

Instytut Europy Środkowej  
Institute of Central Europe

IEŚ

7/2020

POLICY  
PAPERS



# The Visegrad Group at 30: Achievements and Challenges

Edited by  
Tomasz Stępniewski

2020





**Publishing series** IEŚ Policy Papers

**Number** 7/2020

**Series editors** Beata Surmacz and Tomasz Stępniewski



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**ISBN** 978-83-66413-38-2

**Published and edited**

Instytut Europy Środkowej | Institute of Central Europe

ul. Niecała 5

20-080 Lublin

[www.ies.lublin.pl](http://www.ies.lublin.pl)

**Cover design and typesetting** [www.targonski.pl](http://www.targonski.pl)

**Cover photo** © Bordovski Yauheni | [shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)

**Print** [www.drukarniaakapit.pl](http://www.drukarniaakapit.pl)



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Tomasz Stępniewski

## **Visegrad's Pearl Anniversary: Introduction**

In 2021, we are celebrating 30 years (the pearl anniversary) since the Visegrad Group's (V4) inception. The Visegrad Triangle came to life on 15 February 1991. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the triangle turned into a quadrangle. Since the beginning, the countries of the V4 strove to get past the communist legacy and be integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures. The objective was achieved in 1999 (NATO membership) and 2004 (EU membership). Over the past thirty years, the V4 (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) has epitomized a successful systemic transformation, thriving regional cooperation and prosperous economic growth. The geopolitical location of the member states in the heart of the continent makes the V4 a key player both for the European Union and NATO. In other words, the V4 states are now front and center on the European and transatlantic policy agenda. Such an external dimension of the V4 seems of vital significance. Efforts ought to focus on the consolidation of Central Europe's position on the continent. As a consequence, a strong need arises for the development of measures aiming to reinforce the political and economic



cohesion of the region. For that reason, the foundation of a network on the north-south axis should not only involve the development of transport and energy infrastructure, but also a general, growth-oriented cooperation for the benefit of the Nordic and Baltic states, the Visegrad states and the Balkans.

This special series of IEŚ Policy Papers is the result of collaboration between researchers from the Institute of Central Europe in Lublin (Łukasz Lewkowicz, Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik, Michał Paszkowski, Tomasz Stępniewski, Andrzej Szabaciuk, Agata Tatarenko), researchers from the Visegrad countries including the Slovak Foreign Policy Association – RC SFP, Bratislava, Slovakia (Tomáš Strážay), the Association for International Affairs – AMO Prague, Czechia (Vít Dostál), the Tihany Centre for Political Analysis, Tihany, Hungary (Péter Galambos, György Odze), and American, European and Polish institutions such as Harvard University (George Soroka), the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt, Germany (Zsuzsanna Végh), and the Institute for Western Affairs in Poznań (Martin Wycisk).

We would like to extend our special thanks to the contributing authors for their commitment in providing the input and analysis on the Visegrad Group's 30th anniversary from the point of view of the V4's achievements and challenges. We hope that this special series of the IEŚ Policy Papers is well-received by readers and will prompt further research on the part of experts dealing with V4-related matters.

Tomasz Stępniewski

Deputy Director  
Instytut Europy Środkowej, IEŚ / Institute of Central Europe  
Lublin, December 2020



## **Executive summary**

### **V4 as a source of inspiration – Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and beyond**

- The strength of V4 lies predominantly in the existence of informal institutions. Frequent and regular meetings of political representatives and experts make the V4 an informally institutionalized initiative;
- V4 countries do not always speak with one voice. However, their divergent positions on certain issues do not water down their cooperation;
- The attractiveness of the V4 model is perhaps appreciated the most in the Western Balkans. However, certain procedural aspects of the V4 cooperation are valued in other regions as well;
- The willingness to accept the V4 model of cooperation as an inspiration is apparent in Central Asia. However, sufficient political will among Central Asian leaders to continue or enhance collaboration in the region is

a prerequisite for the development of any kind of co-operation between the V4 and Central Asia.

## **V4 and fragile international security contexts**

- V4 and conventional security threats in the region;
- Conventional security threats: regional conflicts (especially the war in eastern Ukraine) and instability in the Euro-Atlantic space and its neighborhood; the role of revisionist Russia and the Black Sea region security complex;
- The impairment of cooperative security mechanisms, as well as political and international law-based commitments;
- The increasing pressures on national borders and their role as frontiers capable of mitigating risks and threats to national safety and security. Such threats come from the enhanced military potential of hostile actors and the changing nature of warfare;
- The build-up of Russia's military presence on NATO's eastern flank.

## **V4 and energy security threats in a new complicated environment**

- Russia remains the chief crude oil and natural gas supplier to Central European countries. As a consequence, only close cooperation (infrastructural development) and presence in energy-related organizations (such as the International Energy Agency) will allow

the V4 countries to consolidate regional energy security;

- Individual V4 member states significantly differ in their approach to ensuring energy security. However, there is also the common ground on the issue. The V4's growing awareness of the threats and impact of modern challenges (e.g. climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic) will require greater regional coordination with a view to prospective developments.

## **V4 and soft challenges and threats to safety and security**

- The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has the strongest impact on the socio-economic life of the V4 countries. Negotiations concerning the European Instrument for Reconstruction and the Multiannual Financial Framework for the years 2021–2027 constitute a major challenge for the countries of the region;
- The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected the economies and health systems of the V4 countries. It has also influenced EU policy at various levels. During the current Polish presidency of the V4, legislative work will continue on the European Green Deal and achievement of climate neutrality by 2050.

## **V4, disinformation and cybersecurity threats**

- For the V4 countries, information threats are both external and domestic. They include pro-Kremlin

narratives, unverified facts and conspiracy theories, which have undermined citizens' trust in their national governments;

- Both information and cybersecurity threats represent growing challenges to information systems in the V4. This, however, opens venues for a mutual regional approach as these issues require collective tools, policies and frameworks. Such a development also creates opportunities to share best practices, ideas and improvements among the V4 members.

### **Russia in the Visegrad Group's security perspective**

- The Russian Federation's politics towards Eastern Europe is a substantial challenge from the point of view of the Visegrad Group;
- The Visegrad Group is aware of the economic and military potential of the Russian Federation. For this reason, the V4 aims to engage in a partnership-based dialogue with Russia. The dialogue ought to be based upon mutual respect. The parties should discuss international laws, the sovereignty of the post-Soviet countries, and the inviolability of state borders.

### **Washington and the Visegrad Group**

- The new Biden administration is eager to rebuild partnerships with Europe as a whole, and especially with key players such as Germany. This will affect the V4 states, as while Poland and the others will remain

important in U.S. foreign policy, the emphasis will be on European institutions rather than direct bilateral relations;

- Biden will work to strengthen NATO as a bulwark against Russian ambitions in Central Europe and elsewhere. It remains to be seen to what extent European states will accept U.S. attempts to reclaim a clear leadership position on the continent.

## **Visegrad cooperation for international development in Africa and the Middle East**

- Having rejected plans to distribute and relocate asylum-seekers and refugees during the 2015 peak of the refugee and migration crisis, the Visegrad governments declared their intention to alleviate the crisis by addressing the root causes of migration. Such an approach would require, e.g. serious commitments in the field of cooperation for international development and humanitarian assistance in Africa and the Middle East;
- Since 2015, the importance of these regions has relatively increased. However, the V4 countries' disbursements still fluctuate and remain marginal in relation to their international development cooperation policies;
- Although the coordination of cooperation for international development has also been on the agenda of Visegrad presidencies, practical results on the ground in the Middle East and Africa are still missing;

- Despite certain inherent differences in their international development cooperation policies, which complicate the development of joint projects, the Visegrad countries' cooperation on the ground would be beneficial. For example, it could boost performance and improve quality by consolidating limited and fragmented resources.

## **V4 and the challenge of climate change**

- The V4 states share the experience of socio-economic transformation, which caused a considerable decrease in the region's greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in the early 1990s;
- This does not necessarily imply a universally shared V4 strategy on further GHG reduction because the emissions structures differ significantly, which reflects, among other matters, divergent energy mixes. In addition, distinct geographical, climatic and legal conditions determine national strategies to address each country's specific challenges;
- For the V4, this does not preclude cooperation in climate policy. Instead, it demarcates potential opportunities. For example, the V4 could further enhance their exchange of experience in reducing GHG emissions, develop joint projects, and coordinate their lobbying efforts for increased financial support for green investments from European funds.

## **V4 and the COVID-19 pandemic: challenges for the nearest future**

- COVID-19 pandemic will certainly have a substantial impact on the labor market. Although the first wave of the pandemic led merely to a moderate growth in unemployment and decline in income within the Visegrad Group, the number of registered unemployed may grow more significantly in the further stages of the pandemic and post-coronavirus reality. Changes in consumer behavior and consumer habits during the pandemic may translate into long-lasting revisions in the labor market in general;
- Much like the economy, the political scene is vulnerable to COVID-19 as well. Both the first and second waves of the pandemic affected public support for political parties. The support or the lack of thereof depended on how well the ruling party dealt with the epidemiological situation;
- Several comments have implied that the V4 countries will collaborate against the COVID-19 pandemic. The leaders of the countries have met on several occasions. They have announced tight cooperation in the fields of healthcare, scientific research and commerce. However, it seems that tangible cooperation has not materialized yet.







Tomáš Strážay

## **V4 Inspirational – Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and beyond**

While this year marks the 30th anniversary of the Visegrad Group, its only institution – the International Visegrad Fund – commemorated its birthday last June. The anniversaries allow us to look in the past and provide the space for thinking about the future. V4, as such, has become a viable regional initiative in the EU, with quite robust political and sectoral cooperation. V4 today is based on pragmatic cooperation, both on the political and sectoral levels. Though there appeared ideas to change the way of its functioning or the number of cooperating countries, V4's institutional design and composition remained unchanged. The reputation of V4 as a functional model of regional cooperation is high, especially outside of the EU, particularly in the neighboring regions of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. What lies behind the attractiveness of this model? And which regions are considered to be the most promising ones in terms of V4 know-how transfer in the coming years?

## **Missing formal and strong informal institutions**

Compared to other regional initiatives in the EU, such as Benelux or Nordic Cooperation, V4 is known for its loose institutionalization. With the exception of the V4 Patent Institute, which is a very specific type of institution, the only standing institution remains to be the International Visegrad Fund. The so-called weak institutionalization goes hand in hand with higher flexibility. V4 can react promptly to outside developments and adopt common positions in the areas where the V4 countries find a common ground. These common positions are, however, not legally binding, which means that V4 cannot be considered as an organization with real power. The grouping is therefore perceived as a consultation platform and coordination mechanism.

The strength of V4 lies predominantly in the existence of informal institutions. Frequent and regular meetings of political representatives or experts make V4 an informally institutionalized initiative. The “informal institutionalism” is also applied to cooperation with non-V4 countries or groupings – the V4+ instrument proved to be effective while developing cooperation with the partners in the EU, in neighboring regions, but also beyond Europe.

It is also worth mentioning that Visegrad Cooperation is not based on any exclusivity – it remains open to partners willing to cooperate in selected (and agreed) areas. The rather informal character of V4 allows the V4 countries to participate in different regional initiatives throughout Central Europe. In some of them, all V4 countries take an active part, just to mention the Central European Initiative (CEI), Bucharest Nine (B9), or Three Seas Initiative (TSI). In some others, only some of the V4 countries take an active part,

e.g., Poland in the case of the Weimar Triangle, or Czechia and Slovakia in the case of the Slavkov Triangle.

## **Procedural know-how transfer**

Especially in the neighboring regions in Eastern and South-eastern Europe, the V4 countries are considered interesting examples of successful economic transition. In those countries, which aspire for EU membership, they also serve as the source of know-how in integration processes. In sharing their experience, various formats of cooperation can be employed, including the V4+ formula. Still, there is also a demand for some procedural aspects of V4 cooperation. The attractiveness of the V4 model is perhaps the highest in the Western Balkans, though some procedural aspects of V4 cooperation are valued in other regions as well. The low level of institutionalization accompanied by the overall flexibility certainly is one of the reasons why the V4 became an inspiration for other regional initiatives. Close communication and a spirit of cooperation can be mentioned as other influential aspects. The robustness and multi-layer character of V4 cooperation should also be highlighted – the V4 certainly has a strong political dimension. However, cooperation is predominantly based on informal ties on the level of representatives of state administration or experts in different sectors, including think-tanks and academia.

The V4 countries do not always speak in one voice, but their divergent positions on some issues do not water down the cooperation. The sophisticated art of disagreement can, therefore, also be the source of inspiration for other groupings. Another influential aspect to consider is the elimi-

nation of tensions between particular countries through developing regional cooperation (see the example of Slovak-Hungarian relations).

## **Western Balkans**

The Visegrad Group is the only regional initiative in the EU that maintains a regular dialogue with the Western Balkan countries. The summit of V4+WB foreign ministers held yearly is just one example of initiatives that demonstrate enhanced cooperation between the two regions. The first important source of inspiration for WB countries was the Central European Free Trade Agreement (known as CEFTA), which originated in V4. The popularity of the “original” CEFTA spread beyond the V4 countries’ borders, and other countries of a broadly defined Central Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovenia) became members. Once the V4 countries (and other partners from Central Europe) acceded the EU, CEFTA became irrelevant for them, because they all entered the single market of the EU. Nevertheless, the fact that CEFTA helped them to prepare themselves for such an important change was the reason why the Western Balkan countries considered CEFTA as an inspiration. CEFTA 2006 was based on the same principles as “original” CEFTA but designed for Southeastern Europe.

Another example of successful procedural know-how transfer is the Western Balkan Fund (WBF). Modeled after the International Visegrad Fund example, the WBF is known for serving as a donor for selected regional projects since several rounds of grant calls have already been launched. Though it still depends on the IVF’s technical assistance,

in the long run, it is expected to be self-sustainable, as the contributions of individual WB countries are supposed to increase. The relevance of the WBF is also recognized by the EU, e.g., the WBF is mentioned directly in the Sofia Declaration of the 2019 EU-Western Balkans Summit.

## **Eastern Europe**

The possibilities to transfer V4 procedural know-how to the EU's Eastern neighborhood turned out to be quite limited. Besides significant structural differences between the region's countries, their different attitudes on the relationship with the EU and prospects for EU accession should also be taken into consideration. Even the Eastern Partnership project initiated by the EU – and intensively promoted by the V4 countries – seems not to have responded fully to the existing differences. The GUAM initiative, encompassing Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, was mentioned some time ago as a groping that might be willing to receive some procedural know-how from V4. Nevertheless, the results are more than modest. GUAM is more of an intergovernmental organization than a flexible regional initiative, having its own seat and institutions, including a secretariat and parliamentary assembly. Also, its mission is different – sectoral cooperation, for instance, is based on working groups that are the subsidiary basis of the organization. The fact that the last remark on the GUAM-V4 cooperation, available on the GUAM website, dates back to 2009 is quite telling. In light of the above, the most efficient instrument for cooperation between the V4 countries and their Eastern neighborhood counterparts remains the V4+EaP format.

## **What next?**

The question is whether there exist other possibilities of V4 know-how transfer than the Western Balkans or Eastern Europe. The answer is positive – at least in Central Asia, there is a willingness to accept V4 cooperation as an inspiration. At the meeting of Central Asian leaders in Astana in 2018, President Nazarbaev mentioned V4 as a model that might apply to his region, mainly because of its low-institutional profile. Other groupings from the EU, such as the Baltic Assembly or Nordic Council and ASEAN, were not marked as applicable since they have more formalized structures. V4 could certainly share its know-how about some coordination mechanisms and experience in eliminating bilateral tensions via regional cooperation. The possibility to establish a regional Fund that would be modeled after the IVF and would support educational and cultural – in other words, soft – projects might also be considered at some point. A necessary precondition for the development of cooperation between the V4 and Central Asia on any level, however, remains the sufficient political will of Central Asian leaders to continue or even deepen collaboration in their region.



Tomasz Stępniewski and Vit Dostal

## **V4 and the fragile international security contexts**

### **The Visegrad Group and conventional security threats in the region: an overall assessment<sup>1</sup>**

At the beginning of 2021, the EU's Eastern Neighborhood is rather unstable and exists in fragile security contexts. As a consequence, the security of the V4 is determined by the stability of security in its neighborhood. It ought to be noted that the annexation of the Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 sent shockwaves throughout Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is based on Tomasz Stępniewski's and Vit Dostal's papers published in the following report: A. Visvizi and T. Stępniewski (eds.), 'Poland, the Czech Republic and NATO in Fragile Security Contexts', Lublin 2016, <https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Poland-the-Czech-Republic-and-NATO-in-Fragile-Security-Contexts.pdf>.



Even though the Russo-Georgian conflict in the summer of 2008 failed to ring the bell, the grab of Crimea and the continuous Russian fanning of the flames in Eastern Ukraine seemingly succeeded. However, in response, governments across the EU started to reverse the declining trend in European defense spending. In addition, NATO began implementing a balanced package to bolster its eastern flank. The bottom line is that the risk of a serious interstate conflict, once virtually inconceivable, has returned to Europe today.

The Russian Federation (RF) is modernizing and reinforcing its conventional forces. It is also using the theatre of Eastern Ukraine to test new strategies. Russia's involvement in Ukraine should not be viewed exclusively in light of the conflict in Ukraine. Rather, a more holistic take on this conflict should be adopted. For that reason, NATO members ought to change their approach towards conventional threats in Europe. The developments on NATO's eastern flank prove the relevance of this claim. From the point of view of conventional threats, it is the revanchist Russia and its neo-imperial policy that constitute the key hazard to the continent today. The following paragraphs elaborate on this claim.

Security in East-Central Europe has become an increasingly complicated affair. As far as military matters are concerned, the threat to V4 countries posed by Western Europe is nearly non-existent because the situation in the region is stable and predictable. Therefore, threats of this nature are highly unlikely. However, (conventional) threats to V4 countries may emerge from the direction of the post-Soviet states. In the 1990s, the situation in East-Central Europe and the post-Soviet space was relatively stable. In contrast, the sit-

uation in the second decade of the 21st century has become severely complicated. This is a consequence of changes in the internal policies of the countries in the region, but also aggressive actions of third parties, e.g. the Russo-Georgian war of 2008, the Russo-Ukrainian war in Donbas since 2014, the annexation of Crimea by Russia. Indeed, Ukraine's crisis, a de facto Russia's armed conflict with Ukraine which has been raging since 2014, altered the perception of security in Eastern Europe and Europe in general. One could argue that the conflict in Ukraine constitutes a symbolic end of the post-Cold War international order based on the peaceful coexistence of states, respect for territorial integrity and rules-based system of international states.

From its onset, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict represented the so-called hybrid or "subliminal" war. Some argue that Russia's objective was to destabilize the situation in southern and eastern Ukraine in order to disconnect these areas from the country and turn them into "occupied territories", or establish a quasi-state in the area, as in the case of Transnistria. As the so-conceived conflict unfolds in the vicinity of the V4, it is bound to raise concerns pertaining to viable security implications. Part of the problem is the unpredictable nature of the direction of Russia's foreign policy. Russia's engagement on the international arena aims at restoring the status quo ante, i.e. the status quo as it was prior to the end of the Cold War. Specifically, Putin's main objective is to exert an influence on the country's peripheries. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski<sup>2</sup>, one of the possible ways of putting

<sup>2</sup> Cf. T. Stępniewski, *Geopolityka regionu Morza Czarnego w pozimnowojennym świecie* [The Geopolitics of the Black Sea Region in the Post-Cold War World], Lublin 2011.

a stop to Russia's revanchist policies is to consolidate European security along the Paris-Berlin-Warsaw-Kyiv line. Therefore, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the support for the pursuit of democracy in Kyiv (Minsk and Kishinev as well) is extremely important. This would contribute to Russia's neo-imperialistic endeavors becoming somewhat restrained.

When analyzing the map of Eastern Europe from the geostrategic point of view, Russia's military presence in the region ought to be taken into account. Russia's potential in Eastern Europe is substantial. Moreover, the RF continuously reinforces its (military) presence in Crimea, Kaliningrad and Belarus<sup>3</sup>. Eastern Europe may be perceived as "a grey zone of security". Frozen conflicts lingering in the region may directly or indirectly exert impact upon the stability and security of V4 states. Poland is the only V4 country that shares a border with Russia, i.e. the Kaliningrad Oblast. The fact that Iskander and Bastion missiles (with the respective range of up to 500 km and 400 km) are located in the Oblast poses a potential threat to north-east Poland and the Baltic states. Moreover, Russian sources indicate that Iskander is considered to be more than a mere missile and represents a guiding and homing system along with mobile launchers. Russian multi-level A2/AD (anti-access/area denial) system is worth making a reference to at this point. The A2/AD revolves around the capability of detecting and jamming electronic guiding systems, spatial orientation

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Reichardt and T. Stępniewski (eds.), "Crisis in Belarus. How should the West respond?", *IEŚ Policy Papers*, no. 8/2020, Lublin: Institute of Central Europe (IEŚ), [http://ies-policy-papers-8-8-2020\\_o.pdf](http://ies-policy-papers-8-8-2020_o.pdf).

and communications, and subsequently eliminating enemy means of aerial warfare including planes, cruise missiles and drones. Russian Kaliningrad constitutes NATO's northernmost threat. The range of anti-aircraft weapons located there reaches deep into Polish airspace and, in case of a crisis, may eliminate NATO reinforcements for Baltic states. The Crimean Peninsula has recently become another threat zone due to its annexation by Russia. Russia established a significant A2/AD presence in the area, which offers control over virtually the entire Black Sea Basin. Another problem associated with the conventional security of the region involves the violation of NATO members' and Scandinavian countries' airspace. "Dangerous military-military and military-civilian incidents involving ships and aircrafts of Russia, NATO member states and third parties continue to pose a serious threat to the Euro-Atlantic security"<sup>4</sup>. In particular, the post-annexation period witnessed Russia's increased military activity, violations of NATO's airspace and territorial waters, and the deterioration of NATO-Russia relations. The fact that Russia, along with the USA, is in the possession of 90% of the world's nuclear warheads is noteworthy. More specifically, estimates suggest that "the [RF] had a stockpile of approximately 4500 nuclear warheads assigned for use by long-range strategic launchers and shorter-range tactical nuclear forces. In addition, as many as 2800 retired but still largely intact warheads awaited dismantlement, for a total

<sup>4</sup> Ł. Kulesa, T. Frear, D. Raynova, "Managing Hazardous Incidents in the Euro-Atlantic Area: A New Plan of Action", *Policy Brief*, November 2016, London: European Leadership Network, <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org>.

inventory of about 7300”<sup>5</sup>. In addition, Russia considers the threat posed by tactical nuclear weapons as a significant strategic instrument that may be applied in order to isolate the post-Soviet space from Western support. So far, Russia has not been overtly inclined to play this card. However, its colossal nuclear potential presents a threat to the security of Western Europe, and Europe in general.

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<sup>5</sup> H.M. Kristensen, R.S. Norris, “Russian nuclear forces 2016”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 3 May 2016, <http://thebulletin.org/2016/may/russian-nuclear-forces-20169394>.

## **V4 and soft challenges and threats to safety and security**

Łukasz Lewkowicz

The Visegrad Group is currently in a very turbulent period. The global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has the greatest impact on the socio-economic life of Central Europe. It has largely affected the economies and health systems of individual countries. It has also influenced European Union policy at various levels. The negotiations on the future EU budget and recovery plan currently underway pose a great challenge for the countries of the region. According to the agenda of the Polish presidency for 2020-2021, V4 Member States will have to stimulate cooperation to limit the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic. They will also work to put the socio-economic life in the region and the EU “back on track” and a return to normality.

A strategic task for the V4 countries during the Polish Presidency is to ensure a return to economic normality as soon as possible. Given the current situation, the service sector most affected by the restrictions should receive immediate public support. This should be one of the main goals of the EU’s recovery plan to rebuild supply chains. In the post-pandemic period, the V4 countries should adopt a policy of promoting themselves as an attractive region for investment in the industry. An incentive for potential investors may come from better infrastructure, stable legal systems, well-educated and qualified labor force, and lower production costs than in Western Europe. At the same time, the V4 countries are characterized by a weaker competitive

position in relation to the technological advancement of the old EU members. Despite this, Central Europe may be an alternative for EU countries to the Asian markets characterized by distant production centers and long supply chains.

The biggest challenge for the V4 is maintaining a common position on the assumptions of the European Instrument for Reconstruction and the Multiannual Financial Framework for the years 2021-2027. It is primarily about favorable provisions regarding the cohesion policy and the Common Agricultural Policy. A coherent V4 policy will also be necessary to use funds still available under the cohesion policy for 2014-2020. In the second half of 2020, a significant challenge was posed by the dispute within the EU over the provisions binding the disbursement of funds in compliance with the rule of law. Poland and Hungary announced a veto of the budget and the reconstruction fund if the “money for the rule of law” mechanism will be adopted. A compromise was finally reached on December 10, 2020 at the EU summit in Brussels. The disputed regulation entered into force. However, special clarification points were included in the summit conclusions. The rule of law will only apply to spending EU funds. In the coming months, the Court of Justice of the EU will decide on the application of the rule of law mechanism.

The global COVID-19 pandemic currently poses a huge challenge to health systems in the V4 countries. The overriding priority of health protection during the Polish Presidency is the fight against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The Polish Presidency focuses on cooperation with partners from the V4 in the field of information exchange on coronavirus research, the possibility of inventing a vaccine, the organiza-

tion of the health service, as well as good practices applied in individual countries to reduce the spread of the virus. The availability of drugs will be a major challenge in the coming months. It is mainly about ensuring fair and affordable prices of medical products and the proper distribution of vaccines and active substances from third countries. Due to the differences in legal systems in the countries of the region, it is important to create effective tools allowing for cross-border cooperation in emergency medical services. Due to staff shortages in the health care system, it is also necessary to introduce legal changes by the V4 countries in the field of access to medical professions by persons who obtained their professional qualifications outside the EU.

Climate change will constitute a significant challenge for the V4 in the coming years. According to experts, Central Europe will face longer periods of drought. The frequency of violent and intense rainfall will also increase, bringing with it an increased risk of flooding. These changes mean the necessity to develop a new water resources management and protection policy throughout the EU. Progressive climate change will also increasingly affect agriculture. Discussion and exchange of experiences on precision agriculture are essential, including innovative methods of cultivating plants, the development of satellite technologies, preventing drought and how to deal with its effects. In order to counteract the negative effects of climate change, during the current Polish presidency of the V4, legislative work on the European Green Deal and achieving climate neutrality by 2050 will be continued. The planned reduction in greenhouse gas emissions may affect the economies of Central Europe still emerging from the pandemic. Therefore, an



important topic is the creation of the Just Transition Fund. The funds of this Fund are intended to support the modernization of mining sectors and climate neutrality. The work within the European Union Emission Trading Scheme is also important for the V4 countries.

The common challenges for the V4 security policy are to find those areas of action where cooperation can be more effective than if the Member States acted alone. The natural field of cooperation is, of course, cooperation on the EU forum. The V4 member states have significant potential to build coalitions aimed at forcing decisions favorable to the grouping, in line with their interests or capable of blocking unfavorable solutions, both in intergovernmental institutions (European Council and Council of the EU) and community institutions (European Parliament and European Commission). The potential for joint action appears especially in relation to those EU policies related to the redistribution of income, i.e. to cohesion policy, agricultural policy and in the case of negotiations on the EU budget and recovery plan for 2021-2027. The key challenge for the V4 will continue to be the EU climate policy, which will have a horizontal impact on a number of other European policies. Coordination of cooperation activities in the field of health-care will also be important.

## **V4 and disinformation and cyber security threats**

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik

The V4 countries strive to create an open and transparent information environment. Media diversity and alternative sources of information are a guaranty of plurality of voices, opinions and analyses because they constitute a basis of democracy. But the democratic countries are exposed to information risks as bias, fake news, propaganda, and manipulation spreading rapidly and effectively affecting the societies. For the V4 countries, information threats are both external and domestic and they have a relevant impact on sustainability, tradition, language and culture development as well as on religious and ethnic identity, custom and values. Particularly it is Russian propaganda which has already been included in Russia's foreign policy towards the region. While none of the examined countries displays numerous Russian-speaking audience, Russian propaganda is facilitated by local pro-Russian media. To increase its effectiveness the media message is accompanied by virtual supporters of pro-Russian parties, politicians, NGOs, and even Churches. Currently, there are dozens of web platforms and media outlets involved in spreading pro-Russian disinformation in Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. They claim no allegiance to Kremlin and it is difficult to prove the link between the propaganda outlets and Russia-based entities. As V4 might be perceived as a regional unit in terms of information security, there are subtle differences between them. According to the GLOBSEC Policy Institute's Vulnerability Index, Poland is the least vulnerable country

among the V4 countries to subversive Russian influence and Hungary is the most sensitive to hostile foreign influence. Pro-Kremlin information campaign includes a wide range of informational methods and instruments and this approach is broad and complex, exploiting history, culture and language. Interestingly when anti-Ukrainian sentiments and revisionist narratives against Lithuania and Ukraine are dedicated particularly to Polish society, in Hungary, Slovakia and Czech Republic Euroscepticism and negative reaction towards NATO dominate. Beyond any doubts, a xenophobic, nationalist and populist rhetoric expanded in V4 undermines the EU integrity, deteriorates regional stability, weakens state authorities and influences the minds of the general public.

Apart from Russia-led disinformation activities, there are internal actors disseminating fake interviews, false or unverified facts and conspiracy theories unconsciously or purposely. Disinformation originated both from foreign and internal actors works well in societies unsatisfied with their own governments and with their own domestic problems so it fits properly to social discontent and low public trust in institutions among the V4 communities. Particularly the COVID-19 outbreak with a large increase of speculation about coronavirus has undermined citizens' trust towards their national governments. According to the newest European Parliament survey (May 2020) citizens in Poland and Hungary reported the lowest confidence in their governments' efforts. The data indicates more attention should be paid to education and public awareness. Unless the development of critical thinking is more of a priority in the national

educational system, the states will be more vulnerable to information security risks.

Furthermore, cyber security threats represent a growing challenge to information systems in V4 including unauthorized access, use, disclosure, disruption, modification, or destruction. The countries have been the targets of many notable cyberattacks and a significant number of cyberespionage activities have been revealed in recent years. The countries are aware of the abovementioned and they have been implementing several national documents fulfilling both the EU and NATO policy commitments. Especially it is the Czech Republic that is top-ranked according to National Cyber Security Index. It creates a chance to share best practices, ideas and improvements among the V4 members.

So far cyber technology and cybersecurity strategy have not been a part of the effective cooperation among the V4 countries. This, however, poses possibilities and opportunities for a mutual regional approach as both disinformation and cybersecurity need collective tools, policies and frameworks. Particularly in the information age, the V4 format has got the potential to develop digital skills, innovations and capabilities as risks and threats become increasingly more alarming with the proliferation of new technologies.

## **V4 and energy security threats in a new complicated environment**

Michał Paszkowski

In addition to the traditional energy threats to the V4 countries (Russia remains the single largest source of crude oil and natural gas imports), today other challenges are starting to play strategic roles. Importantly, many new dangers are related to the energy transformation resulting from the growing social awareness of climate change. New risks affect all energy sectors, including crude oil and liquid fuels, natural gas, electricity (including nuclear energy) and coal.

For the V4 countries, the key challenges include the stability of crude oil supplies. In 2019, 56.2% of Czechia's oil imports came from Russia. In Hungary the figure was 74.6%; in Poland and Slovakia, 66.7% and 100% respectively. Existing infrastructure (pipelines, access to oil terminals), technological limitations (refining installations) and market conditions (regional oil demand) are the main factors affecting diversification opportunities for sources and directions of crude oil supply. The issue of the quality of imported crude oil is becoming a new threat, as shown by the crisis over contaminated crude oil from Russia in 2019. The suspension of crude oil supplies to refineries in Central Europe (e.g., Płock, Gdansk, Kralupy, Litvínov and Százhalombatta) for almost two months showed how difficult these countries' positions are in confrontations with Russia. Nevertheless, this crisis also demonstrated the usefulness of the existing oil stocks system due to membership of the International Energy Agency; and, in part, the EU and proper legislation. During the crisis, the V4 countries released their oil stocks

and took steps to provide an alternative supply of crude oil via oil terminals in the Baltic and Adriatic seas.

Nowadays, for Central European countries, the key priority is also to ensure the stability of the refinery sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the profitability of liquid fuel production has been reduced. Since the adoption of drastic lockdown measures by the V4 governments in order to stave off rising infections in the first nine months of 2020, road fuels demand (gasoline, diesel, LPG) has deteriorated in Czechia by 10.7% year on year, in Hungary by 10.2%, in Poland by 6.6% and in Slovakia by 12.0%. These market conditions result in a demanding environment for refineries in the V4.

In gas, the continued monopoly position of Russia remains the key energy challenge for the V4 countries. Without building alternative pipelines, the surplus of Russian natural gas in the Central European market will limit diversification opportunities. Accordingly, regional cooperation remains an important issue; the construction of new cross-border gas pipelines may enhance these connections. For Central European countries, a real challenge is to coordinate to counteract projects which could increase Europe's reliance on Russian natural gas. Gazprom's "flagship" Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline development is another step to bypass Ukraine and is still a real challenge to Europe's energy security. The construction of the pipeline will curb market competition, and limit the options to diversify gas supplies to Central Europe by enabling the region to access Western gas markets. This is evidenced by already booked natural gas capacity on entry points to transmission networks in Europe (Germany–Czechia and Austria–Czechia borders).

Therefore, all the natural gas supplied via the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is intended for customers in Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary (in the past, Gazprom was supplying these countries via Ukraine). Therefore, not all the natural gas supplied via the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline is intended for customers in Western Europe; some will be redirected to the south.

Moreover, Central European countries are struggling with local pollution; air quality in certain regions and cities remains unsatisfactory. The role of coal in the V4's future energy mix should be clarified, particularly now that the European Commission is putting in place legislation and ambitious policy goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG). Coal is still a vital energy source in the V4 countries, representing 39.2% of the total primary energy supply (TPES) in Czechia, 9.3% in Hungary, 19.6% in Slovakia and 50.8% in Poland.

The main issues are regional energy integrity and cooperation. Threats and risks to the energy security of V4 countries are also linked to the availability of uranium (the main fuel for nuclear reactors), and the safety of the existing nuclear power plants (there are six operable reactors in Czechia, four in Hungary and two in Slovakia) in times of increasing risks to the natural environment. Overall, energy hazards not only concern the diversification of suppliers, but also the stability of production (electricity) and imports (crude oil, natural gas) to V4 countries. Today all energy projects should be planned and operated in the most environmentally friendly way possible.

## **Russia in Visegrad Group's security perspective**

Andrzej Szabaciuk

One of the key security challenges of the Visegrad Group is the close proximity of the post-Soviet area. The rapid decomposition of the USSR, the instability of political systems, and the dynamic socio-political processes taking place in the former Soviet republics have an impact on international relations in this region. A significant component of the Eastern European security system is the Russian Federation, the largest country with the biggest population, and economic and military potential. Also, which is equally important, a key supplier of hydrocarbon resources to the V4 countries.

With the beginning of Vladimir Putin's presidency, the Russian Federation has taken a number of steps to rebuild its former influence in the post-Soviet area. The Russian advantage is its cultural proximity as well as political and economic ties in this region. The Kremlin has used the dependence of some post-Soviet states to expand its influence in the region. This is done by the Russian-language media, financially supported pro-Russian political parties and non-governmental organizations promoting the Russian vision of history and international order. Russian state-owned enterprises have attempted to take control over privatized enterprises in the former Soviet republics countries and Central European states. Particular importance has been attached to the energy sector. Access to cheap hydrocarbon resources has become an instrument for buying the loyalty of Central and Eastern European countries.

Opposition to attempts to impose Russian domination resulted in political tensions, trade conflicts, and sometimes



also stoking separatisms to destabilize the state, as was the case with Georgia or Ukraine, for which it even ended with the annexation of part of the territory. Cyber-attacks, disinformation and propaganda are also used on a massive scale. These activities aim to discredit political opponents and create a positive image of Russia in the international arena.

The mentioned processes are a serious challenge from the point of view of the security of the Visegrad Group countries. The political destabilization of Eastern European countries may stimulate mass immigration flows, as has happened in recent years, and may also hinder the normalization of economic and political relations with the Partners from Eastern Europe.

The big challenge is the military potential of the Russian Federation, which situates it in this respect in second place globally after the United States. Russia has significant conventional military forces and a nuclear arsenal along with modern medium and long-range ballistic missile systems. The V4 countries must take this factor into account in their security strategies. The main guarantor of the security of Central European states is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union. The presence of allied troops, and above all US army, joint exercises and maneuvers are the vibrant component of the security strategy of the Central European countries. Investments in strengthening the military potential and increasing energy security are particularly important after the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014.

The Visegrad Group countries aim to build partnership relations with the countries of Eastern Europe, including the Russian Federation, based on the principle of subjectivity,

regard for international law and mutual respect. Actions have taken by Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are not anti-Russian, but an attempt to protect the national interests and strengthen the security of the countries in the region. The meaning of the Eastern Partnership program or The Three Seas Initiative is similar, which is to build a safe neighborhood and to develop joint economic and infrastructure projects.

## **A View from the United States: Washington and the Visegrad Group (V4)**

George Soroka

Although we are living in highly uncertain times, the new Biden administration will no doubt have a noticeable impact on the United States' bilateral relations with the members of the V4, as well as influencing their relations with one another and Europe as a whole. Addressed briefly below are three arenas that will be especially relevant to the restructuring of Washington's post-Trump ties to the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

### **European Cooperation**

The Biden administration has signaled that it will recommit the U.S. to meaningfully supporting European integration efforts and push for renewed levels of cross-border cooperation across the continent. Nevertheless, the V4, and especially Poland, will continue to play an important role in Washington's regional calculus, which seeks stable alliances in Central Europe as a means through which to balance Russian influence.

Consequently, although there will likely be some tensions over perceived democratic deficits among the V4 states, the Biden administration will seek means of constructive engagement that focus on mutual interests, the containment of Moscow's geopolitical ambitions, and support for Ukraine's westward tilt chief among them. This is not to imply that the political preferences of the V4 are identical; they most certainly are not, but the U.S. and Poland—the latter con-

stituting the bloc's largest and most influential member—certainly share these objectives. One pragmatic example of what forms this engagement might take would be a reaffirmation of U.S. support for the Three Seas Initiative, which seeks to better integrate Central Europe along a north-south axis. But although bettering regional cooperation would directly serve U.S. interests, it would also promote those of the V4 by, among other things, fostering more coherent and unified responses to crises such as those evinced in Ukraine in 2014 and, more recently, Belarus.

## Central European Security

Biden has referred to NATO as “the single most consequential alliance in the history of the United States”<sup>6</sup>, implying he will take substantive steps to rebuild trans-Atlantic cooperation. The U.S. president has also proven himself a vocal critic of Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin's increasingly assertive and bellicose foreign policy. As such, the new administration in Washington will remain a staunch ally to Poland and the other Central European states. However, this is not to imply that they will enjoy privileged bilateral relations at the expense of relations with larger and more globally prominent actors. Biden is an old hand at great-power politics, and as such we can expect him to prioritize repairing relations with Berlin and seeking wary accommodation with Moscow.

Under these circumstances, it is realistic to expect continued political and ideological conflagrations in the region

<sup>6</sup> *How Biden and Trump Differ on Foreign Policy*, VOA News, 30 October 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/2020-usa-votes/how-biden-and-trump-differ-foreign-policy>.

between pro-Western governments, their Euro-skeptical peers, and national leaders who overtly tilt towards Russia. However, establishing a “cold peace” between Moscow and the NATO states undoubtedly represents a top priority for Washington going forward. Exemplifying this, Biden and Putin in late January 2021 agreed to extend the New START Treaty concerning nuclear nonproliferation, which was originally set to expire the following month, through February 2026.

## Energy Policy

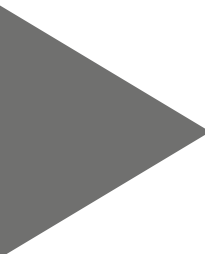
Ever since his days as vice president in the Obama administration, Biden has pushed for diversifying the sources of Europe’s energy imports in order to promote political stability and curtail Moscow’s economic influence. Unsurprisingly, he has come out against Nord Stream II, calling the undersea pipeline (designed to bypass traditional transit countries and supply Russian gas directly to Germany) a “fundamentally bad deal for Europe”<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, one of the energy options that the U.S. can be expected to support is the development of the Southern Gas Corridor, which, once fully realized, will supply Europe with natural gas from the Caspian and the Middle East.

<sup>7</sup> *Biden Calls Nord Stream 2 Pipeline ‘Bad Deal For Europe’*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 25 August 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/biden-nord-stream-2-pipeline-bad-deal-for-europe/27945891.html>.

## Conclusion

To summarize, under the new government in Washington bilateral relations with the V4 states, and Poland in particular, will be mediated through policies that favor more coherent and comprehensive European cooperation. This means that, as the U.S. increasingly comes to focus on the centrality of the EU (and, more specifically, Germany) in the region, the V4 states will be incentivized to follow suit. Underscoring this is the hardline stance that Biden has already taken relative to Russia, the containment of which will depend heavily on re-establishing the centrality of NATO to U.S. relations with Europe in general and the V4 region in particular.





Zsuzsanna Végh

## **Addressing root causes? Visegrad international development cooperation in Africa and the Middle East**

Cooperation in the field of international development policy has long been on the Visegrad Group's agenda, albeit admittedly not among its top priorities. The policy gained new relevance in the aftermath of the 2015 peak of the refugee and migration crisis, following the Visegrad governments' refusal of the European Commission's proposals to deal with the influx of asylum-seekers by introducing a relocation quota system. Instead, they proposed, as part of their "flexible solidarity" approach, to address the so-called root causes of migration and provide assistance in regions where migrants and asylum-seekers arrive from. While such measures do little to solve the immediate challenge Europe has been facing, increasing Visegrad countries' activities in less developed countries and assistance to crisis-hit regions would nonetheless have a beneficial impact on the



countries' international engagement and would bring them closer to meeting their international commitments.

Over the past five years, some shifts in geographic focus and resource allocation are slowly becoming visible, but the individual countries' balance is mixed. Additionally, while consultations in the field of international development cooperation have remained on the agenda of the subsequent V4 presidencies, little progress has been made toward actual cooperation on the ground. While some structural characteristics of the Visegrad countries' current development practices do indeed hamper such progress, cooperation in recipient countries would have clear benefits. For this reason, it is worth not to abandon the idea.

## **Visegrad countries' international development policy in a nutshell**

Visegrad countries are among the newer donors on the international scene, who (re)started their international development cooperation policies as a requirement posed by their accession to the European Union. In the time elapsed, the four countries have all developed their specific legislative and institutional frameworks and strategic approaches following their individual paths, and by 2016 all became members of the OECD Development Cooperation Committee, where they undergo regular reviews to improve their policy.

Despite the individual paths, some characteristics apply to all four countries. Among others, their spending on official development assistance (ODA) is limited and continues to fall short of the 0.33% target of the countries' gross national income (GNI) even today. Additionally, they spend

an overwhelming share of their ODA through multilateral channels, primarily through the EU, instead of bilateral partnerships with recipient countries. Finally, the predominant geographic focus of their assistance lies in their neighborhood, and therefore instead of least developed countries, they typically target lower-middle-income countries.

As new players with limited resources, the Visegrad countries initially found their niche in offering their experience gained through their political and economic transformation process to countries in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans, which were undertaking similar challenges following their own regime changes. This so-called transition experience, which is often shared through both official channels as well as with the involvement of non-governmental organizations, has become a well-known and recognized product, albeit the recent democratic backsliding in the region challenges its credibility.

The four countries' shared approach to the transition experience and the focus on the neighborhoods allowed for the development of joint initiatives over time both in the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. Among those, the V4EaP program, launched through the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) aiming to support the democratization of Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries through exchanges between actors from the V4 and the EaP, clearly stands out. The joint programming of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in Moldova is also worth mentioning as a good example of cooperation among members of the Visegrad Group in a recipient country<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, to date, such joint initiatives

<sup>1</sup> O. Chmiel, *The Engagement of Visegrad Countries in EU-Africa Relations*, Bonn 2018, p. 15.

are rather the exception than the rule even in regions where all four countries show interest in engagement.

## **Assistance to the Middle East and Africa**

Beyond their neighborhoods, Visegrad countries often focused their development assistance on countries that were their partners during the communist times<sup>2</sup>, or where they were engaged as part of international alliances from the 2000s onwards (e.g. Afghanistan). While the former group contained some African and Middle Eastern countries, which thus became target countries of individual Visegrad countries' development assistance, these regions overall received considerably less attention than the Western Balkans or Eastern Europe –due to geographic distance, the limited overall resources, or lack of prior experience on the ground.

By and large, the above characterized the situation at the 2015 peak of the refugee and migration crisis, when the V4 governments declared that they want to curtail migration flows by addressing their root causes. In absolute terms, at this point, Poland's disbursements were the highest in Sub-Saharan Africa (42.92 million USD), Hungary's in North Africa (1.6 million USD), and the Czech Republic's in the Middle East (10.62 million USD). Compared to 2015, Visegrad countries' disbursements have initially mostly increased in these regions, but the trend did not continue linearly; fluctuation from one year to the next is common,

<sup>2</sup> B. Szent-Iványi and A. Tétényi, *Transition and foreign aid policies in the Visegrad Countries: A path dependant approach*, "Transition Studies Review", 15 (3), 2008, p. 573–587.

**Table 1. Visegrad countries' ODA**  
*Amounts of ODA in million USD (current prices)*

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Czech a	199.00	260.24	304.12	305.36	306.09
Total ODA					
ODA/GNI (%)	0.12	0.14	0.15	0.13	0.13
North Africa	0.55	0.26	1.43	0.35	...
Sub-Saharan Africa	4.95	5.93	8.55	11.68	...
Middle East	10.62	11.23	11.57	8.26	...
Hungary	155.55	199.12	148.68	284.94	316.72
Total ODA					
ODA/GNI (%)	0.13	0.17	0.11	0.21	0.22
North Africa	1.60	2.34	2.40	6.69	...
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.43	2.81	2.96	8.57	...
Middle East	5.25	4.82	5.44	25.58	...
Poland	440.89	662.95	679.46	759.18	668.93
Total ODA					
ODA/GNI (%)	0.10	0.15	0.13	0.13	0.12
North Africa	0.35	0.19	2.81	0.24	...
Sub-Saharan Africa	42.92	78.84	13.65	37.39	...
Middle East	4.29	12.41	73.4	16.81	...
Slovakia	84.91	106.01	119.20	137.74	128.73
Total ODA					
ODA/GNI (%)	0.10	0.12	0.13	0.13	0.12
North Africa	...	0.01	...	0.01	...
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.59	2.44	3.13	2.26	...
Middle East	0.29	0.76	2.53	2.42	...

\* 2019 data is preliminary.

Source: OECD Stat.

and drops, even below the 2015 level, can also be observed in some cases.

The Czech Republic steadily increased and more than doubled its disbursements in Sub-Saharan Africa, where it identified Ethiopia and Zambia as priority countries in its 2018–2030 development strategy. In 2018, both countries were among the ten biggest recipients of Czech development assistance<sup>3</sup>. The country's ODA to the Middle East initially increased and subsequently dropped below the 2015 level, although Iraq and Syria were also among the ten biggest recipients of Czech aid. Czech ODA to North Africa, on the other hand, clearly fluctuated during the four-year period.

Except for a drop in the disbursements in the Middle East in 2016, Hungary consistently and significantly increased its ODA in all three regions. While the country's long-term development strategies for 2014–2020 and 2020–2025 do not explicitly identify priority countries (they highlight regions), in the 2018–2020 period, Hungary has cooperated with countries across all three regions. Iraq, Jordan, and Syria were among Hungary's ten largest recipients of assistance, thanks primarily to humanitarian assistance spent largely under the Hungary Helps program, which, however, often prioritizes support for Christian communities in its work.

Poland's ODA significantly fluctuated in all three regions, and with the exception of the Middle East, its assistance fell below the 2015 levels by the end of that period. Nevertheless, from Sub-Saharan Africa, Tanzania and Kenya were among the biggest recipients of Polish ODA, whereas the place of

<sup>3</sup> Source of the ten biggest recipients of the individual Visegrad countries: OECD (2020) Development Co-operation Profiles, Paris.

Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq among the ten main recipients again signifies the influence of the refugee and migration crisis on the country's assistance.

The smallest donor among the four, Slovakia, increased its spending most significantly in the Middle East, it nonetheless remained below what any of the three other countries spent in the region in 2015. Still, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria were among Slovakia's ten biggest recipients in 2018; like Kenya and South Sudan in Sub-Saharan Africa, where Slovak ODA increased but fluctuated compared to 2015. Assistance in North Africa remained minuscule.

While humanitarian aid has been overall the dominant form of assistance from the Visegrad countries to the Middle East in the past few years, approaches in Africa vary. Along with bilateral projects or scholarships, tied aid is also taking its place in the development portfolio of the Visegrad countries, especially of Poland and Hungary – though African partners are only recently entering the list of Hungarian tied aid recipients.

**Table 2. Priority countries in Africa and the Middle East**

Country	Planning period	Priority countries
Czech Republic	2018–2030	Ethiopia, Zambia
Hungary	2020–2025	<i>No concrete countries are identified.</i>
Poland	2016–2020	Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda Lebanon, Palestine
Slovakia	2019–2023	Kenya

Sources: Czech Development Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation.

Beyond their bilateral assistance, Visegrad countries together have also pitched 35 million EUR for the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa (EUTF) in 2018 with the intention to support the project of the Italian Ministry of Interior to strengthen the Libyan coast guard<sup>4</sup>. The EUTF had a significant role in the launch of the first joint V4 project in 2018 in Africa by financing a 2 million EUR project in Kenya, aiming at reviving local farming in the country's coastal region. In cooperation with V4 and local partners, the project is implemented by the Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (Slovak Aid), for which Kenya has been a priority country<sup>5</sup>. However, to date, this has been the only joint V4 project in Africa that involves all four countries.

## Challenges and opportunities for future cooperation

Visegrad countries have made some adjustments to their assistance flows following 2015. Their humanitarian response is visible in the additional resources disbursed in the Middle

<sup>4</sup> Website of the Hungarian Government, *V4 to assist with reinforcement of Libyan coast guard*, 25 October 2018, <https://www.kormany.hu/en/prime-minister-s-office/news/v4-to-assist-with-reinforcement-of-libyan-coast-guard>. More information on the project available at EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Support to Integrated border and migration management in Libya – Second phase*, 13 December 2018, [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/north-africa/libya/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/north-africa/libya/support-integrated-border-and-migration-management-libya-second-phase_en).

<sup>5</sup> European Union External Action, *Joint V4 project to support Kenyan farmers in the Coast*, 12 June 2018, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/46290/joint-v4-project-support-kenyan-farmers-coast\\_et](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/46290/joint-v4-project-support-kenyan-farmers-coast_et). The project appears to be part of a bigger initiative that was approved in 2016 and was partly implemented by Slovak Aid. See: EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, *Conflict prevention, peace, and economic opportunities for youth*, 28 April 2016, [https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/kenya/conflict-prevention-peace-and-economic-opportunities-youth\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/region/horn-africa/kenya/conflict-prevention-peace-and-economic-opportunities-youth_en).

East over the years, and there also appears to be a growing interest in Africa. Nonetheless, the frequent fluctuation in bilateral ODA amounts suggests ad hoc and short-term actions rather than strategic and consistent planning. Should the V4 governments want to live up to their 2015 proposition, more consistency and long-term planning would be advisable.

As the past years' experience shows, practical achievements are, so far, rather limited, despite the subsequent V4 presidencies keeping coordination in the field of international development cooperation on their agenda. The different levels of engagement of the four countries in the target regions, their divergent interests, the limited overlap in priority countries, and the structural and cyclical differences in their development policy, as illustrated in Table 2, all pose challenges for developing cooperation on the ground. These differences also provide ample reason why little practical results were yielded so far, and why it may have been easier to launch the first joint V4 project in Africa in the framework of an EUTF project rather than as a "simple" V4 project.

While much of these differences are unlikely to change, cooperation on the ground would still be beneficial. It would benefit the recipients by pooling the Visegrad countries' limited development assistance allocated to these regions, which, in turn, could scale up projects contributing to their impact, quality, and potentially even sustainability. On the donor side, the less experienced among the V4 could learn from the more seasoned ones in the given country and could improve their own practice and planning. In this sense, joint planning and projects could have added value even



without the participation of each Visegrad country, like the Czech-Slovak cooperation in Moldova. Based on the currently identified priority countries, Ethiopia and Kenya would stand as the most obvious choices to develop pilot initiatives. The V4 countries' shared intention to address the root causes of migration should go beyond rhetoric and serve as a starting point for joint action in the countries of the Middle East and North and Sub-Saharan Africa, in order to make the most of the Visegrad countries' limited development resources.



Martin Wycisk

## **V4 and the challenge of climate change**

One of the key global challenges of the XXI century is climate change. Rising sea levels, disrupted food production, an increased number of natural disasters of intensifying scale are just some of the threats humanity will have to face as a consequence of global warming. Through its very character, this challenge cannot be faced by each country individually but calls for international cooperation. The Visegrad 4 takes part in the international climate effort. They are signatories of the Kyoto Protocol, the Doha Amendment and the Paris Agreement and as member states of the European Union take part in European climate action like the EU Emissions Trading System. An important element of V4 climate policy are the National energy and climate plans (NECP), serving as each EU member state's guidelines to fulfilling the European energy and climate targets. As part of the European Green Deal the EU is currently in the process of updating its GHG emission reduction goal of 40% (compared to 1990) to 55% until 2030. Questions of climate

policy have also been a frequent topic of V4 consultations and with the current implementation of the Green Deal this subject will certainly gain significance.

## **The socio-economic context after 1989**

When reflecting on Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions of the Visegrad countries, one needs to consider the poor environmental records inherited from the Communist period between 1945 and 1989. In the conditions of central planning, focus on heavy industry and lack of social pressure groups which could push for environmental-friendly policy, the whole Eastern Block performed poorly in the protection of climate and nature when compared to Western Europe. There the higher social awareness for environmental problems, articulated by NGOs' and Green parties, brought the issue on the political agenda and ecological aspects being taken into account in policy formulation and implementation.

The transformation of the political and economic system, following the "annus mirabilis" 1989, significantly changed the situation in Central Europe. On the one hand, many unprofitable (and unecological) factories had to be closed, while those left had to undergo significant modernizations ahead of EU integration. This led to a sharp increase in air quality in the region and also a significant drop in GHG emissions. Though the drop of emissions slowed down significantly (in the case of Czechia) or even slightly increased with V4 economies recovering after the EU accession, the GHG emissions levels of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia in 2018 were accordingly 35,2%, 32,3%, 12,6 and 40,9%

lower when compared to 1990 levels<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, the social and economic hardships faced by the populations, especially during the 90's, affected voters' attitudes. With standards of living still behind compared to Western Europe, voters were (and often still are) far more interested in economic and social policies during elections than with the issue of climate change. It is therefore not surprising that Green parties and politicians with an environmentalist agenda struggled to find their way to national parliaments. In other words, domestic pressure to take decisive climate action was rather limited<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, since the middle of the last decade, a growing awareness of the population is observable, with NGO's protesting for improving air quality in Poland or V4 youths participation in the climate protest 2019 (though the intensity was lower compared to Western Europe).

## **GHG emissions of V4**

The GHG emissions of V4 countries vary as a consequence of factors as population and GDP. In 2018 Poland and the Czech Republic were – with emission of 415,9 and 129,4 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent – the 4th and 7th largest contributors to the EU's emissions. Poland's emissions represent in this context less than half of Germany, being the biggest emitter of GHG in the EU with 888,7 million tons. Taking into account

<sup>1</sup> *EU Energy in Figures – Statistical Pocketbook 2020*, Luxembourg 2020, p. 164, [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocketbook\\_energy\\_2020\\_pdf-080920.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocketbook_energy_2020_pdf-080920.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Greens' Dreams Splutter in Central and Southeast Europe*, 23 September 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/23/greens-dreams-splutter-in-central-and-southeast-europe/>.

the size of populations, the impact of the Czech Republic increases with 12,2 tons per capita (4th) compared to Poland (11 tons per capita and 7th place). These results are clearly above EU average of 8,7 tons per capita, but are also far lower as Luxemburg's 20,5 and Estonia's 15,3. In both categories, Hungary and Slovakia do better. They cause only 64 and 43,5 million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent, placing them 22nd and 14th respectively. If taking into account their populations, the position turns out to be more favourable for Hungary (6,6 tons per capita, 22nd) than Slovakia (8 tons per capita – 16th).

Taking a closer look at the sources of GHG the key role of transforming the energy sector becomes apparent. Though this is true for all V4 countries, it is Poland that faces with the most relevant share of energy-related GHG emissions (82,3%), while Slovakia does well with its share (67,36%) being even lower than the EU average (74,67%). A characteristic shared by all V4 countries is that their emissions caused by international aviation (between 0,46% in Slovakia and 1,25% in Hungary) is clearly below the EU average of 3,32%. These numbers reflect the fact that the EU's major airports are concentrated in the Western part of the EU.

A look deeper into the structure of energy-related GHG emissions, show that the impact as such differs widely in the V4. For the Czech Republic and Poland, the energy industries contribute most to the energy related emissions (52,7% and 47,8%). In Hungary and Slovakia the numbers are with 29,1% and 25,3% significantly lower. This shows clearly the impact of the electricity generation from coal, which represents a far bigger share in the Czech (32,41%) and Polish (43,71%) energy mix, compared to Hungary and Slovakia (7,81% and

### Total V4 GHG emissions (including international aviation, excluding LULUCF\*) in 2018

Country	Emissions*	Share in EU-27	Place in EU-27	Emissions/ capita**	Place in EU-27
Czechia	129,4	3,3%	7	12,2	4
Hungary	64	1,6%	14	6,6	22
Poland	415,9	10,7%	4	11	7
Slovakia	43,5	1,1%	22	8	16
EU-27	3893,1	100%	-	8,7	ttt

\* Land use, land use change and forestry is a term used for natural carbon sinks, which can accumulate atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>.

\*\* = in Million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalents EU-27 as in 2020

Source: *EU Energy in Figures – Statistical Pocketbook 2020*, Luxembourg, 2020, p. 164–174, [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocket-book\\_energy\\_2020\\_pdf-080920.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocket-book_energy_2020_pdf-080920.pdf).

### GHG emissions by sectors in 2018

	Energy	Non energy related	International Aviation	Total*
CZ	74,88%	24,19%	0,93%	129,4
HU	71,09%	27,66%	1,25%	64
PL	82,26%	17,02%	0,72%	415,9
SK	67,36	32,18%	0,46%	43,5
EU-27	74,67%	22,01%	3,32%	3893,1

\*= million tons CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent

Source: *EU Energy in Figures – Statistical Pocketbook 2020*, Luxembourg, 2020, p. 165–166, [https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocket-book\\_energy\\_2020\\_pdf-080920.pdf](https://www.euneighbours.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocket-book_energy_2020_pdf-080920.pdf).

17,4% respectively). Accordingly, the discussion on phasing out coal is an important aspect of the climate policy in the two first countries<sup>3</sup>. For Hungary and Slovakia the transport sector is the main contributor to energy-related GHG with 30,9% and 26,3%, though the sector is also important for Czechia (19,7%) and Poland (19,1%). While in broad terms the emission structure of energy related GHG of Poland and Czechia seems broadly comparable, Hungary has the most significant challenge to face in the residential sector, while Slovakia's manufacturing industries clearly contributing far more to the countries' emission compared to the V4 counterparts. Worth to mention is as well, how diversified the V4 energy-related GHG emissions are to the European average. Explanation are the different energy mixes and economical structures inside the V4.

## Conclusions – Potential and challenges ahead

The emission structure of each the V4 varies significantly inside the group. This will define the priorities of each country's climate policy. For Poland and the Czech Republic organizing the phasing out of coal can bring the most significant reductions in GHG emissions, though only if the challenging task of a just transition in the coal industries will be managed successfully. This does not mean, that energy will not play an important role in the climate policy of

<sup>3</sup> The first one initiated a special "coal commission" with relevant stakeholders to prepare a coal phase-out, while Poland's government agreed with the trade unions on a coal phase-out until 2049. In the second case, the European Commission still needs to determine whether the planned actions are in line with European rules on state aid and competition.

## Structure of Energy related GHG emissions 2018

	Energy Industries	Manufacturing, Industries & Construction	Transport	Commercial/ Institutional	Residential	Agriculture /Forestry/ Fisheries	Other Sectors	Other Combustion & Fugitive Emissions
CZ	52,7%	10,3%	19,7%	2,9%	9,4%	1,2%	0,3%	3,4%
HU	29,1%	11,8	30,9%	6,4%	17,6%	3,3%	0%	1,8%
PL	47,8%	9,3%	19,1%	2,0%	11,2%	3,6	0%	7,0%
SK	25,3%	25,9%	26,3%	5,1%	10,2%	1,4%	0,3%	5,5%
EU-27	34,9%	15,5%	28,5%	4,8%	11,1%	2,6%	0,2%	2,5%

Source: *EU Energy in Figures – Statistical Pocketbook 2020*, Luxembourg 2020, p. 165, [https://www.euneighbour.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocketbook\\_energy\\_2020\\_pdf-080920.pdf](https://www.euneighbour.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2020-09/pocketbook_energy_2020_pdf-080920.pdf).



the other V4 countries. All of them agreed to increase the role of renewable energy sources in their energy mixes until 2030 to 19,2% (Slovakia) up to 23% (Poland) according to their respective NEPCs. Their paths, though, will differ on achieving this goal, due to different geographical conditions found in each. For example, only Poland has the possibility to develop offshore wind parks, as the only V4 country with direct access to the Baltic Sea. Czechia and Slovakia might consider further development of hydro energy, while the natural conditions of Hungary clearly favour further investment in solar energy.

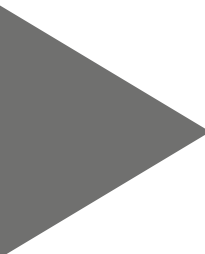
Another significant contribution to emission reduction will be the transport sector. This can be achieved by increasing the role of renewables in transport to 14% until 2030, by introducing more efficient or alternatively fuelled vehicles (for example electric busses). However both will require major investment, certainly impacting the V4 logistic companies.

All four countries aim to improve on energy efficiency and a more effective heating/cooling solutions for commercial and residential housing. Here a constant exchange of experience and good practices can be beneficial to all sides.

The governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia will face in the upcoming years outside (and potentially growing domestic) pressure to further reduce the GHG emissions. The key for successfully reducing V4's carbon footprint will depend on whether public support for decisive climate action can be gained. In this context, the inclusion of all stakeholders on all levels of government will be of relevance. The Green Deal as proposed by the European Commission tries to take it into account with the Just Tran-

sition Fund. It remains to be seen if the funds will suffice, how they will be allocated between the affected areas and if they will convince populations to support a more ambitious climate policy. This is particularly the case in the coal regions of Poland and Czechia, where this industry is a major employer a serious political struggle might await.





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## **V4 and COVID-19 pandemic: challenges for the next future**

The ongoing Polish presidency in the Visegrad Group coincided with a special moment in human history – the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. While no one is currently able to predict the specific consequences of it, there are no doubts that they will be serious. They will certainly also affect the V4 countries.

It is and was hard to decide for all governments which method should they use to handle the crisis. Theoretically, you can save lives with one or more total lockdown, but what will happen with the national industry and with people's jobs? Or you can try to save the national economy but it will definitely cost some people's life. It seems all countries try to save the citizens.

The first, spring wave, which affected the countries of the Visegrad Group to a relatively small extent, left some margin for ambiguity to the effects of the epidemic. However, the observation of the development of the pandemic during the second, autumn wave, leads to the conclusion that

the pandemic will deeply affect many specific areas, such as the labour market, caused also by the changes in social behaviors during the pandemic, the political scene, including the future shape of international cooperation such as V4 or European Union, and, as a result, may transform the reality as we all know it.

## **Challenges for the economy and the labor market**

As it is very difficult to predict how the world economy will handle the coronavirus crisis, however it can be said with certainty that it will have a great impact on the labour market. It may be manifold: from rising unemployment to various changes related to forms of employment (precarious jobs or remote work).

The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the labour markets in Visegrad Group countries with a moderate unemployment growth and income decrease, potentially leading to long-term unemployment among specific groups of labour forces and weakening of labour market attachment for the next years. In V4 countries, as in the UE, the spring-summer months of the pandemic has affected primarily three groups of workers. The first group includes people who performed precarious jobs and temporary jobs. The second group consists of young people, especially those who worked in the hotel, restaurant and café (HoReCa) sector and graduates who were to enter the labour market this year. The third group consists of women. The reasons for the last one include, firstly, the fact that statistically women lose their jobs more frequently than men in crisis situations. Secondly,

the pandemic crisis has hit hard sectors occupied by women, such as the beauty industry and often SMEs, where the owners and employees are very often women (restaurants, hotels, Airbnb, beauty salons, hairdressers, fitness clubs). In general, in the V4 countries, the sectors most affected were the following: accommodation services, transport and tourism, fashion and beauty industry. In Slovakia, the crisis may also hit the highly developed car industry.

However, according to the data from the Trading Economics, it must be emphasized that the unemployment ratio for the V4 during the first wave, except from Slovakia, was lower than the EU average. Nevertheless, the number of registered unemployed may increase more significantly in further stages of pandemic and coronavirus crisis. All countries in the region financially supported enterprises in order to maintain jobs. For example, in Poland according to the condition established during the first wave, business owners, which are using the financial support from public funds, in order not to return the loan, must keep employees in employment for 12 months. When this condition expires, mass layoffs may occur.

The labour market will certainly be affected strongly by the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit hard the countries of the Visegrad Group. In order to prevent the further spread of the SARS-COV-2 different solutions have been introduced included closing restaurants, hotels, beauty service, and gyms, which will probably have deep consequences, as the HoReCa and beauty sector were already in trouble. In a similar situation is the aviation industry. Although air traffic was not totally grounded during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it was during

the first wave, the sector is still facing difficulties due to concerns of clients related to possible problems with returning home in the event of new restrictions or fear of contracting the coronavirus abroad.

In fact, it is the change in consumer behaviour and consumer habits during a pandemic that may contribute to long-lasting revisions in the labour market in general. However, these modifications do not necessarily mean only a crisis in the labour market, they would also force its profound transformations. For example, already during the first wave of COVID-19, we could observe a rapid and growing interest in e-marketing and e-commerce tools, which have led to an increase in employment in these sectors. E-commerce platforms, also from V4 countries, such as Polish Allegro or Czech Rohlik, recorded a considerable rise in revenues. As a consequence of mass transferring of purchasing to the Internet, a boost in employment was also observed in courier companies and the IT industry (website design, handling internet transactions). Also, sales of computers and tablets developed significantly in V4 countries. The stress-test for these branches was the on-line shopping associated with the end of the year holidays (Christmas, New Year).

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered digital transformation, which we can observe also in the labour market in another dimension. One of its effects was the introduction of remote work on a large scale. According to the available data, employees who work remotely by dint of the restrictions, also after the end of the pandemic will probably opt for maintaining a hybrid work mode: same days in the week in the workplace, same somewhere else (home or co-work places). Additionally, employers more and more often also

see the advantages of such solutions, such as lowering labor costs – renting office space or smaller electricity bills.

The above-mentioned phenomena additionally emphasize the importance of Polish Presidency in V4 objectives contained in point Digital V4, thus the cooperation in the area of the digital agenda between V4 countries, especially in the aspects of innovation and application of new technologies, digital transition and cybersecurity. Equally important is enhancing V4 cooperation in the area of Government Technology (GovTech), digitalization and innovation support through cross-border initiatives and promoting collaboration between regional private and public actors.

The effects of the pandemic on the labor markets in the V4 countries will depend on many factors. The first of them is to adjust the aid from public funds to the needs of entrepreneurs, and thus to maintain employment. The second is the skillful stimulation of consumption, considering the challenges resulting from climate change. The third is the creation by the state of appropriate tools that would allow entrepreneurs to adapt to the new customer behavior caused during a pandemic (e.g. e-commerce). Additionally, the period of the coronavirus crisis should be an opportunity to rethink already existing problems of labour market in V4 countries, such as modification of the existing production structure, outflow of skilled labor abroad and digital transformation, to name the most important ones.

## **Challenges for the political scene**

The first and the second waves of the pandemic showed how vulnerable the political scene is to COVID-19. In all V4 coun-



tries, the first wave of COVID-19 pandemic had a rather positive impact on the strengthening and legitimacy of power, which is a characteristic “bonus” for the political elite struggling with an unknown threat. This trend can be seen in the V4 countries (except Hungary) from the first weeks of March (the support for the Fidesz-KNDP coalition in Hungary remains unchanged, regardless of the pandemic). This was due to the citizens gathering around power, which worked in its favour. Concerns about the future were expressed by all citizens, regardless of political views. Hence, a significant increase has been noticed in the trust towards health ministers and other people managing activities in response to COVID-19. However, there was no straightforward link between COVID-19 and support towards the heads of government or presidents.

From May 2020 - the period of calming of the first wave of the pandemic – a decline in the main political party’s support can be observed in all countries except Hungary. On the one hand, this is a consequence of citizens’ fatigue with the coronavirus-related restrictions, and on the other, of getting used to the new situation and returning to “normal politics”, resulting in critical reviews of the governments by the citizens. This has a varying degree of impact on the growth of support from the opposition parties. In Poland, from April to mid-August, the largest opposition party gained ten percentage points, while the ruling party lost three percentage points. Such changes cannot be seen in Slovakia and Hungary. On the other hand, in the Czech Republic, there is a trend of increasing support for the anti-system party, namely the Czech Pirate Party.

Support for the Czech Pirate Party increased significantly during the second epidemic wave in the Czech Republic, a time when epidemic rates in the Czech Republic were among the highest in the world (such as for example number of new daily diagnoses cases per 100,000 inhabitants). This was due to several different reasons: ineffective handling of the pandemic by the Czech government, failure to adjust the introduced restrictions to the current epidemiological situation and the positive reception of the Czech Pirate Party' actions by the public, like the return to work in the hospital of one of the party leaders, the mayor of Prague Zdeněk Hřib, a doctor by profession.

The Czech example shows that the course of a pandemic can have a profound impact on the political scene. It may be an opportunity to strengthen the influence of the ruling party, as well as an opportunity for the opposition to build political capital, and in the future to taking over the power in the state.

## **Challenges for V4 and international cooperation**

Since 2015 (migration crisis) it is well-known that Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia try to form their own opinions and methods concerning regional and EU issues. As for the COVID-19 period, it is interesting to analyse if it is possible to speak about existing cooperation between the member states.

On the one hand, there are many statements that suggested to the region and Europe that V4 countries will work together against the COVID-19 pandemic and its conse-

quences. The leaders of the countries met several times. They announced close cooperation in the field of health care, scientific research and commerce. In the end, the Polish deputy minister of foreign affairs, Szymon Szyński declared that since 9th October 2020 the V4 has established the Virtual Information Sharing Centre, where the politicians of the V4 countries can exchange their views and share information about the topics of health care and foreign policy. *Ad hoc* cooperation also can be reported e. g. Hungary gave breathing machines to Czechia and Ukraine and sent volunteers to Slovakia to help in testing the people of the country (October-November 2020).

It should be mentioned that cross border cooperation remained. During the summer and the beginning of the autumn V4 states also helped each other in the field of tourism. They advertised the region as a possible location for a short or longer holiday. Moreover, Slovakia and Hungary helped the Czech tourist to reach the Adriatic Sea and in September 2020 Hungary let in only Polish, Czech and Slovak tourists after closing its borders.

On the other hand, it seems we could not speak about real cooperation. The COVID-19 situations are different in each and every member state and the reactions were also various, from the total lockdown in Slovakia to the economic approach of Hungary or Czechia as we could see in the first wave. Hungary also stated that Austria is (not Poland or the other V4 member states) and will be an example of the country. The Hungarian government will follow the temporary provisions of Austria. Last but not least, an average citizen also cannot see any picture of common work

between the V4 countries, the media does not make many reports about this topic.

## Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected almost all countries in the world. However, crisis spikes – in particular – have occurred at different times in different countries. The experience of the pandemic has thus shown the importance of solidarity between states – as well as between the peoples – especially those linked by special structures, such as the Visegrad Group and the European Union. Having this in mind, in the face of below-mentioned challenges to act together in order to found the solution.

Firstly, it is important to use already existing channels for information sharing in aspects of health care but also foreign policy (closing borders). Secondly, all of the V4 countries should prepare for the economic crisis. Maybe it is time to handle these kinds of problems on the regional, thus V4 level. The idea of TSI is probably a good solution because it is a cross border cooperation programme. Developing the infrastructure (roads, ports, waterways, pipelines, digital technologies) of the region could cause similar effects as the New Deal in the USA. The question if V4 countries can act together on economic level still remains open.

Last but not least, the further development of the COVID-19 pandemic, unless a cure would be quickly found, will lead to social and political fatigue.





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### **Visegrad's Pearl Anniversary**

In 2021, we are celebrating 30 years since the Visegrad Group's inception. The Visegrad Triangle came to life on 15 February 1991. After the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, the triangle turned into a quadrangle. Since the beginning, the countries of the V4 strove to get past the communist legacy and be integrated into Euro-Atlantic structures. The objective was achieved in 1999 (NATO membership) and 2004 (EU membership). Over the past thirty years, the V4 (Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) has epitomized a successful systemic transformation, thriving regional cooperation and prosperous economic growth. The geopolitical location of the member states in the heart of the continent makes the V4 a key player both for the European Union and NATO.

Tomasz Stępniewski

ISBN 978-83-66413-38-2



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