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The Visegrád Group in the EU: 2016 as a turning-point?

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Abstract The past year has witnessed a major shift in the relationships between the four Central European countries that make up the Visegrád Group. In matters related to migration, the members of the alliance have worked together in Brussels as a cohesive bloc throughout 2016. But in the wake of Brexit, simmering internal divisions have arisen within this regional alliance over the EU's future. The Visegrád Group acts as an amplifier, an ad hoc coalition, reinforcing regional positions where they exist. Its diplomatic infrastructure and other structural factors are here to stay, but the key drivers of its stances are now domestic politics and the role of the countries' leaders. In the absence of a shared vision for the future of Europe and the role of EU institutions, the honeymoon period seems to be over. A 'conservative revolution' in Poland has created an illiberal axis with Hungary, where a sovereigntist narrative holds sway, while the Czech and Slovak governments have maintained a more pragmatic line on the EU. The new risk is that reinventing the EU will come at the expense of (divided) Central Europeans.

Keywords EU | Visegrád | V4 | Central Europe | Regional cooperation | Brussels | Diplomacy | Migration | Geopolitics

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Introduction

In the history of the Visegrád Group (V4) and its influence within the EU, the year 2016 will be seen as a turning point. This informal Central European alliance—which includes the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia—entered the year on a high. Amidst deep divisions between the member states on how Europe should approach the refugee and migration crisis, the V4 was able to defend its line of strongly opposing mandatory relocations. Eventually, once the EU–Turkey deal and other measures had achieved a dramatic drop in the flow of migrants, the V4 was able to leave its stamp on the new EU policy approach to the crisis: the roadmap agreed at the Bratislava Summit on 16 September places emphasis on the protection of external borders and promotes the concept of ‘flexible solidarity’. And yet, the V4 will not end this year in a celebratory mood. The new reality is an internal split over the future shape of the Union itself. From a distance, all four governments are considered to be Eurosceptic and proponents of a weak EU with strong member states. On closer inspection, however, there is a growing divergence between this ‘sovereignist narrative’ promoted by Budapest and Warsaw, and the moderate ‘pragmatic line’ pursued by Bratislava and Prague.

So what is this mysterious Visegrád Group? What drove it to be so organised during the migration crisis? And what can one expect from Central Europeans at a time of existential crisis for the EU?

Bad image, not substance

The high profile of the V4 on the refugee and migration crisis from mid-2015 has earned it more coverage than ever before in the 25 years of its existence. Yet most of this coverage was predominantly negative, as furious politicians and public opinion in Western Europe continued to remind the Visegrád countries of their lack of solidarity and burden-sharing on refugee issues. ‘The migration crisis has given an unsettling new direction to an old alliance’, remarked *The Economist* in January 2016 under the catchy headline ‘Big, bad Visegrád’.

‘What do you want to do about the negative image of Visegrád?’ was the question asked of the foreign ministers of all four members of the V4 as they met in Prague in February to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the V4’s founding. Their responses were defensive, and in the case of the Hungarian and Polish ministers, also confrontational. Hungary’s Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó claimed that heavy criticism of the V4 by its EU partners was a sign of its increasing relevance, and would, in the end, encourage the V4 governments to close ranks even more. His Polish counterpart Witold Waszczykowski dismissed concerns about the future cuts in cohesion funds from Germany and other Western European net payers as totally overblown. For Slovakia’s Foreign Minister Miroslav Lajčák it was a shock to be treated as a ‘younger brother’ by many of his Western European counterparts during the migration crisis. At the same time, Lajčák was concerned that the wedge between the EU’s East and West

was becoming too large. As the host of the meeting, Czech Foreign Minister Lubomír Zaorálek was the last to speak, and tried to offer a moderate voice: both the EU and the V4 share a common fate, and neither can succeed without the other.

This image problem will stick with the V4 into the future. We should be under no illusion—Central Europeans are not the only ones that have problems with solidarity or continue to meet as a regional club in the fractured EU. Look at the Nordic Council, the six founding members, the Franco–German alliance or even the loose Mediterranean club. Coordinating in small groups now seems to be the name of the game: it can be effective, and is sometimes even necessary within the complex EU system. It can also have a positive outcome for the Union as a whole. At the same time, the Nordic or Benelux countries are not lumped together conceptually if one or more of them does something unworthy of the spirit of European solidarity.

A bit of history

The regional cooperation of the V4 was born shortly after the collapse of Communism, under the leadership of former dissidents turned politicians. The presidents of Czechoslovakia and Poland, Václav Havel and Lech Wałęsa, met in February 1991 in the scenic little town of Visegrád with Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall. The place was chosen to create a historical link with the meeting of the Central European kings there in 1335 to settle their neighbourly disputes and regional rivalries, and to create new commercial routes that bypassed Vienna. This time the common goal was to try to distance their countries from Russia and the geopolitical legacy of Soviet dominance. As Rupnik (2016, 58) reminds us, the V4 was ‘forged with democratic ideals, aspirations and leadership... It also represented a strong opposition to nationalism... in the region. And thirdly, there was a European dimension—the common goal was to join Europe, to create a new Central Europe while simultaneously integrating it with the broader European project’.

In a quarter of a century, the V4 has developed as both a consequence and a source of historically unprecedented stability in Central Europe. Initially it struggled to find a new purpose once all four countries had become full members of the EU and NATO. After 2004, common interests became less obvious as the V4’s governments saw greater benefit in setting their policy preferences and alliances individually. Over time, however, similarities among the V4 countries in terms of economic profile, geography and history have led to a greater awareness of how their intra-EU interests tend to overlap.

How does the V4 operate?

The V4 operates as a diplomatic framework for regional intergovernmental cooperation, without its own institutions or formal structures. Thus the V4 often acts as *an amplifier*,

an ad hoc coalition, to reinforce regional positions where they exist and bring them together through an established set of procedures: the rotating one-year presidency and regular high-level meetings at the presidential, prime ministerial and ministerial levels, often down to the expert level of the directors of departments. The only permanent institution in the V4 is the International Visegrád Fund which promotes joint projects and networks among civil society and other non-state actors in the four countries. In recent years, the V4 has developed into a multi-layered regional cooperation scheme among various branches of government, complemented by a dense web of connections between stakeholders in the private and non-governmental sectors.

What is underestimated by outsiders is the high level of socialisation among the V4 state officials and experts. Phone calls to their Visegrád counterparts are often the first they make when they need to consult on EU policy issues. Yet a lot still depends on mutual interests, functional synergies and even on personal chemistry at the highest level.

‘Some would like to see the Visegrád countries pursuing convergent or even identical policies within the EU. They seem to be surprised that, in reality, their national interests differ. The Czech, Hungarian, Slovak, and Polish governments often do not seek optimal results through cooperation, but compete for resources, attention or prestige’, acknowledged Schneider (2015, 1). As former Czech first deputy foreign minister, Schneider also outlines reasons why the V4 format can bring added value to Central Europeans on the EU level: ‘[A]mplifying each nation’s voice through cooperation is the most effective way to gain attention and influence in Brussels... the V4 potentially strengthens the leverage of Central European states in coalition building within the EU’ (Schneider 2015, 1).

Previous tensions and divisions

Over time, the regional alliance has developed a sense of diplomatic flexibility and the ‘art of disagreeing’, so that when countries do not share the same opinions, it does not mean an end to the cooperation in that policy area, or that the disagreement spills over into other areas. There have been periods of ‘passive Visegrád’ as one country or another has become an outlier, or as members of the group have been riven by mutual tensions. The most frequent V4 outlier is Poland: due to its size and relevance in European politics, it has always had more opportunities to join other coalitions and alliances, such as the Weimar Triangle, or to ally itself with the Baltic countries or Scandinavia. Another flashpoint in regional cooperation has been Slovak–Hungarian relations: there were diplomatic spats over the 2009 language law amendment in Bratislava, followed by controversies over the nationalist agenda in Budapest when Orbán’s Fidesz came to power in 2010.

The internal flexibility of the group was tested to the limit by deep divisions at the outset of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. The positions taken range from Poland’s strong anti-Russia stance to Hungary’s privileged partnership with Moscow, with the Czechs and

Slovaks standing somewhere in between. At the time, many observers predicted that new geopolitical fault lines in the region over Russia would splinter the V4 ‘to the point of irrelevance’ (Lucas 2014). To some extent this was true, as within NATO Poland organised a wider coalition of countries on the Eastern flank, including Romania and the Baltic countries.

The unwavering anti-Russian position of the Polish government was clear. The other three V4 governments, however, were very reluctant to agree on EU sanctions against Russia.

In parallel, the focus of the V4’s cooperation shifted to the EU agenda. A new window of opportunity was opening up, with a less Eurosceptic and more constructive approach to Europe in Prague under the new centre–left government of Bohuslav Sobotka, which came to power in early 2014.

A better-organised bloc in Brussels

The strengthening of the V4’s cooperation on key EU issues can be traced back to the 2009–11 period. An important catalyst was the 2009 gas crisis and subsequent coordination on energy, which helped the Group to use EU funding and the EU Commission’s regulatory framework to build interconnectors and other missing infrastructure, and also to challenge Russia’s Gazprom as the monopolistic gas supplier. In addition, the V4’s cooperation on the EU agenda was strengthened by the learning experiences of the Czech (2009), Hungarian (2011) and Polish (2011) EU presidencies. Gradually, Visegrád governments were becoming policy-shapers rather than policy-recipients on cohesion, the single market, energy, enlargement, the Eastern Partnership and other EU policy areas.

Clear signs of the V4 maximising its clout by working and voting together in Brussels were already apparent in 2014, such as in the appointment of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as the president of the European Council. Another example was the balanced compromise made over the EU’s climate package deal in October 2014 for the Paris global climate conference. Rather than blocking the whole deal, the V4 plus other supporters, such as Romania and Bulgaria, presented a common set of demands for the final deal. Benefiting from the requirement to find a unanimous consensus among all member states, the Central Europeans engaged in detailed technocratic negotiations with the EU Commission and powerful members, and ultimately managed to secure better conditions for the future emission reduction targets for their industries.

At the time Slovakia was holding the rotating V4 presidency, and its permanent representative to the EU Ivan Korčok was quoted by the *Financial Times* as calling it ‘a realisation moment. It became so obvious to us all that this group was a tangible and effective way of achieving something... It was like when a small child learns how to first ride a bicycle. Now there is high confidence among the members that we can continue to fight and win EU battles’ (Foy 2014).

A survey of V4 policymakers prior to the migration crisis

This high confidence was also reflected in attitudes among policymakers at home. In June 2015, just before the flow of refugees and migrants into Europe dramatically increased, a consortium of four think tanks conducted a unique regional survey of foreign policy trends. Data was collected from over 400 foreign policy experts and practitioners in all V4 countries. The results indicated several interesting trends.

First, there was a high expectation that the V4 would remain a cohesive bloc on the EU level for some time. Perceptions of priorities on the national and the EU levels overlapped a lot, including on migration and energy issues. Also, bilateral relations within the V4 were perceived as excellent—which has not always been the case.

Second, the survey showed that on the future of EU integration, the V4 countries' expectations were divergent and fragmented. Polish and Czech experts expected more differentiated (multi-speed) integration, the Slovaks supported deeper integration of the euro area, and the Hungarians thought that the larger member states would increasingly dominate the institution. These results offer a warning that if fundamental questions about Europe's future arise, the V4 is no longer likely to act as a coherent bloc (Nič and Dostál 2016).

Diverging views on Europe's future

As the migration crisis settled down and the Brexit vote in the UK on 23 June 2016 accelerated the EU reform debate, the simmering divisions among the national views of the V4 came to the surface. In the run-up to the Bratislava Summit on 16 September, the V4 prime ministers met three times. The ambition of the Polish V4 presidency, as announced by Prime Minister Beata Szydło, was to table substantial proposals at the summit that would address sensitive issues regarding the functioning of the EU: the institutional balance in Brussels, relations between the EU institutions and the member states, and the EU's political agenda. In the preparatory stages, however, an offensive approach towards EU institutions presented by Budapest and Warsaw generated a lot of concern in the two other national capitals. Prague and Bratislava did not want to support any radical moves that would create more discord and confrontation among EU leaders at the Bratislava Summit. Such a course of action would also go against the interests of the Slovak EU presidency, which as the host of the summit, had hoped to secure an agreement among the EU leaders on general principles for the post-Brexit EU.

In the end, the V4 managed to achieve concessions from its EU partners on migration policy. The Bratislava roadmap adopted the concept of 'flexible solidarity', which enables EU member states to decide, on a voluntary basis, on specific forms of contribution to the EU response, taking into account their experience and potential. Now it is up to

the V4 countries to fill out the concept of ‘flexible solidarity’ with content and practical deliverables, so that it does not become an excuse for solidarity ‘a la carte’ and opt-outs from common EU migration policy in the future.

At their final press conferences after the Bratislava Summit, the V4 leaders again offered contrasting assessments of what had been achieved. Most notably, Hungary’s Prime Minister Orbán blasted the summit as a failure, while Slovakia’s Prime Minister Fico declared that it was ‘exceptionally successful’.

So what is going on in the V4 and between its four countries? Although the regional group continues to meet and to coordinate in Brussels on a regular basis, there has recently been more creeping tension and discord. Several factors are now pulling the V4 in different directions, and some of them are long term and structural.

First, Poland has experienced a conservative revolution under Law and Justice’s one-party government, with fast, far-reaching changes being made to domestic and foreign policy. Controversial changes to the Constitutional Tribunal led to the European Commission’s decision to place Poland in a structured dialogue and under monitoring—the first time the relatively new Rule of Law framework (introduced in 2014 due to general concern about democratic backsliding in Hungary) has been triggered against a member state. The procedure could still progress to the next stage, potentially leading to the launch of sanctions under Article 7 of the Lisbon Treaty—a long-dormant law that could ultimately lead to the suspension of voting rights for the targeted member state. At the time of writing, there was no sign of willingness on the side of the Polish government to search for compromises and a successful resolution of the case.

This is a sign of the rapid decline of Poland’s influence in Brussels. This carries several risks for the V4’s cooperation: with Poland now in charge of the V4 rotating presidency, its agenda could be hijacked by Warsaw’s quarrel with EU institutions. Even more relevant is the fact that to hold sway as a powerful regional bloc in Brussels, the V4 has thus far to a large extent relied on Warsaw.

It is fair to note that Poland’s position in debates about the post-Brexit EU is still evolving. In a mixture of pragmatism and ideology, two chief factors seem to be the personal inclinations of Jarosław Kaczyński, the country’s leader in practice if not in title (formally he is just the chair of the ruling party), and the future evolution of the domestic political context (Buras 2016, 1).

There are some important overlaps between Orbán’s vision and the conservative nationalist ideology of Law and Justice. The Polish ruling party believes that a polycentric Europe exists in which the periphery needs to balance the dominance of the Franco–German core. In order to elevate its peripheral and subordinated position in relation to ‘core Europe’, Warsaw is seeking allies in Central and Eastern Europe (and before Brexit also in the Eurosceptic UK) with which it wishes to construct a regional coalition to counter the Western European vision of further EU integration (Dostál 2016, 4). However, it is not clear who in the region would be interested, except Hungary.

Second, Hungary's controversial referendum against a mandatory EU quota on refugees on 2 October was another step forward for the 'cultural counter-revolution'. In spite of an insufficient turnout to be valid, Prime Minister Orbán used the vote as an argument (with 98% of those who took part supporting the government's call to reject the outdated EU plan) to propose constitutional amendments that included a claim that the nation-state should be the basis for EU decisions, not vice versa. Orbán actively supported the UK to stay in the EU but now he sees the post-Brexit period as a fantastic opportunity to overhaul institutions in Brussels and to move towards a less integrated Europe with stronger nation-states. In a weakening, fragmented EU with cohesion funding running out after 2020 (when the current budget period is over) Hungary could boost its relative position in Europe and vis-à-vis Germany by forming regional blocs with strong national and religious identities. Both conservative governments, Budapest as well as Warsaw, are now trying to massage the V4 into a regional platform that supports their ideas.

Third, the centre-left governments in Prague and Bratislava are broader three-party coalitions, and their Social Democratic prime ministers do not want to be part of a conservative counter-revolution against the EU institutions. Although Fico may have personal affinities with some aspects of Orbán's line, he moderated his anti-migrant rhetoric after the March elections as Slovakia took over the EU presidency. In addition, Fico's political power at home is not so absolutely dominating as that of Orbán or Kaczyński. Furthermore, both Fico and Sobótka, who is considered a weak prime minister even by Czech standards, have to deal with strong opponents in the form of the presidents of their countries (the liberal Andrej Kiska in Slovakia, and the populist Social Democrat Miloš Zeman in the Czech Republic).

That said, a plurality of key decision-makers in both Prague and Bratislava have so far tended to agree on two things—first, on recognising Germany's centrality in any future EU configuration, and second, on not sharing Polish or Hungarian concerns about this. On the contrary, they do not want to be part of any entrenched, consistent alliance against Berlin or Chancellor Angela Merkel (no matter how much they may criticise her refugee policy). The fundamentals of European policy in the respective V4 countries are now diverging. The Czech Republic has always valued its relationship with neighbouring Germany as more important than that with any of its Visegrád allies. Likewise Slovakia is part of the eurozone, making it more integrated with Germany and core Europe than the other V4 countries, and even ready to move further ahead with more fiscal integration.

However, in a V4 alliance dominated by the larger and better coordinated 'illiberal tandem' led by two strong populist leaders, the Czech and Slovak space to manoeuvre will be limited. As one Czech official has recently described the situation, Visegrád has become a toxic brand, and all they can do is send messages to the West and attempt damage limitation (Foy and Byrne 2016).

This has been quietly celebrated by many EU partners as a good thing. Yet it also carries new risks and uncertainty—this time from the opposite direction: a lack of

engagement from Central Europeans in reconstructing the Union could be a negative factor, contributing to more disintegration (Krastev 2016).

Conclusion

While divisions within the V4 will make it more constrained and narrow-minded, there is no reason to think that the alliance will go away. On EU issues in which their interests converge—such as safeguarding the free movement of labour, completing the single market or migration—the V4 will continue to throw its weight around.

If more flexibility is applied to the EU project, movements favouring integration could gain momentum after the French presidential and German parliamentary elections in 2017. Berlin and Paris should try to engage Central Europeans in constructing a flexible Union to the extent and within the layers that each country is prepared to consider. As the push for opt-outs is increasing, more opt-ins could be introduced: this would pull the Warsaw–Budapest axis in the opposite direction to Bratislava, with Prague caught somewhere in the middle as it approaches its own parliamentary elections in late 2017.

The post-Brexit EU will continue to become more and more differentiated, and the same development is very likely to occur in Central Europe. However, as the regional voice is going to be increasingly marginalised in this process, the reinvention of the EU could move forward at the expense of Central Europeans. In this respect, Donald Tusk, the Polish president of the European Council, has an important role to play in keeping the region connected to the EU project even as some countries ostentatiously keep their distance from Brussels.

Ultimately, this is about the Western anchor and European orientation of not only the Visegrád alliance, but the whole of Central Europe.

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