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# From Pro-European Alliance to Eurosceptic Protest Group? The case of the Visegrad Group

## Summary

Once frontrunners of democratization and Europeanization, the Visegrad Group has gained a reputation as the European Union's trouble-maker and protest group over the past years. The group comprising Czechia,<sup>1</sup> Hungary, Poland and Slovakia stood ready to block the development of a common European policy on migration in response to the refugee and migration crisis, and their political elites have voiced increasingly critical messages concerning European integration.

A closer look, however, reveals that behind the apparent unity, primarily on migration, country priorities and positions are more nuanced and at times divergent – e.g. on the future reform of the EU, of the eurozone, or even the importance of the Visegrad format as such. While Poland and Hungary are more confrontational and wage a 'cultural counter-revolution' towards the EU, Czechia and especially Slovakia – the country most integrated to the EU core through its eurozone membership – has attempted to show a more pro-European picture. These divisions among the countries reflect different attitudes towards the EU, which run the risk of rendering the Visegrad states' coordination and cooperation more difficult on developments of a political nature, such as the EU's future reform. Nevertheless, they will not prohibit the continuation of sectoral cooperation in areas where interests better align.

## 1 The development of Visegrad narratives

Despite its recent emergence to the European centre stage and its current reputation as a protest group, **the Visegrad Group has a 27 year-long history that in fact started with a declaredly pro-European agenda.** Reevoking the historical memory of cooperation among the countries of the region,<sup>2</sup> the Visegrad Group was established on 15 February 1991, not long after the three founding countries

(Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland) had regained their independence from the Soviet bloc.<sup>3</sup> The similar political, economic and social legacy of the communist past and the newly shared goal of democratic transformation provided ample reason to coordinate efforts and share experiences in order to facilitate the three (later four) countries' integration into Euro-Atlantic structures like the European Union and

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<sup>1</sup> The country's name was officially changed from Czech Republic to Czechia in 2016.

<sup>2</sup> The historical roots of the Visegrad cooperation go back as far as 1335, when Charles I of Anjou, King of Hungary, hosted Casimir III, King of Poland, and John of Luxembourg, King of Bohemia, at the Congress of Visegrad, where they forged an alliance among their kingdoms that lasted for over half a century. For more details, see Rác, György (2009) *The Congress of Visegrád*. In: *Visegrád 1335*. (Bratislava: International Visegrad Fund), pp. 19–29. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/congress-of-visegrad/gyorgy-racz-the-congress>. Last accessed: 17 March 2018.

<sup>3</sup> With the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the number of Visegrad countries increased to four.

NATO. In parallel to the external agenda, the V4 pledged to develop economic, infrastructural and social ties within the region. The *Zeitgeist* that called for these countries' 'return to Europe' and prompted Prime Minister József Antall, and Presidents Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa to sign the Visegrad Declaration<sup>4</sup> was by and large undisputed in the Visegrad states at the time.

Following its declaration of its independence in 1993, however, Slovakia was an exception to this rule. The government of Slovak Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar, in place between 1993 and 1998, was balancing between East and West, but with the change of the government in 1998, Slovakia finally chose the European path under the leadership of Mikuláš Dzurinda. As the country embraced the agenda of Europeanization, the Visegrad cooperation, now with all four countries on the same page, also started to intensify. Yet, the format remained uninstitutionalized. The regular meetings on various levels and the coordination introduced from 1999 on both political and sectoral issues<sup>5</sup> were instrumental in helping Slovakia catch up with the rest of the group. Finally, the four countries joined the EU together on 1 May 2004, thus fulfilling the central founding mission of the Visegrad cooperation.

**The countries' membership in the EU and NATO necessitated the reconsideration of the purpose of the V4.** As a result, the Kroměříž Declaration adopted in 2004 tasked the group with strengthening the four countries' cooperation within the EU, deepening regional ties and offering the members' so-called transition experience to countries seeking to pursue a similar transition path to join the Euro-Atlantic integration structures.<sup>6</sup> The formulation of the latter goal reinforced the message suggested by the V4's accession to the EU, namely that the Visegrad states had successfully completed their transformation process and were therefore ready to share the lessons learnt as new, stable democracies.

This mission and narrative has been supported in practice by the activities of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), which was set up in 2000 as the cooperation's only insti-

tution supporting intra-regional cooperation. Following the Visegrad countries' EU accession, the IVF gradually broadened its grant and scholarship schemes in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, with the goal of supporting the transfer of best practices of democratic transition. However, as signs of democratic backsliding started to occur in certain V4 countries over the recent years, **the V4's transition narrative built on the region's successful democratization has begun to weaken.**

In the meanwhile, supporting the group's mission to strengthen its profile in the EU, the Visegrad countries introduced regular consultations ahead of Council meetings in 2009. The purpose was to coordinate and formulate joint positions where possible, and to build a coalition with EU member states sharing similar interests. A notable coalition-building initiative was, for example, the Friends of Cohesion group that lobbied for maintaining financial support in the 2013–2020 budgetary period for less developed regions (mainly in the eastern part of the EU) through the EU's cohesion policy. Nevertheless, despite the regular consultations, the Visegrad Group's cooperation and coalition-building efforts remained on the policy level and were thus little visible in high politics. The breakthrough, which also gave a distinct political character to the group, came in 2015 with the peak of the refugee and migration crisis. **With unprecedented resolve, the group stood against the relocation quota proposed by the European Commission.** While the stance was formulated directly against taking asylum-seekers and refugees (often referred to as 'economic migrants' in the V4), **the Visegrad countries also united against 'Brussels'.** They claimed that the 2015 relocation quota decision made on the Council level was in breach of member states' sovereignty and that the topic should have been discussed in the European Council.

Although the V4's joint position was adopted under the Czech Visegrad presidency, it featured the same confrontational line against the EU and its institutions that the Hungarian government had been pursuing for years by that point. From this time on, the Visegrad countries were

<sup>4</sup> Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration. Website of the Visegrad Group. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>. Last accessed: 17 March 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Contents of Visegrad Cooperation. Website of the Visegrad Group. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412>. Last accessed: 17 March 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union (12 May 2004). Website of the Visegrad Group. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1>. Last accessed: 17 March 2018.

vocal not only on policy issues, as before, but also started to communicate their joint positions on EU-level political developments, such as Brexit and its consequences, or the future institutional and policy reforms of the Union. **This, in turn, gives a clear EU angle to the V4's current focus.**

## 2 Views from the member states

Despite the V4's newly found voice and its recent rise on the European scene, its member countries differ in their motivations to engage in the cooperation. Depending on their regional ambitions, embeddedness in the EU or their political vision, their investedness in developing the Visegrad Group into a European game-changer varies, too. As different perceptions and intentions naturally influence the cooperation's political potential, it is worth discussing briefly what role the individual countries assign to the cooperation, how they see the V4's place in the EU, and to what extent they consider it to be a useful instrument or potentially a liability in pursuing their interests in the European Union.

### *Czechia*

**Czechia played an instrumental role in the launch of the Visegrad cooperation through President Václav Havel,** whose commitment to democratic values resonated well with the founding principles of the V4. During the EU accession process, the cooperation of the four countries was seen by Prague as a useful tool to facilitate progress. After gaining membership, however, the Czech political elite did not set an ambitious agenda for the group. Apart from EU-level coordination, Prague concentrated rather on cooperation in sectoral policy areas within the V4. The most ambitious initiative of Czechia, in which it counted on the support of its Visegrad partners, was the non-paper calling for the development of the EU's policy toward its eastern neighbourhood, published in 2007. This non-paper then contributed to the thinking leading to the launch of the Eastern Partnership, coincidentally during the Czech EU presidency in 2009.

Reflecting the low level of political ambition concerning the V4, the 2015/2016 Czech Visegrad presidency<sup>7</sup> simply pledged to strengthen trust among the Visegrad countries

and in the EU. It focused on sectoral policy areas such as the digital agenda or the Energy Union. The presidency was, however, hijacked by the refugee and migration crisis, unexpectedly politicizing its agenda. Prague suddenly found itself in the contentious situation of being required to represent the joint Visegrad position opposing the relocation quota and thus the European mainstream, but, most importantly, Germany.

While the social democrat-led Sobotka government agreed with Hungary and Slovakia in substance (it also voted against the Commission's relocation quota proposal in the Council in 2015), avoiding further confrontation, it did not join their case in September 2015 at the European Court of Justice, attacking the same decision. This was one of the steps that revealed that Czechia under Sobotka would not follow such a confrontational policy towards the EU as Hungary, and later Poland. **It also made it clear that the Visegrad cooperation is not an utmost priority for the country.**

Instead of investing its energies into the Visegrad cooperation, the government sought to balance its options and broaden its outlook on the region by deepening ties with Austria and Germany.<sup>8</sup> These intentions brought about in 2015 the launch of the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue and the Slavkov (or Austerlitz) Triangle between Czechia, Austria and Slovakia.<sup>9</sup> With the establishment of the latter, many have envisioned the break-up of Visegrad. While it indeed reflects internal cracks between Czechia and Slovakia on the one hand and Hungary and Poland on the other, the format has not since become significant and Visegrad continues to be the dominant Central European format, even if without much Czech initiative.

### *Hungary*

Although one of Hungary's key foreign policy goals in the 1990s was developing good neighbourly relations and strengthening regional ties, cooperation within the V4 was not a high priority after the EU accession. It was only after 2010 that the Viktor Orbán-led Fidesz government gradually attributed more importance to the V4, as its relations

<sup>7</sup> V4 Trust – Program for the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group (July 2015–June 2016). Website of the Visegrad Group. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20152016-czech>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Dostál, Vít (2017) "Alleged Czech Discomfort. The Visegrad Group and the Cynic Reality." Visegrad Insight. Available at: <http://visegradinsight.eu/alleged-czech-discomfort/>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Kałan, Dariusz (2015) "The Slavkov Triangle: A Rival to the Visegrad Group?" Polish Institute of International Affairs Bulletin No. 19 (751). Available at: [https://www.pism.pl/files/?id\\_plik=19252](https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=19252). Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

with EU institutions and western European partners suffered due to his illiberal political agenda. The Visegrad Group was portrayed by the Orbán government as a potential counterweight within the EU, an alternative powerhouse to the core Europe. **As opposed to the Sobotka government, the Orbán government has attributed a strong political role to the V4 over the past years** and seeks to present it as a group still united on political and ideological matters.

According to the Orbán government's narrative, the Visegrad Group, unlike western European member states, can provide the much-needed momentum for the reform and development of the EU. On the one hand, it is presented by the Hungarian government as the region that stands up for the Judeo-Christian heritage of Europe, thus defending the EU in the face of migration pressure. This point was reflected in the September 2016 statement by Prime Minister Orbán and the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party leader Jarosław Kaczyński, when they vowed to launch a cultural counter-revolution together to reform the EU.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the Visegrad Group is often referred to by Hungarian leaders as the economic engine of Europe that managed to recover from the financial crisis well, unlike other parts of the EU. This narrative seeks to legitimize the importance of the region not only for Hungary's development, but also for that of the EU. **Though Hungary under Prime Minister Orbán is open to cooperate with partners from Central and Eastern Europe more broadly, the importance of the Visegrad Group currently goes unquestioned.**

### *Poland*

**The Visegrad cooperation has been perceived as a useful tool in Poland**, especially in those cases where the country could further its interests in the EU by relying on the group without much compromise. Such issues include, for example, the promotion of the Eastern Partnership policy or the joint lobbying for EU cohesion funds under the previously mentioned Friends of Cohesion group. Nevertheless, it cannot be overlooked that Poland plays in a different league

from its smaller partners, for which reason Warsaw seeks to be a leader of regional cooperation.

**The PiS government that came into office in November 2015 fuels the Eurosceptic political agenda the Visegrad Group has become known for over the past few years.**

As mentioned previously, Jarosław Kaczyński, who leads the PiS government behind the scenes, shares the views of Prime Minister Orbán regarding his mission attributed to the region, and his desire for a European Union of sovereign nation states. However, when it comes to communication within the EU, the Polish government under former PiS Prime Minister Beata Szydło has been much more confrontational and ideologically driven than the (at least until recently) more pragmatic Hungarian government.

Additionally – and even more problematic for Poland's long-term interests – the confrontation entered the domain of bilateral relations with Berlin as well, severing ties with the country's traditionally most important EU partner.<sup>11</sup> Once entering into power, for the sake of domestic purposes, the PiS government started reopening painful issues from the historically tainted past of German-Polish bilateral relations, among them the question of war reparations, that pushed bilateral ties to their lowest since the regime change.<sup>12</sup> With Mateusz Morawiecki taking over the position of head of government in December 2017, relations have somewhat improved, but they are still far from their pre-2015 level.

The Visegrad cooperation has gained importance for Warsaw in recent years as it needs the support of its Visegrad partners in its clash with the European institutions, and especially in the face of the European Commission as the Article 7 procedure, launched in December 2017, unfolds. **At the same time, Poland also looks to build a broader alliance among Central and Eastern European EU members** under the Three Seas Initiative. The project, which was launched in 2016 with twelve members, has economic cooperation at the core of its agenda, specifically the development of the infrastructural interconnectedness of the region

<sup>10</sup> Foy, Henry and Neil Buckley (2016) "Orban and Kaczynski Vow 'Cultural Counter-Revolution' to Reform EU." *Financial Times*, 7 September 2016. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/e825f7f4-74a3-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Buras, Piotr (2017) "Europe and its Discontents: Poland's Collision Course with the European Union." *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Available at: [http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europe\\_and\\_its\\_discontents\\_polands\\_collision\\_course\\_with\\_the\\_eu\\_7220](http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europe_and_its_discontents_polands_collision_course_with_the_eu_7220). Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Zaborowski, Marcin (2017) "What is the Future for German-Polish Relations." *Visegrad Insight*. Available at: <http://visegradinsight.eu/what-is-the-future-for-german-polish-relations/>. Last accessed: 6 June 2018.

in terms of energy, transport and communication, which so far has sorely lacked the EU's attention. The group, however, is not receptive to being dragged into Poland's political disputes and ideological clashes with Brussels.<sup>13</sup>

### *Slovakia*

As noted previously, once Mečiar lost power in 1998, **the Visegrad Group proved to be useful in helping the smallest Visegrad country, Slovakia, to catch up with the rest of the group and to join the European Union** as part of the big enlargement wave of 2004. Consequently, the V4 has been seen positively overall by Bratislava. Following the accession, Slovakia proceeded farthest on the path of European integration, becoming the first Visegrad country to join the eurozone in 2009. This situation, coupled with the level of economic interconnectedness with the European core, especially with Germany, puts Slovakia into a unique position in the V4 and ties it more to the EU core. Although regional cooperation has had a lasting positive influence on the country, **the recent negative image of Visegrad is in direct contradiction to Slovakia's most immediate interests, among them smooth relations and cooperation with the key countries of the eurozone.**

At the peak of the refugee and migration crisis, which just preceded the national parliamentary election campaign, Prime Minister Robert Fico of the social democratic Smer party adopted the same Eurosceptic and anti-refugee rhetoric as Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, with whom he later challenged the Council decision at the European Court of Justice. Despite Fico's hopes, the nationalist and xenophobic rhetoric brought increasing support for his radical right contenders in the Slovak parliamentary elections in March 2016, following which Fico toned down his rhetoric. Later, as confrontation between the EU institutions and the duo of Hungary and Poland intensified, considerations stemming from Slovakia's closer position to the core started to come to the fore. Seeing the direction of the debate on the future of Europe and how a multispeed Europe is not off the table in the future either, Fico decided to try to distance Slovakia from the negative image of the V4, at least rhetorically, by clearly expressing that he believes the country's place is in core Europe.<sup>14</sup>

### *Divisions remain*

In sum, despite the recent rise of the Visegrad cooperation on the European stage and the image some of its leaders seek to convey, there are obvious differences concerning how important and useful the individual countries perceive the Visegrad Group to be for pursuing their interests in the European Union.

**While Prime Minister Orbán and PiS leader Jarosław Kaczyński wish to build on the regional alliance, recent times have indicated a more cautious position from the Czech and Slovak governments.** As they sought to pursue their cultural counter-revolution in the defence of traditional values, the individual communication of the Hungarian and Polish governments towards the EU was far more confrontational than that of Czechia or Slovakia at any point following 2015. This has been coupled with direct conflicts as EU institutions raised the alarm due to concerns about the state of democracy, respect for the rule of law, democratic values and principles, which have arguably been under threat as the Hungarian and Polish governments used their power to reshape their countries' constitutions and institutions.

In May 2017, the European Parliament's plenary called on its Committee on Civic Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) to examine if there is a systemic threat to democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary, and to draw up a resolution based on which the plenary can decide whether to initiate the Article 7 procedure against Hungary. Subsequently, in December, the European Commission initiated the Article 7.1 procedure against Poland over its reforms of the judiciary, finding that these pose a threat to the rule of law. **These conflicts not only affect Poland's and Hungary's standing in the EU, but also taint the reputation of the Visegrad Group and, through that, the image of Czechia and Slovakia.** Such impressions risk undermining the group's and the individual countries' position in the EU, which is especially problematic as talks about future developments of the EU and its budget fill the agenda. In this light, it is understandable why Czechia and Slovakia made the previously noted attempts in 2017 to reinforce their pro-EU orientation in the eyes of EU institutions and European partners.

<sup>13</sup> Buras, Piotr (2018) "Visegrad Dreams for Warsaw, Nightmares for Berlin." European Council on Foreign Relations. Available at: [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_visegrad\\_dreams\\_for\\_warsaw\\_nightmares\\_for\\_berlin](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_visegrad_dreams_for_warsaw_nightmares_for_berlin). Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Jancarikova, Tatiana (2017) "Slovakia's Future is with Core EU, not Eurosceptic Eastern Nations: PM." Reuters, 15 August 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-politics-eu/slovakias-future-is-with-core-eu-not-eurosceptic-eastern-nations-pm-idUSKCN1AV1YY>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

### 3 Visegrad cooperation on the European scene

Although the Visegrad cooperation continues to have an intra-regional dimension seeking to strengthen the interconnectedness of the four countries, with the rise of the group on the European scene, its external – that is, EU-level – activities naturally warrant more interest. The key themes on the European agenda of the Visegrad Group currently are:

- The future of the EU and of European governance.
- The next multiannual financial framework.
- The reform of the EU's migration and asylum policy.

**Neither the V4 as a group nor any of the Visegrad governments individually have ever gone as far as to call for an exit from the European Union**, even though the positions voiced over the past years in most of the above domains have overwhelmingly been critical of the current shape of the EU, of the European Commission and of intentions to deepen the integration. In fact, as a recent survey found, 98 per cent of Visegrad policy stakeholders believe that there is no alternative form of cooperation with the EU that would be more beneficial for their country than membership.<sup>15</sup> But while the frequent criticism in the group's joint statements suggests a clear unity and the existence of a minimum agreement concerning the EU, the countries' individual communications and the issues missing from these statements also reveal differences, with implications for the future of the Visegrad cooperation.

#### *The future of the EU*

**Following the Brexit referendum, the Visegrad Group placed great emphasis on reiterating that the EU should focus on areas where there is agreement among the member states and where tangible results can be achieved.** It argued that in order to maintain the unity between and strengthen trust among the countries, the EU should avoid drawn-out debates on issues where there is no consensus.

With such an argumentation, the V4 sought to divert attention away from areas where it disagrees with the mainstream (e.g. migration), while at the same time laying the ground for pursuing an intergovernmental, consensual logic it thinks should lead future decision-making, especially in new areas.

In the name of consensus, the V4 adopted a conservative position in wishing to secure common achievements in the field of economic and monetary cooperation. Among these, its focus is on the four freedoms as the foundations of the single market, which the group seeks to deepen through the liberalization of services and the development of the digital single market. A similarly important achievement in the eyes of the Visegrad countries is the Schengen Zone which, according to the V4, should be fully restored as soon as possible.

Some of the shared priorities of the Visegrad countries on the future of European governance were presented by Slovakia in September 2016, during the country's first ever EU presidency. These called for upholding a balance among the EU institutions and respecting the role of the European Council as the institution setting the political direction for the EU. It demanded a strengthened role for the national parliaments, more respect for diversity within the EU, and keeping negotiations on EU matters open to all member states.<sup>16</sup> These broad directions still hold valid in mid-2018, as reflected in the 2017/2018 Hungarian Visegrad presidency programme, emphasizing that the future reform of the EU should strengthen the role of member states and respect national and regional diversity.<sup>17</sup>

**The emphasis on the national level, in obvious opposition to the trans- or supranational one, appears clearer than ever in the V4 statement on the future of Europe from January 2018**, where the four countries called for a red card system to be introduced instead of the current yellow card one in order to empower national parliaments.

<sup>15</sup> The Trends of Visegrad European Policy survey was conducted in August–September 2017 in all four Visegrad countries and was filled out by 451 stakeholders (politicians, civil servants, researchers and analysts, journalists and business(wo)men) altogether. Its results are available online at: <https://trendy.amo.cz/trendy2017/home>. The quoted results answered the question: "To what extent do you agree with the following proposition about the role of [your country] in the EU?". Proposition: "EU membership is more beneficial to [your country] than any other form of relationship with the EU." The results show the aggregate of "agree" and "somewhat agree" responses. Data available at: <https://trendy.amo.cz/trendy2017/visualizations?visId=06>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Joint Statement of the Heads of Governments of the V4 Countries. Website of the Visegrad Group, 19 September 2016. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the-160919>. Accessed: 18 March 2018.

<sup>17</sup> V4 Connects: 2017–2018 Hungarian Presidency. Website of the Visegrad Group. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/2017-2018-hungarian/20172018-hungarian>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

They also argued that on matters of “strategic national interest”, member states should be entitled to call for unanimous decision-making in the European Council. In the same document, the V4 rejected the establishment of transnational lists in European elections<sup>18</sup> and opposed the election of the head of the Commission through the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism. In the V4’s view, these would upset the balance among the EU institutions and would not be in line with the Treaties.<sup>19</sup>

While the positions appearing in the joint statements reflect a good level of convergence among the four Visegrad countries on matters concerning the future of the EU, there are some key issues – such as membership of the eurozone or even attitudes towards a multispeed Europe – which do not feature, for the simple reason that the countries’ positions diverge.

**Concerning the eurozone and the introduction of the common currency, the V4 countries follow their own individual paths.** The current governments of Poland and Hungary show no real interest in introducing the euro in the near future. Czechia showed some openness toward the eurozone when former Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka expressed in August 2017 that Prague was interested in having observer status at meetings of the eurozone finance ministers.<sup>20</sup> Following the election victory of ANO-leader Andrej Babiš in October 2017, however, it is still uncertain how the Czech position will develop, given the difficulties Babiš was facing in forming a viable coalition as of late May 2018. His starting point, however, is refusal: Babiš himself has previously clearly spoken out against the adoption

of the euro.<sup>21</sup> Finally, Slovakia has been a member of the group since 2009 and is therefore the most integrated into the EU’s core; it has also expressed support for the reform of the eurozone.<sup>22</sup> This level of integration in the eurozone explains why former Prime Minister Fico, following Babiš’ victory in the Czech parliamentary elections, was eager to emphasize that Slovakia is a “pro-European island in the region”,<sup>23</sup> and why the general impression is that the country would go along with the core in a two- or multispeed integration rather than oppose it.

Beyond the highest political level, **the European policy stakeholders of Slovakia also show a different attitude from their Visegrad counterparts** towards the possibility and desirability of the development of a multispeed EU. Stakeholders in all V4 countries believe that out of the five scenarios presented by the European Commission’s White Paper about the future of the EU in March 2017, it is the multispeed scenario (“Those who want more, do more”) that is most likely to materialize.<sup>24</sup> However, while respondents from Czechia, Hungary and Poland typically regard this eventuality as harmful for their country, Slovak stakeholders considered the development beneficial for Slovakia.<sup>25</sup> Their judgement confirms the perception that the country’s deeper integration into the EU has overall been a positive development for Slovakia.

*MFJ beyond 2020*

**The Visegrad countries have been net beneficiaries of the European Union’s budget and have received significant transfers ever since their accession,** especially through the

<sup>18</sup> V4 Statement on the Future of Europe. Website of the Visegrad Group, 26 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2018/v4-statement-on-the>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>19</sup> De La Baume, Maïa (2018) “EU Leaders’ Positions on Budget and Top Job.” Politico Europe, 21 February 2018. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/where-leaders-stand-on-the-eu-budget-and-spitzenkandidat-process/>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>20</sup> “Czechs may seek Observer Seat at Beefed-up Eurogroup.” Euractiv, 22 August 2017. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-europe/news/czechs-may-seek-observer-seat-at-beefed-up-eurogroup/>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Houska, Ondrej (2017) “Czech Election Stalemate on Joining Euro.” EUobserver, 13 October 2017. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/elections/139425>. Last accessed: 6 June 2018.

<sup>22</sup> “Eurozone Needs to Push on with Banking, Bailout Reforms – Slovak Finance Minister”. Euractiv, 30 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/eurozone-needs-to-push-on-with-banking-bailout-reforms-slovak-finance-minister/>. Last accessed: 6 June 2018.

<sup>23</sup> “Slovakia a Pro-European Island in its Region, PM says.” Reuters, 23 October 2017. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-slovakia-europe/slovakia-a-pro-european-island-in-its-region-pm-says-idUSKBN1CS1M3>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Trends of Visegrad European Policy (2017). *Ibid.* Question: “In your opinion, how probable are the individual scenarios of the European Commission’s White Paper on the Future of Europe to materialize?” Data available at: <https://trendy.amo.cz/trendy2017/visualizations?visId=08>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Trends of Visegrad European Policy (2017). *Ibid.* Question: “In your opinion, how beneficial would the individual scenarios of the European Commission’s White Paper on the Future of Europe be for [your country]?” Data available at: <https://trendy.amo.cz/trendy2017/visualizations?visId=09>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

regional and cohesion policy of the EU. While their capitals (or, in the case of Hungary and Poland, the region where their capitals are situated) have by now managed to exceed the average GDP of the EU, the remaining NUTS-2<sup>26</sup> regions of the Visegrad countries – with very few exceptions in Czechia and Poland – still belong to the less developed regions of the EU – that is, their GDP is below the 75 per cent of the EU average.<sup>27</sup>

In the 2014–2020 budget period, Czechia was allocated about 18.1 billion EUR, Hungary 16.8 billion EUR, Poland 63.4 billion EUR and Slovakia 11.5 billion EUR from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Cohesion Fund (CF). The amount allocated for these four countries translates to about 31.2 per cent of the 351.8 billion EUR budget available from these two instruments during the entire budget period.<sup>28</sup> Although the transfers received through the instruments of the common agricultural policy are not negligible either, they lag behind transfers to countries like France, Italy or Germany.<sup>29</sup> **Therefore, the Visegrad states’ joint lobbying has so far focused on cohesion policy during the negotiations of the 2014–2020 financial framework, as the Friends of Cohesion group has clearly shown.**

Lobbying for maintaining the level of cohesion funding for the next period has become even more pressing for these states as the prospective exit of the United Kingdom, one of the EU’s biggest contributors, will affect the overall available financial resources under the next budgetary period. Fearing

a shrinking of the budget and its potential consequences for their favoured policies, **Hungary and Poland have already expressed their support for increasing national budget contributions from 1 to 1.2 per cent of GNI for the next period** and have called on the Commission to draft an ambitious budget,<sup>30</sup> a position not without contradictions given the two countries’ critical approach to European integration. Subsequently, Slovakia has also expressed openness to the possibility of increasing its contribution if the question was opened.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, on 2 February 2018, in a joint statement, the Visegrad countries, together with Croatia, noted that tackling the challenges the EU was facing should not be at the expense of cohesion policy, and an increase of the total amount of the next MFF above 1 per cent of the GNI should be taken into consideration.<sup>32</sup> The meeting itself took place within a broader group of net beneficiaries, including Bulgaria (which could not sign the joint statement due to its role as President of the Council of the EU), Romania and Slovenia. These countries expressed their belief in March 2017 that less developed regions should receive special consideration in the EU’s cohesion policy beyond 2020,<sup>33</sup> and said they would all find an increase to at least 1.1 per cent of the GNI acceptable at the February 2018 meeting.<sup>34</sup>

In terms of the thematic focus of the financial support Visegrad countries hope to receive, concrete directions and positions have not yet been laid out, apart from the general notion that local and national priorities and the territorial

<sup>26</sup> NUTS-2 regions stand for the second level of administrative units under the EU’s Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS), which are used for statistical purposes in the EU. The EU’s cohesion policy allocates financial resources to individual member states by taking into account the level of development of their NUTS-2 territorial units.

<sup>27</sup> “Quick Facts on European Regions.” Statistics illustrated, Eurostat. Available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/en/web/regions/statistics-illustrated>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>28</sup> “European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI Funds) - Explore our Data.” European Commission. Available at: <https://cohesiondata.ec.europa.eu/>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>29</sup> “The CAP in your Country – Factsheet.” European Commission. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-in-your-country\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/cap-in-your-country_en). Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Valero, Jorge (2018) “Hungary and Poland defend Larger European Budget.” Euractiv, 9 January 2018. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/hungary-and-poland-defend-larger-european-budget/>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>31</sup> “Pellegrini: Future EU Cohesion Policy should Involve Less Red Tape.” SME, 19 January 2018. Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20741322/pellegrini-future-eu-cohesion-policy-should-involve-less-red-tape.html>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and Croatia. Website of the Visegrad Group, 2 February 2018. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2018/joint-statement-of-the-180329>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Joint Paper of the Visegrad Group, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Slovenia on Cohesion Policy after 2020. Website of the Visegrad Group, 2 March 2018. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/selected-events-in-2017-170203/joint-paper-of-the>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>34</sup> “Továbbra is szükség van a kohéziós politikára [Cohesion policy continues to be needed].” Website of the Hungarian Government, 2 February 2018. Available at: <http://www.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/hirek/tovabbra-is-szukseg-van-a-kohezios-politikara>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

**Table 1** Top three priorities for the EU budget, according to stakeholders in individual V4 countries.

	Czechia	Hungary	Poland	Slovakia
1.	Science, research and innovation (72%)	Education (69%)	Science, research and innovation (79%)	Science, research and innovation (69%)
2.	Development of infrastructure (64%)	Science, research and innovation (52%)	Development of infrastructure (38%)	Education (64%)
3.	Education (58%)	Development of least developed regions (43%)	Environment and climate action; Development of least developed regions; SMEs (37%)	Development of infrastructure (57%)

In your opinion, which three areas should be prioritized in [your country] when deciding about the division of EU funds for the period starting with 2021?

Respondents selected three areas; % of responses.<sup>35</sup>

specificities of the countries should be taken into account. Although they reflect the opinion of a broader circle of stakeholders, the results of the Trends of Visegrad European Policy survey nonetheless can provide some indications as to which areas should be the focus of the individual countries. The answers overall show that stakeholders believe that science, research and innovation, and education should receive special attention in the coming years. This resonates well with the often-cited need to transition to a knowledge-based economy, and with **the Visegrad countries' intention to increase their and the EU's competitiveness through innovation and digitalization.**

Individually, Czechs name among the top three priorities 1) science, research and innovation; 2) development of infrastructure; and 3) education. Hungarians pick 1) education; 2) science, research and innovation; and 3) the development of less developed regions. Poles focus primarily on 1) science, research and innovation; 2) development of infrastructure; and list a further three areas (environment and climate action, less developed regions, and SMEs) with equal frequency in third place. Finally, Slovaks consider 1) science, research and innovation; 2) education; and 3) infrastructural development as the most important priorities beyond 2020.

Finally, recent times have brought multiple proposals suggesting the linking of budget disbursements to some kind of rule of law or democracy conditionality. This idea generally

does not enjoy support in the V4, especially not in Hungary and Poland. In its budget proposal unveiled in May 2018, the European Commission suggested tying payments from the budget to a robust and functioning regulatory framework for financial management in the member states, thus proposing the introduction of some form of conditionality specifically focusing on the regulatory framework directly affecting the use of EU funds. This, just like a previous proposal to link funding in some form to membership in the recently established European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO),<sup>36</sup> has been received negatively, especially by Poland and Hungary, which feel targeted by such proposals.<sup>37</sup> The Visegrad countries, however, are divided on the matter of EPPO: while Poland and Hungary maintain that such control should remain on the national and not the EU level, Czechia and Slovakia joined the new institution without voicing criticism. Although the feasibility of the proposed reforms is still under question, **should the idea of linking the EU budget disbursements with some form of conditionality gain traction, Hungary and Poland would need to reconcile the value of protecting their national sovereignty with the opportunity of benefitting from EU funds**, which they would be hard-pressed to denounce.

#### *Migration and asylum*

The pursuit of a consensual approach, which the Visegrad Group's joint communication suggests, is especially emphasized in relation to the EU's policy on immigration and asy-

<sup>35</sup> Trends of Visegrad European Policy (2017). *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Cooper, Harry (2017) "EU's Jourova wants Funds Linked to New Prosecutor's Office." Politico Europe, 8 June 2017. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/eus-jourova-wants-funds-linked-to-new-prosecutors-office/>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Zalán, Eszter (2018) "Poland, Hungary Push Back at EU Budget 'Conditionality'." EUobserver, 14 May 2018. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/institutional/141808>. Last accessed: 6 June 2018.

lum since the 2015 peak of the refugee and migration crisis. The Visegrad countries jointly maintain that in developing the EU's approach, the European Commission should follow the political direction laid out by the European Council. In suggesting this, they wish to delegate the policy to the intergovernmental level, where decisions are made unanimously. The topic, which fuelled the V4's rise on the European scene, has been highly politicized and thoroughly securitized by the Visegrad governments in recent years. On the one hand, this still informs the V4 position in the EU; on the other, however, it limits the possibility of dialogue about the issue on both the national and the European level.

Since 2015, a few key messages have consistently featured as part of the V4 position, including:

- Protection of the external borders of the EU.
- Differentiation among legitimate asylum-seekers and so-called economic migrants.
- The need for partnership with countries of transit and origin.
- Support for migration pacts.
- Generally addressing the root causes of migration.

Despite the declaration of the last priority, the Visegrad countries have so far done little to contribute to such initiatives effectively with either ideas or substance. Although V4 countries never specify how root causes should be addressed, this priority could potentially be understood as a call for increased development and humanitarian assistance for developing and crisis-ridden regions. In this regard, however, the Visegrad countries are not the most credible advocates, considering that **they are all far from spending 0.7 per cent of their GNI on development assistance, which is the target adopted by all EU countries.** The few concrete steps the Visegrad countries have taken are instead in line with the securitized nature of the problem: they have delegated border guards to support the protection of the Bulgarian and Macedonian borders on the Western Balkan route, or more recently, contributed to the border protection of Libya with 35 million EUR. However, **the most prevalent and con-**

**frontational element of the Visegrad position has been, and remains, the refusal of any mandatory relocation mechanism,** which Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia voted against in 2015, as previously discussed.<sup>38</sup> Instead, Visegrad countries propose help through 'flexible solidarity', or the offer of alternative ways to address the crisis, like those mentioned above.

The reactions of the Visegrad countries to the ECJ ruling dismissing the complaint from Hungary and Slovakia about the quota in 2017 have been telling in respect of how they perceive the EU and how they want to be perceived. While the then Slovak Prime Minister voiced that his country respects the ECJ decision, albeit its opinion has not changed about quotas, Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó described the decision as outrageous and as an act where "politics raped European law".<sup>39</sup> Three months later, the EU escalated the infringement procedures to the ECJ due to lack of implementation against Czechia, Hungary and Poland.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, despite its earlier alliance with Hungary in the court case, Slovakia was not among the rest of the V4, which indicates that in the end Bratislava submitted itself to the ECJ decision.

#### 4 Prospects for the Visegrad Group

The past few years have certainly lifted the European profile of the Visegrad cooperation, giving it increasing visibility and recognition across the European Union. Despite the prominent profile, however, **the fundamental logic of the Visegrad cooperation has not changed since the watershed years of 2015.** The growing recognition has not triggered any sort of institutionalization of the group or even intentions to move in that direction. Therefore, it can be expected that the Visegrad Group continues to coordinate in a wider range of topics and form joint positions flexibly only where their interests and views align. However, this new, prominent profile is perceived much differently across the EU than that before 2015. Unlike in the decade following their EU accession, when the group's political stance – if it had one – was clearly EU-positive, the recent politicization has fundamentally altered the V4's role in the EU. **The un-**

<sup>38</sup> The discussion about the quota took place during the Polish election campaign. Although initially the Polish Civic Platform government opposed the quota, too, in the hope of political gains with its European partners, it decided at the last minute not to veto. The incoming Law and Justice government, however, later refused to implement the decision.

<sup>39</sup> Zalan, Eszter (2017) "Hungary and Slovakia Defiant after EU Court Rebuke." EUobserver, 6 September 2017. Available at: <https://euobserver.com/migration/138913>. Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

<sup>40</sup> "Relocation: Commission refers the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the Court of Justice." European Commission, 7 December 2017. Available at: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-5002\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-5002_en.htm). Last accessed: 5 June 2018.

**precedentedly Eurosceptic positions taken by the V4 on several occasions have given it a more prominent profile, but that of a protest group that blocks the development of joint positions** with its inflexibility, its expectancy but its parallel lack of solidarity. As the group has sought to evolve into a policy-maker from a policy-taker on the EU stage, instead of moving policy-making forward through a cooperative, consensus-seeking attitude, it has chosen to slow down (or, in certain cases, even turn back) integration by wishing the return of power and sovereignty to EU member states. Consequently, the Visegrad Group's agenda today could only be more different from its original mission if it sought the exit of its members from the Union.

This new politicized image is raising concerns in some member states, while receiving positive feedback from others. **With nationalist populism gaining voters' support across the EU, the countries behind the V4's current public image, Hungary and Poland, appear as role models to political forces wishing to see 'less Europe', a return to national traditions and exclusionist policies.** However, despite the image, the leadership of the Visegrad Group as a whole has been largely reactive in practice. All the prominent themes that have dominated the Visegrad agenda over the past three years, like migration, the next MFF or the EU reform, have been supplied by international and European developments. **Beyond the general directions in these topics, the Visegrad Group does not speak in unison on many of the details.** The group has not been able to formulate joint positions on key matters, and has displayed divisions behind the scenes due to the individual interests and specificities of its members.

In terms of sectoral issues, the path ahead for the V4 is relatively clear: it will continue coordination and will seek coalitions where it considers its interests to be aligned and where

it can gain the support of likeminded countries, generally its neighbours. In this regard, its engagement in negotiations on the upcoming multiannual financial framework will follow a similar interest-driven pattern to before. However, the potential introduction of some form of conditionality could complicate things among the V4 partners due to the explicit lack of such a commitment in Poland and Hungary.

**More interesting and less predictable is how cooperation will develop in the group in relation to more politicized questions, especially on the future of the EU.** Here, the past year has brought divergences to the fore, as it is not only the V4's protest attitude to the relocation quota, but Poland and Hungary's confrontation with EU institutions over the state of democracy and rule of law, too, that has tainted the image of Visegrad. It has been becoming apparent that EU institutions find the latter two countries' deviation from the common values and principles increasingly problematic. On the other hand, the European commitment of Slovakia which, in institutional terms, is practically already part of the core has been repeatedly emphasized by the country's leadership, as was noted before. These statements can be interpreted as the country seeking to distance itself from the negative reputation gained by Poland and Hungary. Due to Slovakia's institutional embeddedness in the EU core through the eurozone, the country's overall commitments and preferences are unlikely to change in the near future. Czechia, however, is still an open question: the future Babiš government, if formed, can still tilt the country in one direction or another.

**Due to the multitude of factors, it is still uncertain to what extent the Visegrad Group can form a strong coalition in the political reform process of the EU. However, it is increasingly apparent that it has little chance of going along with the four countries united in this matter.**

## Chronology

- 1989** Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland regain independence from the Soviet bloc.
- 1991** The Visegrad Group (V4) is established on 15 February with a pro-European agenda.
- 1993** Peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia; Slovakia gains independence.
- 1998** After balancing between East and West, Slovakia also chooses the European path.
- Cooperation in the Visegrad Group starts to intensify.
- 1999** Regular meetings and coordination within the Visegrad Group are introduced on multiple levels.
- Czechia, Hungary and Poland become members of NATO.
- 2000** The International Visegrad Fund (IVF) is set up to support intra-regional cooperation.
- The first presidency of the Visegrad Group is assumed by Poland.
- 2004** The four Visegrad countries gain EU membership on 1 May.
- Slovakia joins NATO.
- The Kroměříž Declaration sets new tasks for the group:
- Strengthening the four countries' cooperation within the EU.
  - Deepening regional ties.
  - Offering support to countries that seek Euro-Atlantic integration.
- 2009** Slovakia joins the eurozone.
- Czechia's first EU presidency.
- The V4 introduces regular consultations ahead of (European) Council meetings to formulate joint positions, although the cooperation is as yet little visible in high EU politics.
- 2011** Hungary's first EU presidency.
- Poland's first EU presidency.
- 2015** The V4 agenda becomes politicized in reaction to the refugee and migration crisis:
- The group stands against the quota for relocation of refugees proposed by the European Commission.
  - Hungary and Slovakia challenge the Council decision on the quota at the European Court of Justice; their complaints are dismissed in 2017.
- The Slavkov Triangle is launched with the participation of Austria, Czechia and Slovakia.
- 2016** Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Polish Law and Justice Party Leader Jarosław Kaczyński vow to launch a cultural counter-revolution to reform the EU.
- The Three Seas Initiative is launched with twelve Central and Eastern European members.
- Slovakia's first EU presidency.
- 2017** The European Parliament's plenary calls on its Committee on Civic Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs to examine if there is a systemic threat to democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights in Hungary.
- The European Commission launches the Article 7.1 procedure against Poland.
- 2018** The V4 sets out its preferences in its joint statement on the future of Europe.
- Among others, the group:
- Demands that member states should be entitled to call for unanimous decision-making in the European Council on matters of 'strategic national interest'.
  - Rejects the establishment of transnational lists in European elections.
  - Opposes the election of the head of the Commission through the *Spitzenkandidaten* mechanism.