

V4 Strategies in the European Union

Rifts within the EU and the Visegrád Group

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Established in 1991, the Visegrád Group has played a historically important role in the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. With the accession of the four countries to the EU and NATO, the Visegrád Group fulfilled its purpose, pushing V4 members to reshape regional cooperation and find another meaningful purpose. Consequently, the V4 became a regional consultation (and coordination) group for EU-level decision-making. This has become even more visible during the European migration debate. However, differences have often outweighed common positions, while the rule of law procedures against Hungary and Poland have profoundly impacted the V4 brand, too. Foreign policy has emerged as the most visible difference among Visegrád countries, with Hungary being the ultimate outlier.

On the Road to Europe

1989 turned out to be a defining year for Central and Eastern Europe. The fall of the Iron Curtain created an historic opportunity for the region to reunite with Europe. In this spirit, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland joined forces in 1991 to advance their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Signed in 1991, the Visegrád Declaration set out five key objectives for regional cooperation, including the abolishment of the remains of totalitarianism, a more effective transition to liberal democracy and parliamentarism, strengthening the rule of law and – most importantly – joining the European Union and NATO. Recognizing Central European aspirations, the EU also signed a declaration on future cooperation with the Visegrád Group in 1991. The region scored another major recognition when US President Bill Clinton met V4 leaders in 1994. In order to support economic convergence goals and create favorable environments for both the region and the accession process, V4 countries set up the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). During the 1990s, CEFTA proved instrumental in overcoming the economic challenges from the termination of the COMECON with the fall of the USSR.

While the initial history of the Visegrád Group is filled with historic accomplishments in fostering better relations with the EU and the US, the period between 1994 and 1999 was marked by major divergence between members, which indicated that political alignment between Visegrád governments are among the major factors shaping regional cooperation. Slovakia's chances for Euro-Atlantic integration took a serious hit due to the autocratic tendencies of the country under Prime Minister Vladimir Meciar. The „split” within the V4 has become more apparent when the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland were granted NATO membership in 1999. Concerning the Western aspirations of the V4, other circumstances also showed that the countries were developing their individual positions on policy matters, leading to different priorities for the incumbent governments. The end of the Meciar era resulted in the revival of V4 coordination on the road towards Europe. The next period saw several rounds of crucial negotiations with the European bloc.

13 years after the V4 was founded, all participating countries were admitted into the European Union. The Visegrád Group thus fulfilled its original purpose; however, this did not

result in the termination of the regional grouping. To the contrary, the V4 continued to live on as a regional coordination group, primarily with two aims. First, the participating countries continued to look for joint solutions towards regional problems. Second, they were identifying regionally important political and policy issues ahead of European Council summits and other European Union meetings. While the Visegrád Group is still a regional bloc without any substantial institutional background, the International Visegrád Fund (IVF), established in 2000, has become a primary source of funding for cross-border and regional projects, many of which have contributed to the democratic development of the region. The V4 also set its sight beyond Central Europe, as the so-called V4+ cooperation formats with primarily non-EU countries became more significant, particularly with Western Balkans states and, later on, Eastern Partnership countries.

Migration and European rifts

Another critical year in the history of the Visegrád Group was 2015, which proved to be a significant period in EU history, as well. The 2014-2015 migration crisis created an unprecedented pressure on the European community, pushing the EU to search for common positions as migration became a challenge for multiple EU member states. The European Commission took the initiative in 2015 with proposing a mandatory relocation quota to show solidarity at the highest possible level. However, three out of four V4 countries, with Poland being the outlier at the time, spoke out against the proposal. Following the change of government in Warsaw in 2015, the V4 started presenting a united front against proposals coming from Western Europe and the EU Commission. This has proven highly controversial within the European Union and increased the possibility of wider rifts in policy debates. Defying the European Council decision from the Council of the EU on relocation quotas, the V4 decided not to implement the EU decision, leading to judicial cases at the European Court of Justice, first with lawsuits by Slovakia and Hungary, then legal challenges from the entire Visegrád bloc. In both cases, the judicial body found that Visegrád countries violated EU law when they chose not to respect the common EU position in the Council of the EU.

The severity of the situation surrounding the migration debate and its potential impact on the European community was eventually recognized by Slovakia, which – under Prime Minister Robert Fico – was looking to bring the two sides closer. During the Slovak EU presidency in 2016, the Visegrád Group, following a Slovak initiative, endorsed the notion of the so-called flexible solidarity, a cooperation element aimed at curbing migration flows by providing other tools of assistance. According to flexible solidarity, not all EU members states would be obliged to host refugees in their home country. The Slovak proposal has shown that while the Visegrád Group stands against hosting refugees, Slovakia and the Czech Republic have a more moderate attitude in comparison with Poland and Hungary, and this divergence did not only apply to migration. The migration debate was further strengthened by the fact that separate discussions about migrants and refugees essentially became one.

The V4 blockade of EU migration policy, which is also being used for domestic political gains primarily in Poland and Hungary in the frames of these governments' anti-Brussels rhetoric, is likely to continue as the Visegrád Group and, particularly, Poland and Hungary rejected the EU migration pact proposed by European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen. This

will further delay joint European solution mechanisms and it is likely push border countries, particularly in the Mediterranean region, to find other, regional solutions.

The real rift: Visegrád and the rule of law

While the migration debate has dominated the V4 political discourse on the surface of European politics, an even more divisive issue has come to light between the V4 and the EU due to Poland and Hungary. With both countries ruled by right-wing authoritarian governments, the two member states have undergone a sharp decline in the rule of law. Democratic backsliding has taken different forms in the two countries but their issues became equally pressing for the European Union to act. In 2017, the European Commission initiated the so-called Article 7 procedure against Poland for the first time in the history of the European bloc, while the European Parliament – also for the first time in its history – overwhelmingly voted to launch the very same procedure against Hungary in 2018. While several EU debates were initiated to discuss the rule of law in the two Visegrád members, none of the two procedures have so far resulted in achieving the originally intended goal, with political struggles about the subject still dominating EU politics. Equally important is that the Polish and Hungarian governments have pledged to veto the procedure against each other in the Council of the EU if it came to a vote.

Regardless, the rule of law debate became a milestone in EU history, with EU bodies looking to strengthen the rule of law by other means. This resulted in the introduction of the rule of law conditionality mechanism, linking European values and EU-provided funds in the Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 and the EU's so far unprecedented recovery package, the NextGeneration EU facility to support the recovery in the wake of the coronavirus-fueled economic downturn in 2020. Rifts over the involvement of the rule of law apparently were so severe that Hungary and Poland threatened to veto the EU recovery package in 2020. The two countries eventually came to terms with the rest of the European bloc – on the condition that Budapest and Warsaw would be able to challenge the provision in EU court, delaying its implementation. While the judicial procedure is still ongoing, a key takeaway from the rule of law debate is that the rift between the Visegrád bloc and the EU has not only weakened the European positions of Poland and Hungary but it has also negatively impacted the image of the V4 within the European community.

Lost V4 cohesion?

Although the Visegrád Group has been presenting a united front against mass migration and even to hosting refugees, the experience of the past years suggests that it is generally difficult to find an abundance of common V4 positions. Visegrád countries had differing views on the European debate on posted workers. A similar rift occurred in the debates leading up the European Green Deal negotiations in 2019. Initially, three out of four Visegrád countries spoke out against the proposed conditions of achieving climate neutrality by 2050. V4 solidarity also diminished when Poland remained the only EU state opposing the agreement in late 2019. The most visible intra-V4 rifts, however, were seen in foreign policy. While Poland has traditionally had a tougher stance against Russian aggression and influencing efforts in Central

and Eastern Europe, with the Czech Republic and Slovakia both being in line with the European mainstream, Hungary has opened its doors to the Kremlin's influence, leading to a high level of cooperation between Budapest and Moscow. Even V4 solidarity took a serious hit when the Hungarian government moved to soften a joint Visegrád statement on Russia concerning the involvement of Russian secret services in the 2014 Vrbečice explosions in the Czech Republic.

Looking ahead

30 years after its foundation, the Visegrád Group is mainly functioning as an EU coordination group. However, EU membership does not put boundaries on which policy directions should be pursued by regional cooperation. Annual V4 presidencies of the participating countries provide excellent opportunities to present a united position on regional, European and global issues, while the V4+ cooperation formats could prove essential in building Central Europe's international relations. The latter holds not only for „priority regions” such as the Eastern Partnership but could present opportunities globally, too. Furthermore, other regional cooperation formats show that setting up an institutional framework could contribute to the development of the Visegrád Group. Given V4 countries' participation in the European Union, the institutional V4 set-up could only be successful if it did not go against the interests of the European and Transatlantic communities.