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“Back on track”: the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group in the shadow of a pandemic

On July 1, Poland took over the annual presidency of the Visegrad Group (V4) for the sixth time. In the program of the new presidency, the emphasis was placed on taking joint actions to return to economic and social normality. The most important element of the functioning of the V4 in the coming year is to stimulate the economy weakened by the pandemic. The tasks of particular importance for the Polish side include the development of a common V4 position on the issues of admission of the Western Balkan states (WB) to the European Union (EU), the development of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and the common migration policy. Digital cooperation is also to be an important element of the Polish Presidency, the importance of which has been demonstrated by the spread of the pandemic and the closure of economies.

Presidency priorities. The slogan of the current presidency is *Back on track*. The program for 2020-2021 has identified four strategic goals: “Strong V4 in a strong Europe”, which is to coordinate the policies of the V4 states in the EU; “Return to Normal”, associated with combating the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences; “People-to-people” for integration and internal coherence of the V4, and “Digital V4”, aimed at developing V4 collaboration in the digital sector. The Polish Presidency is also jubilee: in June this year, the 20th anniversary of the launch of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) was celebrated, and in February 2021, the 30th anniversary of the V4 will be celebrated.

The economy overshadowed by the pandemic. The biggest challenge for the Polish Presidency is maintaining a common position on the assumptions of the European Instrument for Reconstruction (EIR) and the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for the years 2021-2027. It is primarily about favorable provisions regarding the cohesion policy and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). A coherent V4 policy will also be necessary to use funds still available under the cohesion policy for 2014-2020. In the context of crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the coordination of V4 cooperation in the field of health protection and research will be of particular importance. Climate policy remains a key challenge for the EU and has a huge impact on other European policies. *The European Green Deal* communication presented by the European Commission will require coordinated economic and environmental actions. It is also a big challenge to jointly deal with problems caused by drought and dwindling water resources. Efforts to increase the internal cohesion of the V4 will continue in all non-political areas in which the member states will have common interests. In the economic sphere, the area of interest will remain, among others, broadly understood infrastructure connections (road, rail, energy). Brexit remains a challenge for the EU, especially in the economic sphere (e.g., the need to negotiate a new trade agreement). During the Polish Presidency, further coordination of the activities and positions of the V4 in the area of negotiations with the United Kingdom and their consistent presence on the EU forum will be carried out.

Perspective digital agenda. The pandemic and its economic consequences have shown the need to support the EU's digitization and innovation policy. With the emergence of new technologies in areas such as artificial intelligence, the Internet, quantum computers, and cybersecurity, it becomes crucial to consider the opportunities and challenges that these tools bring. The Polish Presidency's task is to develop a clear, acceptable, and practical framework for digital policy, both at the multilateral and EU level. The willingness to further support the digitization of public and private institutions in the region is also underlined. During the Polish V4 presidency, it is assumed that more attention will be paid to the issues of automation and robotization of employment and remote work. Taking into account the EU policy in the field of digital education, it will be

necessary to exchange experiences within the V4 related to the necessity of transition to distance learning and its consequences for education systems. From this perspective, the Presidency will focus on counteracting digital exclusion.

Active international cooperation. During the Polish Presidency, the V4 intends to remain active in external policy, both on the EU forum and the V4+ formula. Maintaining close transatlantic cooperation is essential for the security of the region. The Polish Presidency pays special attention to regional cooperation under the Three Seas Initiative (TSI), a platform combining the V4, the EU, and transatlantic cooperation.

Migration policy remains an important element on the EU agenda. Currently, work on a new Pact on Migration and Asylum is starting in the EU Council, as well as further work on reforming the asylum system. During the presidency, it will be necessary to maintain the uniform activity of the V4 in this area, so as to effectively prevent the introduction of solutions contrary to the common position of the V4 states, particularly regarding the forced relocation of migrants.

The V4 declares further coordinated support for processes and actions for the enlargement of the EU, including support for the pro-integration aspirations of the Western Balkan states. In this context, an important task for the V4 is to exchange experiences with the WB states on the accession process and the first years of membership, and encourage them to implement the necessary internal reforms. The V4 also announces the implementation of the agreed technical assistance for the Western Balkans Fund via the IVF.

The eastern neighbors of the EU also remain important for the new presidency. The dynamically developing situation in Ukraine and Belarus is of key importance here. The Polish presidency aims to promote further and expand the V4's cooperation with the Eastern Partnership states, which should be treated as the most important long-term priority of the grouping. The Polish Presidency also declares that it will take into account the economic aspects of cooperation between the V4 and the EaP. For this reason, the V4 assumes further support for the implementation of the EU's association agreements, including those constituting their integral part of the agreements on the creation of Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTAs) with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

The social dimension. During the Polish Presidency, support will be given to multidimensional contacts between the societies of the V4 states as well as the promotion and dissemination of the culture and history of Central European states. The International Visegrad Fund and its numerous support instruments (grants, scholarship programs, etc.) play a crucial role in this task. The IVF's goal is to support cooperation between the V4 states and their joint representation in third states. It is realized through the financial support of activities in the field of promotion and development: cultural cooperation, scientific and educational activities, youth exchange, cross-border cooperation, and tourism. The cooperation of Central European think tanks within the Think Visegrad (TV) platform is also expected to become more dynamic. In this context, it is planned to organize a conference midway through the presidency. The experience exchange program run by TV under the Civil Service Mobility Program (CSMP) is to be continued. V4 analytical cooperation will take place within the V4 Energy Think Tank platform.

Chances and challenges facing the Polish Presidency. Conclusions for Poland. The V4 should be considered a proven format for regional cooperation, to which all member states agree. Currently, the EU remains the natural playing field for the V4. Through joint actions and building broader thematic coalitions in the V4+ format, it is possible to force decisions that are beneficial to them on the EU forum (e.g., during budget negotiations). Strong and lasting coalitions also allow for equal negotiations with stronger partners from the EU. Thanks to the Group's involvement in the European Neighborhood Policy, it has a chance to co-create the European foreign policy. The states of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership remain an essential area of V4 activity. The common position on the forced relocation of migrants shows that the group has a chance to participate more actively in shaping the EU's migration and asylum policy. The member states are also united by the will to reform the EU in depth and their opposition to the creation of a two-speed Europe.

The greatest challenge facing the V4 is the lack of a common strategy towards the Russian Federation. Hungary is in favor of lifting the sanctions and for political and energy cooperation with Russia. Some politicians in the Czechia and Slovakia believe that there is currently no direct threat from Russia; therefore, they criticize the maintenance of the sanctions and take an ambiguous stance on the construction of Nord Stream 2. Another vital factor causing conflicts in the V4 is the separate national interests of individual states. An example may be, among others, the summit in Jerusalem in 2019. Initially, the meeting was to be canceled due to Poland's absence but, eventually, there were bilateral meetings between the prime ministers of Hungary, Czechia, Slovakia, and Israel. In the past, a media campaign against Polish food was carried out in the Czechia and Slovakia. It is also worth noting the negative reception of the V4 in Western Europe. The jubilee presidency may provide an opportunity to conduct an effective campaign promoting Visegrad cooperation in the EU and the world.