timeframe one can expect stagnation, declarative actions and taking ad hoc initiatives⁷.

The heterogeneity of the Group will become more and more evident. This will not add to the meaning and possibilities of V4.

Although labelled here as a “mid-term” scenario this continuation of the status quo may last for quite a long time. In a more distant perspective, various other options are possible.

Future Scenario #1: Benelux of the East

The V4 might, with time, form a better integrated macro-regional grouping, that would actively work towards streamlining the European Union, maintaining the classical defence functions of NATO, harmonising their foreign policies, converting their economies into innovative ones, improving the infrastructural connectivity of its participants, guaranteeing undisturbed access to large quantities of energy at a low price.

The reference to Benelux is used here in inverted commas; in this scenario, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary will not institutionalise their relations and will remain a loose – although effective – forum for discussing and coordinating their policies. The aim of the Group would be to win as much as possible in the EU decision-making process thanks to concerted action, the strength of arguments, skilful bargaining and ability to attract other partners to support mutually beneficial proposals. V4 meetings would take place both as separate events and on the margin of EU gatherings, where proposals would be given the final shape. In the most optimistic variant of this scenario, the provisions on EU enhanced co-operation might be applied, for instance with regard to energy security.

Conditions of diverting the story of Visegrad in that direction are as follows:

- The V4 states would have to define their common interests regarding the integration within the EU, security, economy and social affairs, and proceed in accordance with their agreement. As has been stated earlier, there is quite substantive room for shared policies, since the real objectives of the four states are the same; the problem is that due to internal tensions in individual countries they are filtered through the current needs of the ruling parties. In fact, objective interests of the Central European nations are closely linked with the success of the EU;
- Visegrad countries would need to engage in the European process in the positive way. Today this condition seems impossible, but it is absolutely realistic. Citizens of the four States represent a very pro-European approach. According to the most recent opinion poll, EU membership is being supported by 88% of Poles (52% have declared a *strong support*), 82% – Hungarians, 74% – Slovaks (the strong support in both societies equals 30%) and 56% of Czechs. 58% of Poles are of the opinion that belonging to the group of the most tightly linked EU Member States would be beneficial to their country; the same attitude is being manifested by 41% of Hungarians, 36% – Slovaks and 20% of Czechs. Only 5% of Poles and Hungarians would opt for leaving the Union⁸. Clearly, the European policies carried out by governments in Warsaw and Budapest do not respond to the expectations of their respective populations. It is a matter of time that the two become in line with each other;
- Rational and responsible leadership is also required. V4 politics, especially on the European forum, cannot be based on emotions, on triggering negative sentiments of the population and on attempts to promote selfish goals. Apparently, more time is needed to lay foundation for positive political culture as a rule organising those societies. The meaning of such a notion as “solidarity”, which has been crucial for Central Europeans over the first two decades after the reunification of the continent has to be reiterated. Tough bargaining in areas which are open for negotiations within the EU, or the right to make no concession with regard to the very core principles, cannot be mixed with egoism. Self-constraint for the sake of interest of all must not be seen as a sign of weakness.

6 See: Petr Šabata, *Pryč od Visegrádu, tahle skupina nám svazuje ruce a kazí pověst*, IROzhlas, 20.07.2017, https://www.irozhlaz.cz/komentare/pryc-od-visegradu-tahle-skupina-nam-svazuje-ruce-a-kazi-povest_1707200700_pj

7 See: A. Chojan, *op. cit.*, pp. 11.

8 Komunikat z badań nr 103/2017. Polacy, Czesi, Słowacy i Węgrzy o członkostwie w Unii Europejskiej, CBOS, August 2017. The poll was conducted in June/July 2017 by the following research centres: CBOS in Poland, CVVM Sociological Institute in the Czech Republic, FOCUS in Slovakia and TÁRKI in Hungary.

Future Scenario #2: The Troublemaker

The opposite – negative for both the EU and the Visegrad societies (although it might be assessed otherwise by the governments) – scenario would lead to the V4 integration as a *de facto* alternative to furthering ties with the European Union. This would imply that Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary continue membership in the EU, but would for a much longer time refrain from joining the Eurozone. Slovakia's role as a liaison between the remaining three and the new core of the Community would have to be prolonged.

Some Visegrad institutions may be established. It is to be remembered that today the International Visegrad Fund, not particularly meaningful, is its only formal body. Recently, there has been some talk about a parliamentary assembly, but the Group is far from any decision to that end. If instituted, it would only be a forum for MPs' regular meetings and discussions, without any form of a parliamentary scrutiny. Other possible institutions could embrace a formalised forum for PM's discussions and decisions, a reinforced Presidency, ministerial meetings (in different formats) or experts' working groups, etc. The more institutionalised the V4 is, the less its interest would be in the EU. Such a formalisation would be alien to the nature of Visegrad co-operation; it would have to bring tangible results – otherwise it might eventually kill the initiative.

The Group would use its more structured dialogue (which might give an impression of strength) to promote its own, narrowly understood, interests at the forum of the Union. In this scenario, V4 positions would often be visibly different from those of the rest of the EU. In addition, they could be formulated in a categorical manner, thus posing a risk to the whole Community's unity and ability to act. As a result, the Group would be losing credibility and confidence. Its position would deteriorate, which in turn would strengthen separatist (relating to the EU as a whole) tendencies among its participants. Numerous new European projects might be taken aside from the Group.

This scenario could materialise, if:

- populist governments are not ousted for a longer period of time, and also countries which have not been infected by it by now, would install similar regimes;
- if the community of interests among the V4 countries develops and their rivalry weakens. What is important is that the perception of common interest would be false – they would be seen as incompatible with decisions taken by the Union. The Visegrad members might, for instance, agree to oppose EU's climate policy, protest against the enhanced co-operation in areas crucial for the functioning of the Eurozone (labour markets, fiscal policies, pension systems, social policies), block any

moves towards a truly common foreign policy, express no willingness to participate in security structures being created or adjusted (PESCO, EDA), etc.;

- if a feeling of irresponsiveness to Central European specificity by “Brussels” is anchored in Visegrad governments and, more generally, in internal politics there. Slovakia seems to be in a safe haven in that respect, as it belongs to the Eurozone and obviously intends to join front-runners in further integration. In three other countries the impression that the rest of the Union is moving ahead without taking their demands into consideration may easily pave its way. Eurosceptic authorities may present this to the public as a sign of disrespect;
- any “victory” in the clashes between the EU institutions (the Commission, European Parliament, Court of Justice; also the Council representing the view of the majority of the Member States) and those Visegrad countries who are being criticised for breaching European principles and undermining the values will be interpreted by the V4's partners as a proof of strength of the format and will encourage them to further consolidate their specificity.

Future Scenario #3: Disintegration

Under any circumstances the Visegrad Group will continue its existence. The mere participation of representatives of Central European political elites in V4 meetings have already acquired the strength of an unconditioned reflex. The question is what the effectiveness of this format will be.

It may so happen that the Visegrad co-operation turns into a meaningless ceremony. The meetings would be inconclusive. They would be held rarely, and no institutionalisation would take place. Momentary lapses of all activities might also occur.

This scenario would mean that the V4 plays no role in European policies. It would provide no contribution to solving problems and addressing the challenges, but neither would it be able to exert a destructive influence.

The probability of such development might increase if Poland changed its government and reoriented its policy towards a pro-European one. It would then search closest allies among Germany, France, possibly also Spain and Italy – as it would again aspire to join the group of the largest in the Union. This would not have a negative effect on the V4 only if its other partners, too, took a pro-integrationist stance and, in addition, accepted Warsaw's privileged position.

Some countries may search for other macro-regional alternatives, which would seem to better suit their interests. Such experiments to that effect have already been made: Poland attempts to consolidate the previously mentioned “Three Seas”, or “Intermarum”, initiative, while the

The V4 countries should be able to elaborate common policies with regard to many more areas than they have done so far, but also there is a vast domain where the collision of their interests seems insurmountable.

Czech Republic and Slovakia have tried to form the Slavkov (Austerlitz) Triangle with Austria⁹. However, in other formats colliding interests for sure would be more apparent, since they would involve countries with differing experiences, objectives and perspectives; also increasing the number of engaged parties largely adds to the possibility of incoherence.

This kind of disintegrating of the V4 could happen under the following conditions:

- When the Group’s members stick to their individual priorities and prove unable to elaborate consensus regarding their objective interests;
- When any two countries are run by populist and Euro-sceptic governments, while the other two choose a clearly pro-EU course. In today’s reality, some already use a name of “V2+2” to describe the format¹⁰. Such a situation would though need to last for a longer period of time. Should such a split occur between three States and one, it would have a different effect: if the majority happens to be pro-integrationist, the Visegrad would be frozen again, if there is the opposite proportion, its activity might be limited to coordination within the group of Three;
- This development will speed up if EU leading states and institutions intensify dialogue with those Central European governments who perceive their dominant interests as part of Union policies, thus leaving the Eurosceptics isolated. This summer’s actions by Emmanuel Macron and the European Commission to promote a new Posting of Workers Directive was an example of such a move. It displayed how incoherent the V4 was with respect to this issue. In consequence, the Group cracked quite easily. The same happened earlier when Donald Tusk was re-elected to the post of President of the European Council, or when the previous Polish government joined the EU decision on relocating refugees in 2015.

9 Dariusz Kałan, The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?, Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin No. 19 (751)/2015

10 Aleksander Fuksiewicz, Agnieszka Łada, When two plus two doesn’t equal four. The Visegrad Group on the future of Europe, Analyses & Opinions, No. 23 (150), Instytut Spraw Publicznych / Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw, July 2017; Petr Šabata, op.cit.

Conclusions

1. The Visegrad Group can either play a constructive role in the European integration, or it can hamper the process by slowing down the EU decision making. It can also be an insignificant factor. In any case it will not have the power to alter the course taken by the EU as a whole. If the first of these possibilities happens, the Union might benefit from Central Europeans’ Euro-enthusiasm, their industriousness, as well as sensitivity concerning the Eastern security issues (Ukraine, Belarus, reinforcing security of three Baltic Member States). This variant would lead to a better integration of a region of more than 65 million inhabitants to trans-European networks and community of interests. Even in this scenario, a tightly integrated V4 would rather be incapable of bringing much to EU’s common foreign policy, climate protection, or elaborating new solutions tailored to giving an impetus to the euro zone.
2. The strength and the nature (pro-, or anti-integrationist) of the Visegrad Group’s impact on European policies depend mostly on the choices made by voters in countries forming this structure. Viktor Orbán’s example shows that by generous social transfers channelled to large segments of the population it is possible to continually reconfirm the support – even if the European policy of the government contradicts the expectation of the overwhelming part of the population. This pattern is being copied in Poland. It cannot be taken for granted that the other countries shall ever be immune from a similar U-turn – even if Slovakia belongs to the Eurozone and Czech politics seem to be more rational and West-oriented. Such a development would hardly be possible if some of the fundamental values were not breached: freedom of the media, equal possibilities of political parties’ financing, independence of the judiciary, a fair electoral system, apolitical civil service. The EU has instruments to intervene in such cases, but they seem insufficiently strong; what is more, the Union is using them with caution. In the past this practice brought the result when applied vis-à-vis one individual Member State. It remains to be seen whether the same approach applied to two or more countries would prove equally effective.
3. The V4 countries could – and should – be able to elaborate common policies with regard to many more areas than they have done so far, but also there is a vast domain where the collision of their interests seems insurmountable. This is a real obstacle to fostering their co-operation. Most probably, the Visegrad will never become a highly unified structure. ●



III. Possible Progressive Alliances

Miroslav Poche

Ildiko Lendvai

Sławomir Wiatr
and Przemysław Potocki

Ľuboš Blaha

**Miroslav Poche,**

MEP, Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats,
Member of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD)

Czechia: The Rise of Populism and the Crisis of Identity of Centre-Left

The 2008 financial and economic crisis was expected to boost the centre-left in the European Union. The opposite turned out to be the case and the 2017 elections, an *annus horribilis* for social democracy so far, have been the culmination of the vain struggle of the centre-left to up till now find an appropriate political response to new challenges and trends. As structural changes in our societies, driven in particular by economic and demographic forces, have taken place, the overall political landscape in Europe has been altered with the traditional left-right polarization significantly weakened. Instead we have witnessed the rise of populist and anti-establishment political forces across Europe, which effectively blend issues and ideas traditionally associated with either left or right, and which are strongly personalized with authoritative leaders.

In reaction to these developments, the centre-left has been plunged into the debate on how to face populism in the most effective way. However, this process has so far led to a deep identity crisis that many European social democratic parties have been affected by. This has been also the case of the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD) which suffered a heavy defeat in the October general elections after being the leading force in the coalition government for the past four years.

The identity crisis of ČSSD, under the pressure from populist movements, such as Andrej Babiš' ANO or Tomio Okamura's SPD, plainly and openly manifested itself in the months leading up to the elections. On the one hand, there have been social democratic representatives with the position that we need to fight populists with their own weapons, such as similar rhetoric, with slogans rather than with a clear-cut political programme, with an emphasis on security, as well as with a stronger reservation about European integration, progressive values and ideas and with a reversed understanding of what solidarity really means.

On the other hand, there have been leading figures of the ČSSD who have tried to stick to traditional social democratic ideas, especially the defence of the welfare state, the upholding of the rights of employees and to stand by the pro-European orientation of the party. In the end, the

political message ČSSD presented was not clear enough. It was insufficiently credible and comprehensive for voters. Moreover, the key social democratic ideas, such as increasing wages and maintaining access to public services or decent pensions, have not been underpinned by a strong progressive discourse that would be able to mobilize the public support for ČSSD.

The centre-left is certainly at the crossroads, not only in the Czech Republic, but in the whole of Central Europe. There are a number of challenges ahead. It will be necessary to rethink which segments of society it can most reliably represent and speak to. Historically, it has been the working class. However, this traditional group of voters has become rather diverse with the growing financial role of the service industry, digitalization and the automatization of the economy. It requires relevant adjustments on the side of social democracy, beginning with rethinking of its political programme and re-evaluating policies in key areas. Last but not least, the issue of what kind of leadership the centre-left needs is also very much on the table. ●

**Ildiko Lendvai,**

former leader of the Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP)

The State of Progressive Ideas in Hungary

In Hungary – like in other Visegrad countries – the progressive thinking has traditionally been characterized by different disputant streams. In the last one and a half century, past milestones paved three different roads. The leftist-social democratic thinking has always been focused on social inequalities, the situation of workers. The liberal thinking has flogged the lack of democracy, while the national-independence-popular thinking (as the history of the Visegrad countries was for a long time marked by fight for independence) has aimed the national self-determination.

These three trends could be differentiated during the formation of the multi-party system after the transition of 1989. Transformation was a tricky time for all three traditions, which included more or less progressive elements. The left-wing, which formed governments three times, had to be at the heart of constructing market economy, privatization, and later in the crisis management, which coincided with increasing wealth gap. In the eye of their traditional voters it was contradicting the left-wing values and no social measures could reverse the decrease of voters' support. Those liberal thinkers who put the ideal of free market in focus and denied the state intervention could not cope with poverty, social inequality, and adverse effects of modernization. Meanwhile, the popular-national thinking fell victim to the biggest distortion. Fidesz, the party in rule today, was originally liberal before entering the Christian conservative-“national” area, depriving the popular-national ideals of their former progressive elements as well as social and democratic ambitions. Nowadays, the so-called official national ideology stems from the delusion of unhealed national wounds of the past. It translates into anti-European sentiment, isolation, xenophobia and the rejection of the Western esprit, enlightenment, liberalism, tolerance, diversity. This spirit of governance is identical with that of the rising Hungarian radical right-wing populism.

The ideology repeatedly transmitted by most of the media has left an imprint on the Hungarian public opinion. Global economic crisis and the wave of migration have increased the need for security. Many citizens accepted the contradiction between security and freedom, choosing the so-called “illiberal state” in the name of security. Many of them do not think that democracy, fundamental freedoms,

constitutionality, progress are absolute values. Anti-refugee propaganda proved to be the most important weapon, increasing xenophobic attitudes significantly. Meanwhile, only a group of intellectuals and democratic opposition rallies for the protection of these values.

At the same time, many progressive elements were preserved in the collective mindset. The Hungarian society is still sensible to social inequalities and thirsts for social justice. Additionally, despite government's attempts, the country remains a secular society, denying bigotry and enforcement of rigid religious norms in private life. The majority is in favour of gender equality, women's bigger presence in public sphere and more environmental awareness. Unlike the government, which favours isolation and Euroscepticism, every public research proves that three quarters of the Hungarians are pro-European and reckon Europeanism as an important value. ●

**Sławomir Wiatr,**

former MP, chairman of the Progress Forum Coordination Committee

**and Przemysław Potocki,**

academic lecturer, co-founder of the Ignacy Daszyński Centre

Opinion on the Left in Poland

Some initial remarks on structural aspects of the Polish political market will clarify theoretical and empirical background for the diagnosis and progressive proposals presented in this text. Today, the right-wing political segment is the largest and the one represented by liberal parties holds the second position. The left-wing political segment is the smallest – its decrease has started in 2003 as a consequence of internal political conflicts within the party as well as due to the deteriorating economic situation in the country (especially in the labour market). The activity of political parties in Poland is clearly determined by macroeconomic factors: unemployment and inflation. When they decrease, the support for the political party in power may rise. Demography also determines political processes because the relative electoral potential of younger citizens is weaker than that of the older ones (they are more inclined to vote and their proportion within the population has been steadily growing).

The present position of the left-wing forces in Poland is determined by ideological factors (opinion on the role of the Catholic Church in public sphere, attitudes towards termination of pregnancy), economic factors are less important (current support for the governing right-wing PiS party is higher among socioeconomic groups located in the lower segments of social structure). Thus, the present position of the main left-wing political force – Left Democratic Alliance (SLD) should oppose politicizing history by PiS and strive for the agreement of all left-wing political actors. In order to regain public trust, SLD should support democratic procedures and initiate a wide programmatic debate. As the party has lost the element of social responsiveness of its image, it should favour ideological values over pragmatic goals.

Generally speaking, the left-wing political forces in Poland face the following tasks in the nearest future: defending of the country's Constitution and independent judicial system; increasing public funding of the health system; defending social rights of employees and promoting higher wages; advocating for free public education at all levels; curbing marginalisation and social inequalities through increased tax rates and social allowances; sensitizing public opinion to the danger of growing

nationalism in Poland; defending media freedom and secularity of the State; opposing restrictive anti-abortion law and fighting for gender equality, LGBT and other ethnic and national minority rights; initiating direct actions for environmental protection.

To achieve these goals, concrete political actions of various left-wing political forces in Poland must be launched within the forthcoming 12 months, such as: regaining public trust and rebuilding reliability by using a new pro-social programme; improving communication with potential voters; participating in demonstrations and embracing the youth – mobilizing them to join political parties; improving internal democratic procedures and communication inside the parties; preparing for municipal and parliamentary elections by launching a wide and open debate about the possibility of unification of the left-wing political forces for consolidation and wide electoral coalition. ●



Ľuboš Blaha,

Chair of the Committee of the
National Council of Slovak Republic on European Affairs

Slovak social democracy: focus on social issues

The year 1989 launched a process of extreme neoliberalization in Slovakia. The Left was cornered and could not defend itself. It had to face not only the ideological offensive of the Right, which, with the help of western embassies, media, think tanks and corporations, tried to demonize any form of left-wing thinking in the name of anti-communism, but also the pressure of transnational financial agencies that dictated the politics of post-communist Europe. The culmination of neoliberal reforms proved to be the radical experiments in the first years of the 21st century, when the country's right-wing government (1) partially adopted the Chilean model of the pension system, (2) abolished the progressivity in the tax system by implementing a flat tax, (3) allowed financial groups to enter the health care system and (4) privatized a number of strategic businesses and industries. Since then, the social democratic governments managed to moderate some of the neoliberal reforms, however the neoliberal approach still keeps his hegemony in the political discourse.

The advantage of the Slovak social democracy, represented since 1999 by the dominant SMER-SR party, is its charismatic leader Robert Fico who has been the seminal figure of Slovak politics since the beginning of the century. He was prime minister in years 2006–2010, and since 2012, he has been back in office. He has been one of the most popular political personalities in Slovakia for two decades, and the successes of social democracy in this region can be undoubtedly credited to his political prowess and charisma. Without him, the Slovak social democracy would have 15% support at most (the Slovak Left has always had weaker roots than its Czech counterpart has); SMER's support throughout the decade has ranged between 25 and 54%.

Fico's politics focus on the expectations of the working people in Slovakia, so it deals with mostly social issues: raising the minimum wage, fight against unemployment, strengthening the unions and raising social benefits. He puts much less accent on the culturally liberal agenda, which is typical for the central European area. When it comes to the rights of sexual minorities, the politics of SMER is more neutral, even conservative. The rhetoric of the prime minister on multiculturalism is rather dismissive. As for equal rights for men and women, the Slovak Left's attitude is traditionally progressive; however, gender issues are also not a priority in the political discourse.

Furthermore, the Left's room for manoeuvre in cultural issues has recently diminished even more. The Far Right has been on the rise in recent years (the neo-Nazi Kotleba-ĽSNS party gained 9% support in the most recent parliamentary elections and its support has since risen above 10%). This has to do on one hand with the "Roma issue" and on the other with the migration crisis (besides the neo-Nazis, the right-wing populist "We are family" party also entered parliament, on the wave of islamophobia). For the social democratic government in Slovakia, to engage in LGBTI rights issues at this point in time would be akin to political suicide. Slovakia is a conservative and largely catholic country (Catholicism in central Europe is ideologically closer to the Eastern Orthodox Church than to the progressive sentiments of Pope Francis), which limits the possibilities of social democracy in minority issues. The liberal Left is basically non-existent in Slovakia. There are a few intellectuals that are loud, because they get a platform in the media, but electorally speaking, this ideological group makes up only a miniscule part of society. Social democracy in Slovakia is more conservative in cultural issues than western left-wing parties, which is also the secret of its success.

Slovak society is especially dismissive about the issue of refugee quotas. According to polling, a whopping 94% of Slovaks are against the mandatory quotas, which is the highest number in the European Union. It is just logical that the social democracy in Slovakia focuses on socio-economic issues rather than the post-material topics of the New Left, although it supports the fight against climate change and for women's rights. Robert Fico called very resolutely this year for a greater European integration, which, compared to the past, is a significant move to a European future. A significant part of the Left's voters has still sympathies towards Russia. It is partially a legacy of the former regime and partially a result of a tendency towards pan-nationalism of a Slavic type. That is why a more positive dictionary in relation to Russia is important to the Slovak Left. One of the greatest challenges of the Slovak social democracy is the fight against the far right, which often gets the votes of typical left-wing voters (unemployed, poor people, working class etc.): there is a common understanding that the solution is not the coercion of cultural liberalism, but a focus on social issues and a gradual (progressive) build-up of tolerance in the Slovak society. ●



IV. Epilogue

Prof. Andrea Pető



Prof. Andrea Pető

The Future of V4: Where Have All the Progressive Ideas Gone and When Will They Come Back?

The “Visegrad Four” has recently become a problematic concept, a regional cooperation, which is causing concern and raising eyebrows in Brussels. The well-performing students of the 1989 post-communist transition have become rebellious. How did a very innocent regional cooperation which was the product of the collapse of communism and momentary non-interest of the traditional geopolitical big players in the region, namely Russia and Germany, become so important?

Visegrad has become famous for issues one does not wish to be famous for: the lack of consistent strategy and non-cooperation.

This type of regional cooperation is very specific as it has a flexible system of fixed and written rules of cooperation, as well as rotating presidency and headquarters. The cooperation is fostered by the International Visegrad Fund and founded by government representatives. These cultural projects are expected to strengthen the cooperation. Even though there are only four member states, there is deep animosity among its members partly as a result of historical events that took place 70 or even 90 years ago. Still Visegrad has recently emerged as a new geopolitical centre, partly because it is originally a cultural cooperation and the change of identity in terms of politics paved the way for a stronger and more effective cooperation.

Even though the analysis of these recent developments is rather shallow and follows forecastable patterns, this unexpected emergence of a new effective cooperation is a major paradigm change in Europe. The total population of these four countries is 64 million, greater than that of France and close to that of the UK, and amounts to the 22nd largest economy in the world¹. Following the logic of market capitalism there

is no need for another competitor in the already fragmented European market, but the in-between status of these in-between regions must be maintained economically (providing cheap labour), culturally (not investing in joint cultural projects) and politically (forming an alternative union: “Austerlitz 3” by Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic).

V4 countries argue that they have to find their own path to prosperity, and this should not be based on catching up with “the West” of Europe. This new geopolitical vision needs innovative analysis which moves beyond showcasing the V4 (or at least two of the four countries) as a bad example of democratic political practice and strategic thinking. How can countries whose economic growth is largely dependent on EU structural funds be in a position to criticize the EU as a bureaucratic and non-democratic unit? In order to answer these questions memory politics and a new form of governance needs to be addressed before outlining some of the hurdles progressive forces have to overcome in the near future.

History as Family Silverware

After the collapse of communism, the Visegrad Four was formed in a geopolitical vacuum aimed at promoting certain values according to the following founding statement: *The diverse and rich cultures of these nations also embody the fundamental values of the achievements of European thought. The mutual spiritual, cultural and economic influences exerted over a long period of time, resulting from the fact of proximity, could support cooperation based on natural historical development*².

Their joint aims in 1991 were: full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom; elimination of all existing social, economic and spiritual aspects of the totalitarian system; construction of a parliamentary democracy; a modern State of Law; respect for human rights and freedoms; creation

¹ Andrea Schmidt, Friends forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration, Politics in Central Europe Vol. 12, Issue 3 2016, pp. 113–140.

² See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2>

of a modern free-market economy; and full participation in the European political and economic systems, as well as in the systems of security and legislation³.

However, these aims have fundamentally changed over recent years which have also resulted in political changes. To understand these political changes, two concepts must be used: *in-betweenness*⁴ and *mnemonic security*⁵.

The past 25 years have shown that full integration of V4 countries in European political and economic systems produces mixed results. The illusion concerning the integration of the in-between states, namely the merger of New Europe with “Old Europe” to form one Europe, quickly evaporated with the occurrence of the triple crises in 2008. The financial, refugee and security crises were game changers that questioned previous political alliances and strategies. There are substantial differences between the outlooks of the different political forces in the four countries as far as economic issues are concerned, e.g. the future of the Eurozone in terms of the key political issue, namely their levels of criticism as far as European integration is concerned. However, there is one issue they have in common that puts them on a level playing field: their consensual anti-migration position. Some politicians, including Prime Minister Orbán, are open, straightforward and combatant with regard to rejecting the migrant quota as a solution, while the Czech government quietly supports such a policy. With this open opposition to Brussels and the desire to return decision-making processes to the member states from European institutions, Visegrad countries have gained international attention. The international attention politicians can capitalise in their local contexts and fights.

By now a substantial amount of literature has emerged discussing trends and developments concerning this new Visegrad reality. Most of the literature holds these states accountable for diversion from European liberal norms. Since 2010 in Hungary, an easily detectable process has been conducted as far as dismantling the democratic state is concerned, Poland followed suit in 2016 after the PiS victory. The process is referred to as different names, namely cultural counter-revolution, mafia state, illiberal state, anti-democratic, populist and neoconservative, but the heart of the matter is the fundamental question of Central Europe concerning whether or not this in-between region possesses specificities which would qualify it as a separate region.

In order to understand the Visegrad 4 phenomenon the concept of in-betweenness needs to be applied. The feeling

of being caught between two worlds and not supported by either is deeply rooted and dates back to the Ottoman, Russian or Soviet occupations through to the revolutions of 1956 and up until the Prague Spring. The post-1989 period is also characterized by the feeling of being in-between which led to the formation of the Visegrad Four. 2008 was also a defining year in this regard as well.

The new world order works with what is referred to as “mnemonic security”, as well as the control of hegemonic forms of remembrance. The translation of history and its application and thus their identity-shaping effect, are becoming a geopolitical factor. After 1989, fuelled by anti-communist sentiment within the former Eastern Bloc countries and the retributions that took place during the Soviet occupation, anti-communism became the foundation along with the revision of the progressive political tradition on national and international levels.

Before the enlargement of the EU in 2004 the new member states, including the V4 countries together with the Baltic States, successfully lobbied for acceptance of the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism. This Memorial Day, which was expected to counterbalance the Holocaust Memorial Day, created a built-in fracture in the memory culture of Europe. At the same time made the collaboration of the national elites with Nazi Germany and Soviet Union invisible. As the crimes committed by the communist countries had been invisible on the European level, now particularism was inserted in a system which was based on universalism. This memory frame of “repressive erasure”⁶ is based on exclusion. This is the theoretical frame of different memory strategies based on national victimhood, which blames Nazi Germany and the Soviets for all the traumas of the 20th century. This memory frame also strengthens their cooperation based on mnemonic security and disregards the conflicts and rivalries which have been present there. This process reconceptualises the original mission statement and makes it difficult for progressive political forces to articulate their demands in this hegemonic frame.

Since the time when Orbán’s government began to establish this new system, there have been many explanations that viewed Central Europe as the less-developed mirror image of Western Europe. Commentators believed that such a trend could never happen in “developed” democracies, but then came Brexit and the election victory of Trump, which surprised those people who failed to see how divided the societies of these countries are. The crisis has shown us that Europe (and the US) has a dark history as well. A dark history that could be kept at bay through the interconnection of the human rights discourse and free-market capitalism – or so was thought after 1945. But after 2008 it became obvious

3 See: The Visegrad Group official website, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2>

4 Szűcs Jenő, Parti, Júlianna, “The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An outline”, *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* Vol. 29 Issue 2/4, 1983, pp. 131–184.

5 Maria Mäklsoo, ‘Memory must be defended’: Beyond the politics of mnemonical security, *Security Dialogue* Vol. 46, Issue 3, 2015, pp. 221–237.

6 Paul Connerton, Seven Types of Forgetting, *Memory Studies* Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2008, pp. 60–61.

that colonialism, the holocaust, genocides, displacements and discrimination are as much parts of European history as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The mechanisms that were aimed at keeping these trends at bay are failing. Nowhere else is this failure more obvious than in the countries with decades of experience with lived communism.

Memory politics plays a key role in this process, which is visible in the many ways in which different states are silent with regard to the techniques of discrimination that are inherent parts of their history in modernity⁷. The fight for mnemonic security, which in the case of the V4 countries means anti-communism, brought these countries together, but kept them distant from the progressive political tradition. In order to do challenge this, progressive forces need to handle the politics of emotions wisely and strategically while at the same time critically interrogate history of communism.

New Form of Governance: The Polypore State

This reconceptualization of progressive politics has not been easy over the past 25 years and it will not be any easier in the coming years. Duncan Light, whilst analyzing post-communist identities, pointed out that they are driven by *the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation*⁸. This desire, however, has changed due to the failure of neoliberalization of V4 countries. Evaluation of the communist period increasingly draws on pre-1945 concepts in V4 countries. In this context, it can be argued that communist historiography was revisionist historiography and in post-communist Eastern Europe it is of the utmost political importance to analyse how this history-writing works as its anti-modernist variant is gaining momentum in the form of anti-modernist revisionism in history writing especially in the case of the history of emancipatory politics⁹. The memories of communism and the more than hundred years old left-ist tradition have been omitted, forgotten and denied.

The re-emergence of anti-modernism as a reaction to neoliberalism in post-communist Eastern Europe also appropriated history in order to achieve its aims, namely to create a viable, liveable and desirable alternative.

The fact that the current governments of Hungary and Poland are in the process of building a different kind of state inside the EU points to the failure of norm building. This is the reason why, in cooperation with Weronika Grzebalska, the term “polypore state” was created based on our work on Hungary and Poland as far as the description of illiberal trends in the EU is concerned which in fact is not only confined to these countries even though they produce the best examples within the EU. This newly created polypore-like formation resides at places where the structure of the tree – or in our case the state – is injured; and from there it starts constructing its own, parallel structure¹⁰. It is of utmost political importance to understand this form of state and start thinking about different new forms of resistance as old forms do not work in this new context.

This parallel state structure functions in three ways: by mirroring the function of the state, feeding a discourse (through the use of other’s resources and ideas), and changing the values that govern society. An example of mirroring is women’s organisations whose number has significantly grown over the last few years. This growth is in part due to the creation of a parallel NGO-system consisting of conservative women’s organizations and GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations) that follow all kinds of small agendas, such as the labour rights of women or the reintegration of young mothers into the labour force; but there are even organizations that combat domestic violence. It is important to mention the latter as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention will bring in new funds to Hungary, and the government plans to channel this money into the GONGO-system, where loyalty to the state is of utmost importance.

The second function of the polypore state is most visible in the current security discourse: all the talk about “George Soros”, the “migrants” and “gender” is about increasing the feeling of insecurity so that the state can step in and position itself as the saviour of the people.

The third function is the so-called “familiarity” – in this system women do not exist anymore, they become part of the family, and even the state is seen as a family; it functions in exactly the same way as a big family. Historical revisionism plays a similarly prominent role in terms of global transformation as does the transposition of emphasis from women to families – e.g. in some countries, such as Hungary and Poland, the CEDAW reports of the United Nations mention families instead of women; and women only appear as parts of the family. This again is an example of how the

7 Andrea Pető, Revisionist histories, ‘future memories’: far-right memorialization practices in Hungary, *European Politics and Society* Vol. 1, 2017, pp. 41–51.

8 Duncan Light, Gazing on Communism: Heritage Tourism and Post-Communist Identities in Germany, Hungary and Romania, *Tourism Geographies* Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2000 pp. 157–176.

9 Andrea Pető, Revisionist histories, ‘future memories’: far-right memorialization practices in Hungary, *European Politics and Society* Vol. 1, 2017, pp. 41–51.

10 Andrea Pető, Hungary’s Illiberal Polypore State, *European Politics and Society* Newsletter 21, Winter 2017, pp. 18–21; Andrea Pető, Weronika Grzebalska, How Hungary and Poland have silenced women and stifled human rights, *The Huffington Post*, 16.10.2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-conversation-global/how-hungary-and-poland-ha_b_12486148.html

polypore state supersedes the existing institutional mechanisms and uses them to achieve its own goals.

The polypore state actually appropriates issues, e.g. the fight against international capitalism, protecting small-home owners against banks, etc., making it very challenging for progressive forces to readopt that agenda and be vocal about these issues.

Challenging the Polypore State

Any kind of resistance to the polypore state should emerge from a space. In this section a possible space is discussed, namely the NGOs, and a possible issue, gender equality to be precise, considered to illustrate the possible forms of resistance.

In post-democracy¹¹ new political programmes emerging from the re-articulation of the relationship between the state and citizens are constructing new spaces¹². These new spaces are placing democratic actors in an opposing binary position to the establishment, which has a major impact on their performance. Any kind of alternative or resistance is difficult to maintain as the polypore state questions this binary constructing its own NGO sphere, namely the GONGOs, which represent the appropriated agenda of the secular, human rights-based organizations on both the national and international levels. The polypore states have started to establish a pseudo-NGO movement that enjoys mass support by means of state funding, with livelihoods provided by opaque interest groups and with populism-based party communication.

The NGO sector in the countries of the Visegrad Four, which had previously acted as a watchdog and a voice for human rights values in accordance with the principles of liberal democracy, has been fundamentally transformed and now struggles to respond effectively to the government's fundamental structural positions which have broad support in society. Due to a lack of funding and being criminalized in the framework of securitisation of the polypore state what remained for them is the international arena which predominantly consists of different institutions in Brussels. While seemingly active on the international level these NGOs are imprisoned in the national context, as they appear to be the most powerful lobby groups if supported by the special circumstances of their national context. A structural critique of neoliberal globalization has had little effect on the domestic political agenda. The strengthening of racist and nationalist movements offering anti-modernism as a real alternative to neoliberal democracy and the market economy, coupled with the failure of attempts to adapt the Third-Way social

democratic model, led to marginalization of democratic values. Therefore, the donor-dependent NGO sphere, which is also stigmatized by the security discourse as a foreign agent even though most of its issues are now represented by GONGOs, is an unlikely space from where resistance will emerge. It would be a mistake to question people's identification with, and support for, such NGOs or to explain the process in terms of lavish state funding alone. The issues they represent are often material issues, but the language they use is different to that of the progressive movement. Nowhere else is this more obvious than in the case of women's issues.

The outlook for women's organisations does not look any more promising either. Social movements have developed in a specific manner. As has been stated on numerous occasions, the country's NGO sector is weak and vulnerable in terms of both public support and funding¹³. As far as the leftist and liberal women's movements are concerned, the question does not only address the manner in which they can represent international norms (such as gender equality), but also how they evaluate and react to the fact that their political influence has not grown in the post-1989 period, even though gender inequality has increased to unprecedented levels in all fields.

As far as gender analysis is concerned, the concept of "New Woman" was labelled by Rita Felski in her work *The Gender of Modernity* as rendering women "prisoners of progress" (Felski, 1995 pp. 11–33). In the rhetoric of the progressive women's movements, women represent the new beginning, whereby the future is conceived as a normative project that develops linearly. The historical metanarrative about the past of women is hierarchical and exclusive, while aiming to forge a counter-identity. The discourse of the women's movement is strategic and emotionally charged. Its language creates collective subjectivity along with shared rituals, symbols of meanings and stories. The main intervention should be to create a re-enchanting language¹⁴.

Gender equality started with work: once women stepped out of their role of unpaid caretakers, they started demanding payment for the work they were doing equal to that of men. Now, by focusing on the tendencies, it will be seen that robots take on exactly the same jobs that women do. While at the same time there is also a trend for romanticising the care work done by women through the ideology of female difference – these two together will deter women from entering the labour market resulting in women losing the material basis of the emancipatory ideology.

11 Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, Polity Press, Cambridge-Malden 2004.

12 Andrea Pető, Zoltán Vasali, *Political Space: Half Empty? The Case of Hungary*, SPACE-Socio-Political Alternatives in Central Europe. eds. Katarzyna Sobolewska-Myślik, Dominika Kasparowicz. Warsaw, ELIP1ISA, 2014, pp. 60–75.

13 Ferenc Mészlivetz, *A demokrácia és a civil társadalom átalakítása a globális térben* [Democracy and the Transformation of Civil Society in the Global Space], *Civil Szemle* Vol. 10, Issue 1, 2012, pp. 63–82, http://www.civilszemle.hu/downloads/cikkek/2012/30szam_2012_1_Meszlivetz_063-082.pdf

14 Andrea Pető, *Gender equality as re-enchantment: political mobilisation in the times of "neo-patriarchal neo-liberalism" and possibilities of bipartisan dialogue*, *Woman Up 2: A Transatlantic Gender Dialogue. : A Transatlantic Gender Dialogue* eds. Judit Tanczos, Maari Pöim. Brussels, FEPS, 2015, pp. 138–145.

In the meantime, a fundamentalist ideology supports the polypore state, according to which the task of women – who are considered as unequal to men – is to stay at home and care for the family. Only afterwards might she be allowed to work part-time. An important political fight evolves around the question of whether it is possible to quantify care. Possible questions concerning the so-called care crisis which are of particular importance to our future include who is going to give birth, bring up the children, and care for the sick and elderly. The “women’s policies” of the national right-wing political parties all focus on the normative cult of motherhood and familialism. In their political language, these parties refer to “family policy” rather than “women’s politics”, whereby the social role of women is normative motherhood. The liberal-leftist critique of the normative cult of motherhood places the emphasis on women’s individual human rights and the right to choose motherhood. This option includes the right to reject maternity – which in conservative discourse is regarded as “national” sabotage¹⁵.

The conservative women’s movement, with its focus on the primacy of the family and its denial of freedom of choice and structural discrimination, has found a rival in the field of women’s politics. Far-right fundamentalist gender politics, also based on the politics of care and placing the family at the centre, seeks in the long run to absorb the political space for conservative women’s politics, while uniting all these political forces under the rhetoric of hostility to communist oppression¹⁶. The rhetoric of progress, namely the concept of a “New Woman”, is being appropriated by anti-modernist political forces. This rhetoric of victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 has left the emancipatory leftists in a defensive position, as their rhetoric is a defensive and negative one. Having failed to critique the basis of neoliberal politics, it remains the prisoner of progress and helpless to familialism supported by welfare benefits.

The dualism of the neoliberal neopatriarchy and the polypore state – which both suggest cruel solutions to today’s problems – could be resolved through the formation of new coalitions and the eradication of false dichotomies.

There are many points where conversations could be had and a shared language formed, but at the moment this does not seem likely, as everyone who joins the discussion does so as if it concerned antagonistic questions; in other words, they all want to convince others that they possess the only right answer. Gender equality is a good entry point as one of the long lasting legacies of the statist feminist period is the consensual value of gender equality. Independently from the fact that in habitual practices that is not necessarily present, that can be a good starting point for rethinking progressive politics.

Locality is usually not conceptualized as a major space for rethinking politics, even though it is the basis of representational politics. Progressive intellectuals, like Cas Mudde among others, are still prisoners of the aufklarist/enlightenment paradigm which states that intellectuals should “spill down” their ideas to the society and develop class consciousness¹⁷. Mudde is right that political parties are not up to the task of creating a new identity politics, as they are products and representatives of an old-identity politics regime. However, the resistance to the polypore state can only come from localized contexts, namely localized issues by local actors which are framed globally. The issue of corruption (constitutive part of the polypore state) or gender equality, even though it is a structural and global phenomenon, can mobilize resistance only around a local issue. The future will tell us whether reinventing locality in the age of identity politics in the V4 context, together with new movements outside the context of NGOs, can change political parties into institutions of representation. ●

15 Andrea Pető, *Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective*, *Reframing Demographic Change in Europe. Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations*, eds. Heike Kahlert and Waltraud Ernst. Berlin: Focus Gender. Band 11. LIT Verlag, 2010, pp. 189–201.

16 Weronika Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts, Andrea Pető, *Gender as symbolic glue: how ‘gender’ became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order*, *Political Critique*, 13.01.2017; Eszter Kováts, Maari Põim (eds.), *Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe*, Brussels, FEPS, FES, 2015.

17 Cas Mudde, *Nothing left? In search of (a new) social democracy*, 21.11.2013, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/nothing-left-in-search-of-new-social-democracy> (accessed on 4.01.2014)

About the authors



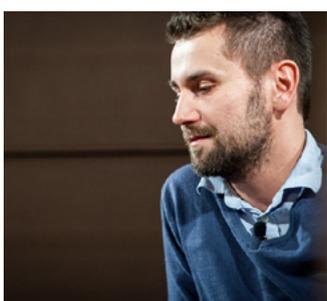
Ireneusz Bil, PhD,

is the current Director of the Aleksander Kwaśniewski Foundation Amicus Europae. The Foundation is active in the area of foreign policy and security, focusing on the Eastern Neighborhood of the European Union. Serves also as Secretary General of the European Council on Tolerance and Reconciliation, an NGO based in Brussels. Prior to holding these positions, he worked as Director of the Office of International Affairs of the Presidential Chancellery from 2004–2006 and as an expert on the National Security Bureau from 1997–2004. Graduate of the Warsaw School of Economics (WSE) and the National Security Studies Program at the Warsaw University, he received his doctoral degree researching energy supply security at the WSE. His interests include energy policy, international security, military and defence issues. at the WSE. His interests include energy policy, international security, military and defence issues.



Tamás Boros

is a political analyst, Co-director of Policy Solutions. He is also member of the Scientific Council of the Foundation for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). Leading news channels regularly invites him on their programmes as a political commentator, while he also frequently gives interviews to prominent international newspapers (e.g. Financial Times, The Economist). His publications and articles mainly focus on the state of democracy, right wing extremism and populism. He previously worked as a specialist in EU communications for the European Commission and the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He had also served as the director of the Pillar Foundation, a non-profit organization promoting European values, for four years.



Radovan Geist

is co-founder and publisher of EurActiv.sk. A regular commentator on EU affairs in Slovak media, he also teaches at the Department of Political Science at the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University in Bratislava. He holds a doctoral degree in Political Science and studied at the Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi and the Institute of Political Science at the Slovak Academy of Sciences.



Agnieszka Łada, PhD,

is political scientist and the current Director of the European Programme at the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw. She graduated from political science at The Warsaw University, MPA studies at Hertie School of Governance in Berlin and psychology of organisation in Dortmund. 2011 Visiting Fellow, European Policy Centre, Brussels; 2012 Research Fellow, Sussex University; 2013 Visiting Scholar, German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin; 2016/17 research fellow, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, Berlin. She is a member of the “Team Europe” experts group which is a network supported by the European Commission Representation in Poland, Member of the Supervisory Board of the Krzyżowa Foundation, Member of the Copernicus Group – a group of experts on Polish-German Relations and the Polish-German Expert Group by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Poland as well as IPA’s Representative in the European Policy Institutes Network.



Tereza Novotná, PhD,

is an academic at the Institute for European Studies, Université libre de Bruxelles and Senior Associate Research Fellow at the EUROPEUM's Brussels Office, a Prague-based think-tank. Tereza received her doctorate from Boston University and other degrees from Charles University Prague. She has held various visiting fellowships in the US, UK, Belgium, Germany and Austria. Tereza is the author of the monograph *How Germany Unified and the EU Enlarged: Negotiating the Accession through Transplantation and Adaptation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and a co-editor of *The Politics of Transatlantic Trade Negotiations: TTIP in a Globalized World* (Ashgate, 2015). In addition to the politics of Central and Eastern Europe, she has researched and widely published on EU foreign policy, EU enlargement and unifications in Germany and on the Korean peninsula, TTIP and transatlantic relations.



Prof. Andrea Pető

is Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University, Budapest, Hungary and a Doctor of Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She is teaching courses on European comparative social and gender history, gender and politics, women's movements, qualitative methods, oral history, and the Holocaust. Author of 5 books, editor of 31 volumes, as well as 259 articles and chapters in books published in seventeen languages. In 2005, she was awarded the Officer's Cross Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary by the President of the Hungarian Republic and the Bolyai Prize by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 2006.



Maria Skóra, PhD,

is Senior Project Manager at Das Progressive Zentrum. She formerly worked for the Humboldt-Viadrina Governance Platform, Berlin, and supported the All-Poland Alliance of Trade Unions in Warsaw as an expert. Maria Skóra joined a range of projects of Das Progressive Zentrum. She led inter alia the expert group »Social and Fiscal Policy« of the project »A Future Agenda for Eastern and Central Europe« that was jointly organised by Das Progressive Zentrum and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung between spring 2013 and the beginning of 2015.



Ania Skrzypek-Claassens, PhD,

is Senior Research Fellow at the Foundations for European Progressive Studies (FEPS). Before joining FEPS in 2009, she worked as younger researcher at the Faculty of Journalism and Political Sciences at the University of Warsaw (2003–2009) and also served as twice consecutively elected Secretary General of Young European Socialists (ECOSY, 2005–2009). She is an author of over 80 published papers and articles, available in English, German, French and Polish. Among her responsibilities at FEPS, she is in charge of the Next Left Research Programme, she co-coordinates FEPS Young Academics Network (FEPS YAN), as also she contributes to the FEPS projects of: Next Social Europe, European Transnational Parties and Democratic Empowerment, Ones to Watch, New Global Progressive Construct Convention and the Annual FEPS – Policy Network Oxford Debates.



Zuzana Stuchlíková

is a research fellow and a Head of Brussels Office at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. Formerly a research assistant at the Charles University, she holds a MA in European Studies and completed a study exchange at Sciences Po Paris School of International Affairs in 2014. She focuses on topics related to Central Europe and Visegrád cooperation, Czech Republic's European Policy and EU institutions.

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



Foundation for European Progressive Studies

Rue Montoyer 40, 4th floor

1000 Brussels, Belgium

T: +32 2 234 69 00

Email: info@feeps-europe.eu

Website: <http://www.feeps-europe.eu/en/>

Twitter @FEPS_Europe

The Foundation for European Progressive Studies is the only progressive think tank at European level. FEPS establishes an intellectual crossroad between social democracy and the European project, putting fresh thinking at the core of its action. As a platform for ideas and dialogue, FEPS works in close collaboration with social democratic organisations, and in particular national foundations and think tanks across Europe, to tackle the challenges that Europe faces today. Close to the Party of European Socialists (PES), the S&D Group in the European Parliament, the PES Group in the Committee of the Regions, Young European Socialists and PES women, but nevertheless independent.

FEPS embodies a new way of thinking on the social democratic, socialist and labour scene in Europe.

Our main purpose is to nourish a fresh progressive dialogue through its research, which includes Next Left and Millennial Dialogue programmes. Activities are in person and online are available in different formats. Notably FEPS Progressive Post magazine and the European Progressive Observatory digital platform as well as further publications and events are where you can find our material.

Das Progressive Zentrum

Werftstraße 3

10557 Berlin, Germany

T: +49 (0) 30 400542-55

Email: mail@progressives-zentrum.org

Website: <http://www.progressives-zentrum.org>

Twitter @DPZ_Berlin

Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent think tank, founded in 2007 as a non-profit initiative. In other countries, think tanks have long established a dynamic market for ideas and have become key players in public debates. Like all industrialised countries, Germany will need to find answers to the challenges triggered by the rapid socio-economic, cultural, technological and ecological transformations of the 21st century. Thus it can only benefit from a lively conglomerate of innovative institutions catering to the need for modernisation.

The Progressive Zentrum aims to:

- pursue a political agenda that promotes progressive politics and reform in Germany;
- shape a new understanding of progress – a new progressive narrative for a modern dynamic society, a just economy and a modern state of the 21st century;
- analyse future problems and develop progressive, scientifically based solutions;
- link discussions in Germany to international debates through bringing together key actors from academia, the media, business and politics;
- provide a platform for an international exchange of ideas, in particular for the next generation of progressive thinkers, researchers and policymakers.

The Visegrad Group (V4) has lately been in the European spotlight. In times of the European “polycrisis”, when the EU community is facing a profound lack of consent which principles it should follow, we want to examine how sustainable is this alliance and how can it affect the European Union. What future scenario for the V4 we would wish for? Therefore, in autumn 2017 the Foundation for European Progressive Studies in cooperation with Das Progressive Zentrum launched a joint project on the future of the Visegrad Group in the European Union to capture that diversity: provide fresh, creative insights and unveil spaces for developing a common agenda to foster European integration and progressive ideas.