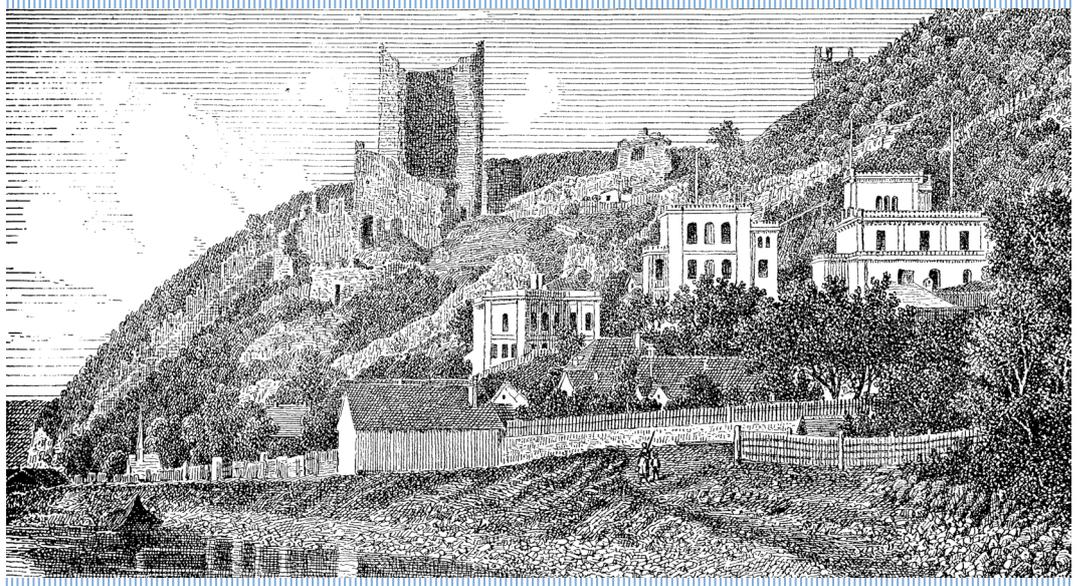


DEMOCRACY &
CITIZENSHIP

POLICY BRIEF
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#VISEGRÁD
#EAST-WEST
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WHAT IS LEFT OF THE “VISEGRÁD GROUP”?



Engraving of the town of Visegrád

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Thirty years ago, a declaration signed by the presidents of Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia committed these countries to seeking cooperation and good neighbourly relations, at a time when the issues of the post-communist transition and membership in the EU and NATO were particularly challenging. How can we assess this “Visegrád process” today?

Introduction ■ 1990 – 2021, two faces of Central Europe

Going back to the text of the [Visegrád Declaration](#), signed on 15 February 1991 in a small Hungarian town near the Slovakian border, is an excellent means of measuring the differences between Central Europe in 1989 and in 2021, for the better and for the worse. For the better: the common

goals listed at the beginning of the Declaration were very substantially fulfilled as early as 1999-2004 and the three decades since its signature have been unquestionably the most prosperous for freedom, democracy and peaceful cooperation in the entire history of the signatory states. For the worse: upon reading this text written by three former dissenters – József Antall, Lech Wałęsa and Václav Havel – who had become president and were attempting to commit their countries to liberal democracy and European integration one can only note certain assertions that the Hungarian or Polish governments would be unwilling to sign today: emphasis on the political dimension of the European project based on common values, such as the rule of law, tolerance and the rejection of nationalism, in addition to the importance of the role played by civil society, etc.

Going beyond the text, **the comparison between the founding figures of the Visegrád Group** (V3, then V4¹) and the leading politicians who represent the group today is striking. While Viktor Orbán claims to be a successor of József Antall, there is a fundamental difference between the latter's positions and political actions at the start of the 1990s and the paths taken and developed by Viktor Orbán since 2010. The links put forward by the Hungarian prime minister between himself and Antall are as unconvincing as those he claims to have with Helmut Kohl. In Poland, a long-standing conflict, which is both political and personal in nature, has placed Jarosław Kaczyński and Lech Wałęsa on a collision course. In the Czech Republic and Slovakia, it would be difficult to find human and political profiles that are more different to Václav Havel than those of the Czech president and prime minister, Miloš Zeman and Andrej Babiš, and the Slovak prime minister, Igor Matovič, each in their own way. Only Zuzana Čaputová is following – as she claims² – in the footsteps of the last Czechoslovak president, at least in some ways.

However, going beyond the outdated and distorted nature of the founding declaration, what analysis can we make of the three decades since its signature?

1 ■ A mixed performance and of variable geometry for a process with many different goals

While this assessment remains somewhat subdued in essence, recent controversies should not overshadow the positive results of the Visegrád

process. In addition, the outcome will also depend on the expectations one may have regarding this cooperation initiative for Central Europe. In light of this, it is necessary to bear in mind the ambivalence already surrounding the Congress of Visegrád in 1335. This historical reference sets the stage symbolically for the 1991 summit³. At the time, the kings of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland met at Visegrád first and foremost to settle disputes between them, and then to attempt to build an alliance to carry greater weight in the European arena, particularly as they faced the burgeoning power of the Habsburgs. These twofold objectives can also be found in the Visegrád process since 1991: the aim is both to calm relations – traditionally complicated and even conflictual⁴ – between the signatory nations and to enjoy a greater influence against other players on the European stage: the USSR then Russia, Germany (particularly following reunification), the European Union, the USA and NATO, etc.

2 ■ A positive, if not spectacular performance within the V4 Group

In terms of the “internal” aspect of the Visegrád cooperation, the outcome is positive, though not spectacular. The situation is a far cry from the comparable regional integration project in Benelux for example, and is even further from the old aspirations towards a Central European federation or confederation which could fill the geopolitical gap created by the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, this was never clearly stated as a potential long-term goal. While there were hints towards this type of ambition, particularly from

1. Cooperation began between three countries: Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, with the latter becoming the Czech Republic and Slovakia on 1 January 1993. The Visegrád Group went from “V3” to “V4”.

2. Cf. for example the interview published in *Le Monde* on 27/07/2019: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/07/27/zuzana-caputova-la-question-migratoire-est-le-probleme-de-toute-l-ue_5494116_3210.html (in French)

3. Cf. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/congress-of-visegrad/gyorgy-racz-the-congress>

4. By way of illustration, we may cite Czech frustration with the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 and the painful memory of the Magyarization policy in Slovakia. The Treaty of Trianon was thought of as a historic disaster in Hungary, while it was one of the founding instruments of Czechoslovakia. Conflicts between Czechoslovakia and its Hungarian and Polish neighbours in the inter-war period culminated in the two countries' participation in the dismembering of Czechoslovakia in 1938-39.

Václav Havel, [for example in his address to the Polish Parliament on 25 January 1990](#), it was very quickly shelved due to national and inter-regional political realities and also thanks to the European political project which substantially diminished the advantages of such regional integration.

If we adopt a more modest approach, it seems clear that the **Visegrád process has helped to improve relations between the four countries concerned**, if only because this regular multilateral dialogue has never stopped, in spite of the sometimes high tensions that emerged throughout the 1990s and subsequently: the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, the tensions opposing the latter (and then Slovakia) and Hungary regarding the Gabčíkovo-Nagymaros dam, recurring tensions concerning the Hungarian minority in Slovakia and Viktor Orbán's criticism of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 2002 regarding the Beneš decrees (which formed the legal basis for the expulsion of Germans and Hungarians from Czechoslovakia in 1945), the Czech prime minister Václav Klaus' preference to "go it alone", clearly standing out from the "Visegrád spirit" in the period from 1993 to 1997⁵, etc. In addition to calming tensions, the V4 Group cooperation did bring about some tangible benefits, with the emblematic example being the group's support for Slovakia in its successful attempt to catch up in the NATO and EU integration process following Vladimír Mečiar's defeat in 1998⁶. Other achievements should also be remembered: the implementation of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in 1993, the coordinated action against the USSR concerning the dissolution of Comecon, the Warsaw Pact and the withdrawal of the Soviet Army and even a level of coordination in the final phase of EU membership negotiations⁷.

Moreover, the V4 cooperation gave rise to a number of initiatives in a range of fields: a contribution to the CSDP with the implementation, following a decision in 2012, of an [EU battlegroup](#) ("Visegrád Battlegroup"); the creation in 2016 of the [Visegrád Patent Institute](#); and - above all - the creation in 2000 of the [International Visegrád Fund](#) to finance, as stated in its [statutes](#), projects in the fields of culture, research, education, exchanges between young people, cross-border cooperation and tourism. Iconic projects co-financed by the Visegrád Fund include the [Platform of European Memory and Conscience](#), the English-language common portal of EurActiv in the four countries dedicated to news in the V4 countries [visegradinfo.eu](#) and the [Central European Art Database](#), a web portal on visual arts in the V4 nations since 1945.

3 ■ A controversial yet minor performance on the European stage

Far from this consensual and relatively broadly apolitical agenda, it is the Visegrád Group's vision as a sort of counterweight to "Brussels", to the Franco-German tandem, to Germany, to the "progressive" forces (ad libitum, according to the situation), or to all that at the same time, which attracted the attention of many observers⁸. However, while the controversial nature of this aspect of the Visegrád process is of interest, its impact is nonetheless limited.

To become a major player on the European or international stage, the V4 Group would have to be in agreement on the fundamentals - and

5. Václav Klaus declared in 1994: "The Czech Republic is not interested in Visegrad, as it is a process artificially created by the West." (interview published in *Le Figaro*, quoted in Vargovčíková op. cit.).

6. Cf. Ania Skrzypek (ed.) and Maria Skóra (ed.): *The Future of the Visegrad Group*, Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Das Progressive Zentrum, 2018, available at: <https://www.progressives-zentrum.org/ebook-the-future-of-the-visegrad-group/>

7. This is what Vladimír Špidla, the Czech prime minister at the time, claimed in an interview given to the daily newspaper *Právo* upon his return from the Copenhagen Summit in 2002 (*Právo*, 16 December 2002).

8. By means of illustration, we can quote two press articles which demonstrate this interest: "The rise and shine of Visegrad" published at the end of 2016 on euobserver.com (<https://euobserver.com/europe-in-review/136044>) and "Le Groupe de Visegrad ou l'émancipation de l'Europe centrale", *Le Monde*, 21/04/2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/04/20/le-groupe-de-visegrad-ou-l-emancipation-de-l-europe-centrale_4905439_3232.html (in French).

this is far from being the case. Aside from the aforementioned wounds and resentments which may or may not be long-standing, it is difficult to find major political issues on which the Visegrád countries have identical or even similar understandings or interests. Yet, as concerns the economy, the countries have different priority sectors: for example, the weighting of the car industry, both in terms of share in GDP and in total employment, is considerably higher in the Czech Republic, in Slovakia and to a lesser extent in Hungary than in Poland. Conversely, agriculture is a key challenge for Poland to a much greater degree than for the other V4 countries.

Slovakia adopted the Euro, while the Czech Republic remains in a wait-and-see pragmatic attitude with hints of scepticism, and Poland and Hungary express a relatively clear ideological refusal of the European currency. In terms of reinforced cooperation, the V4 countries also take action in a piecemeal fashion: out of the five initiatives launched since the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, Slovakia and the Czech Republic took part in three, though not the same ones, Hungary in two and Poland in one⁹.

The attitude towards Russia is one of the few inconsistencies in the honeymoon between Poland and Hungary, since the PiS party's return to power in Warsaw in 2015. Poland champions the idea of a European perspective for Ukraine, a position which resonates much less in the Czech Republic and in Hungary. Similarly, while anti-German rhetoric is somewhat reflected in the four countries, only the Polish PiS government takes it to the highest level occasionally¹⁰. While Christianity plays a key role in social and political life in Poland and Slovakia, this is less the case – despite the FIDESZ narrative – in Hungary and less still in the Czech Republic¹¹.

All these differences, which mainly result from differing structural developments in the countries' political and cultural histories, the geopolitical situation and economic interests, **are underpinned by other fundamental limits of the Visegrád Group, in particular the imbalance between Poland and the three other nations in terms of demographic weighting.** Alone, Poland accounts for 60% of the Group's population, which can only foster a fear of Polish leadership, or even supremacy, which would be unacceptable to the other countries. This imbalance is further underscored by the fact that Poland is among the "large" Member States within the EU. As such, it has enjoyed a specific framework of relations with the Franco-German tandem since 1991 with the "Weimar triangle". Similarly, Nicolas Sarkozy's thoughts on a "directorship of great powers" within the EU, in which Poland would have a seat at the table, did not resonate in the same way in Warsaw compared to the other V4 capitals.

These major differences in attitudes and interests results in a fundamentally reactive and negative position within the EU: it sometimes occurs that the V4 Group says "no", as it did during the migration crisis or more recently when blocking the nomination of Frans Timmermans to become President of the European Commission. However, the Group is barely able to carry off common initiatives. In the institutional debate within the 2004 IGC, Poland allied with Spain, as both countries had a similar interest in defending the Council voting system adopted in Nice, rather than seeking a common position of the V4. For one of its more notable initiatives within the EU, the Eastern Partnership, Poland turned to Sweden, rather than to its V4 partners.

This lack of common political drive is even clearer today, when faced with what may be deemed attempts to "ideologize" the Visegrád process by the Hungarian and Polish governments, recom-

9. The report of the European Parliament Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs: *The Implementation of Enhanced Cooperation in the European Union*, October 2018, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604987/IPOL_STU\(2018\)604987_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/604987/IPOL_STU(2018)604987_EN.pdf)

10. Particularly on the issue of the reparations from World War II imposed on Germany.

11. According to the *European Values Study* (www.atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu), in 2017, the percentage of people who say that religion is very or quite important in their lives was 79% in Poland, 53% in Slovakia, 46% in Hungary and 21% in the Czech Republic.

mending a kind of “cultural counter-revolution” on society issues, an “illiberal democracy” as a political project and a “Europe of nations” against the European project embodied by the current European Union¹². While certain aspects of this agenda may garner support from some political forces in the Czech Republic or in Slovakia, these two countries remain fundamentally reluctant to get drawn into an escalating and profoundly ideological confrontation between “Brussels” and the two “illiberal” governments. The recent power struggle concerning rule of law conditionality is one example that speaks volumes. Hungary and Poland can expect a degree of indulgence, or even sympathy from their other partners in the V4 Group (or even from other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular Croatia and Slovenia), but not any genuine support.

4 ■ Conflicting positions concerning the migration crisis

The conflict regarding the quotas for the resettlement of refugees within the EU and more broadly the European reaction to the 2015 migration crisis is emblematic of all these elements. This case in point demonstrates both the reasons why the idea of a Visegrád Group claiming to be the “custodian of another vision of the European Union¹³” appealed to some, and the major shortcomings of this very idea. This conflict has developed around an ideological narrative expressed by V4 leaders (rejection of “multiculturalism”, advocacy of a vision of the European identity based only on Christianity, all with hints of security rhetoric), elaborating on common features that set the V4 countries apart from virtually all Western European countries (countries with strong ethnic and cultural homogeneity, lack of a

colonial past, countries of emigration rather than immigration) and on the claim that national sovereignty should be respected in the field of asylum and immigration.

However, opposing extra-European immigration is a single political issue, not a full-fledged ideology. All of the aforementioned ideological aspects are not reflected in the same way in the different V4 countries. For example, in the 1990s, the Czech Republic welcomed several thousand refugees from the former Yugoslavia, a considerable percentage of whom were Muslims - without any controversy or difficulty. In 2015, Andrej Babiš, at the time still “only” number 2 in the government, initially spoke to press about the option of the Czech Republic welcoming refugees, given the lack of an unskilled workforce¹⁴, even though he rejected the idea of a compulsory quota system. Hence, the loud refusal to welcome a few hundred Syrian refugees in 2015 can hardly be considered a position deeply rooted in a world vision and Czech interests. Rather, it is a pragmatic position, which uses ideological justifications to cover up electioneering considerations and a lack of political courage against the extreme wings.

Another clear shortcoming in this very emblematic example of the clash between the V4 and the rest of the EU concerning refugee quotas is the actual lack of unity within the V4 Group, once again. During the Council vote on this controversial system, Poland (still governed at the time by the liberals of Donald Tusk’s Civic Platform) ultimately broke away from its V4 partners: there were four countries in the minority, but the fourth was Romania, not Poland. Later on, Hungary and Slovakia brought the Council’s decision before the CJEU¹⁵; their approach was officially supported by Poland, but not by the Czech Republic. Lastly,

12. Cf. https://www.rtf.be/info/medias/detail_kaczynski-et-orban-veulent-une-contre-revolution-culturelle-dans-l-ue?id=9398053 (in French); and also T. Chopin, L. Macek: “Une «Europe des valeurs»? Un combat à mener» 2019 (<https://www.telos-eu.com/fr/politique-francaise-et-internationale/une-europe-des-valeurs-un-combat-a-mener.html>) (in French).

13. Thierry Buron, “Le groupe de Visegrad, une autre Europe” in *Revue Conflits*, 4 August 2020 (<https://www.revueconflits.com/visegrad-une-autre-europe-thierry-buron/>) (in French)

14. Cf. this information from Czech public radio: https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/uprchlici-by-podle-babise-mohli-obsadit-tisice-pracovnich-mist-o-ktera-cesi-nejstoji-_201509120112_mhornakova (in Czech). The lack of a workforce has been one of the major problems for the Czech economy in recent years (cf. <https://english.radio.cz/czech-companies-struggling-labour-shortage-8121115>)

15. Joined cases C 643/15 and C 647/15.

the V4 Group was not able to produce an alternative proposal that had more substance than vague statements of principle. A similar analysis can be made of other issues for which a common position of the V4 Group could be assumed: the revision of the directive on the posting of workers was supported in 2018 by the Czech Republic and Slovakia, whereas Hungary and Poland voted against it. More recently, in view of the European Pact on Migration and Asylum proposed by the European Commission in September 2020, the V4 Group aimed to display unity, but the initial reactions hinted at some differences, with in particular Slovakia being slightly more reserved in the criticism of the project, while Hungary and Poland took the hardest line¹⁶. In December 2020, the Visegrád countries adopted a common position on the Pact proposed by the Commission in the form of a “non-paper”. Although it remains vague and reasserts a number of positions that these countries have championed since 2015, this document does, however, adopt a more conciliatory tone and demonstrates a wish to break the V4 Group’s isolation, as it was co-written with Estonia and Slovenia.

5 ■ Visegrád: in the absence of genuine unity, common resentment

However, it is indisputable that **there is a certain common susceptibility within the V4 Group and more generally in Central and Eastern European countries, related to similar geopolitical situations and historical experiences, but also to a form of resentment felt towards “Westerners”,** suspected of being deeply ignorant¹⁷, condescending, lacking interest or empathy and having a

“double standard” attitude towards Central Europeans. This resentment is particularly strong in the V4 countries as they were - as early as 1989 - leading the way in the post-communist transition and are countries which, for historical reasons, respond particularly badly to the feeling of being relegated to the “outskirts of Europe”, of being treated like “second-class Europeans” or seeing their fully-fledged membership of the Western European civilisation contested. Yet Central Europe tends to see itself as a “kidnapped West” (Milan Kundera), while Westerners post-1945 often liken it to “Eastern countries”, perceived to be fundamentally different to Western Europe. The mutual incomprehension was heightened by the EU accession process, which was excessively presented as an “enlargement” of the EU and insufficiently deemed “the reunification” of Europe¹⁸. All this was set against a backdrop of a self-perception of victimhood, with Central Europe appearing to be the place which was constantly betrayed or sacrificed by Western powers, through traumas such as the Treaty of Trianon for Hungary, the Munich Agreement for the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact for Poland and the Yalta Conference for the four countries. Yet this common susceptibility is not the sole foundation of genuine and long-standing solidarity and much less a common political project, at least not until resentment towards the West reaches breaking point, which is not currently the case for governments (none are currently discussing plans for an “exit”) nor for populations (V4 country citizens are –with the notable exception of Czechs– among the most Euro-optimistic of the EU-27¹⁹. See figure beside).

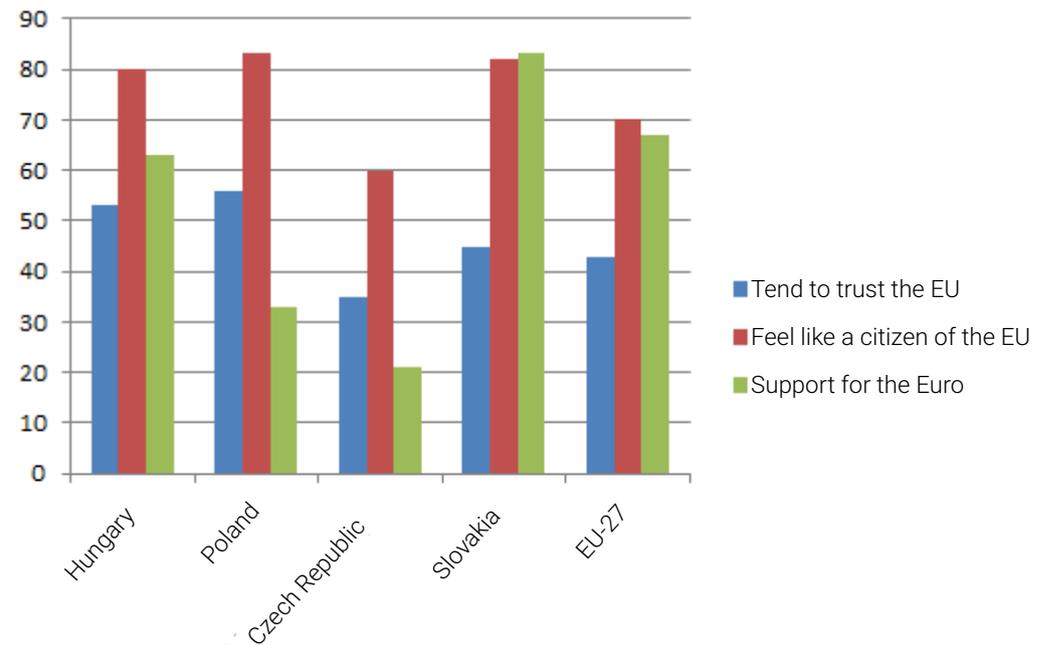
16. Cf. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/in-brussels-visegrad-four-reject-the-eus-migration-plan/>

17. In this regard, there is a real problem in education – France provides an example as its school curriculums stand out for “little or no acknowledgement of the countries of Central Europe” (Thierry Chopin: Enseigner l’Europe en France, Jacques Delors Institute, 2020, https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/R120_201008_LEuropedanslesprogrammesscolaires_Chopin.pdf) (in French)

18. Cf. Thierry Chopin, Sébastien Maillard, Jacques Rupnik, Lukas Macek: “L’Europe d’après. Pour un nouveau récit de l’élargissement», *L’Esprit*, May 2020 (in French)

19. Cf. also Daniel Debomy: *They love me, they love me not, they love me a little: Public opinion and the European Union in the Visegrad Countries*, Policy Paper of the Jacques Delors Institute, 2018 (<https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/PublicOpinionsVisegradCountries-Debomy-April18-1.pdf>)

Figure ■ Public opinion graph



Source: Eurobarometer summer 2020

6 ■ Quo vadis, Visegrád?

Various factors may change this situation and bring about a kind of “unifying radicalisation” of the Visegrád Group countries along an “illiberal” line, thereby threatening the very stability of the Union. The recent announcement that the FIDESZ party is leaving the European Parliament EPP group and its likely future membership in the ECR group, which already includes Polish MEPs of the PiS party and also a considerable number of Slovak and Czech MEPs, may be a sign of a possible change in this direction: a “close-knit V4” which is out of step with the European mainstream, given that the V4 countries are somewhat under-represented within the key political groups of the European Parliament. Moreover, there are many mainly internal factors which foster the rise in forms of populism: corruption, the shortcomings of civil societies, the poor management of the health crisis, economic vulnerabilities, the frustration of those left behind by the post-com-

munist transition and the crisis of political parties,

to name but a few examples. **However, a continuing lack of interest and understanding from the European Union could also heighten anti-European sentiments.**

This problem has been highlighted in studies conducted as part of the EU Coalition Explorer project of the European Council on Foreign Relations²⁰. Surveys conducted among European affairs practitioners and experts in all EU Member States demonstrate either a mutual ignorance (particularly regarding the V4 – France or Netherlands axis, for example) or a very high asymmetry between the interests of the V4 countries to cooperate with another Member State, which is not aware of this Central-European availability. The analyses of the Coalition Explorer tend to show that the apparent (and, as we have seen, very rela-

20. <https://ecfr.eu/special/eucoalitionexplorer>

tive) unity of the V4 Group is quite broadly driven by the fact that these countries do not really have other partners within the EU who are interested and understanding towards them. This means that they turn to their neighbours who share a similar recent history, with a high level of asymmetry within the Visegrád Group itself: the Czech Republic and Slovakia communicate with each other much more than with the other two V4 countries, for obvious historical and linguistic reasons; and Poland and Hungary communicate more with each other than with the two other members of the Group, particularly since 2015, due to a genuine ideological affinity and a feeling of shared adversity within the EU²¹. The V4 Group's difficulty in finding strong and stable alliances with the other Member States is exemplified by the attitude of the country which, in many ways, would seem to be their "natural" partner out of the pre-2004 EU-15, namely Austria. While the Austrian government may sometimes express similar positions or understanding towards the line taken by the Visegrád Group, particularly as regards the issue of migration, it nevertheless keeps its distance, positioning itself instead as an intermediary between the Franco-German tandem and the Central European V4.

There seems to be a growing awareness of this issue, particularly in Germany since the 2015 migration crisis and in France since 2017. Angela Merkel met the V4 Group leaders in Warsaw in August 2016 and more recently in Bratislava in February 2019. As regards France, Emmanuel Macron and the French Minister for Foreign Affairs have increased the number of visits to Central and Eastern Europe. Emmanuel Macron's speech in Krakow and that of Jean-Yves Le Drian²², to name but two particularly striking examples, are steps towards a more balanced, respectful and lucid relationship between France and the Vis-

egrád countries. Still, the line announced in these speeches must now be embodied in a real and long-lasting political agenda. The road ahead is not without its challenges, as the relationship between these countries and France is blighted by old traumas (Trianon, Munich) and recent missteps²³.

The Visegrád Group is also facing another significant challenge: adapting to the EU-27, while the United Kingdom appeared to be a natural ally on several key areas: a strong transatlantic position, advocacy of the interests of Member States which are not members of the Euro area, the refusal to step up social Europe, a preference for the inter-governmental approach, a counterbalance to the influence of the Franco-German tandem, etc. For the Eurosceptic forces in Central Europe, it was difficult to establish a position regarding Brexit: for ideological reasons, they tended to applaud Brexit, even though it was clearly running against the interest of their countries. Furthermore, the V4 countries, and Poland in particular, could only be discomfited by the importance of the rejection of free movement within the EU and by the rhetoric that stigmatised Central European immigration in British public debate... During the negotiations between the 27 and the UK, the V4 Group ultimately did not break from European unity. Yet, now that Brexit has occurred, how will the V4 countries adapt to the new order? While the observation in the *Brexit, Post-Brexit Europe and the V4. Potential Impacts, Interests, and Perceptions* report that "implementing V4 interests in post-Brexit EU will require much stronger efforts and highly skilled diplomacy" is difficult to contest, it is too early to estimate the probability of the two basic scenarios regarding the reaction of these countries. Will the V4 countries come closer together to have a greater influence within the EU-27? Or rather will the absence of their British ally encourage them

21. Cf. in particular the following articles published on the aforementioned project website: "Can Slovakia and the Czech Republic overcome Europe's east-west divide?" (Almut Möller & Milan Nič); *Czechs and balances: Can Berlin shake up the Visegrád group?* (Almut Möller); *Brothers in arms: Poland and Hungary seek to transform the EU.* (Josef Janning).

22. <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/05/president-emmanuel-macrons-speech-at-jaguellonne-university-krakow.en>; <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/our-ministers/jean-yves-le-drian/speeches/article/speech-by-mr-jean-yves-le-drian-minister-for-europe-and-foreign-affairs-at-the>

23. We can cite, for example, the criticism expressed by Nicolas Sarkozy regarding V4 Group meetings ahead of the European Council meetings (cf. <https://euobserver.com/news/28928>)

to forge new alliances that are likely to make nations turn their backs on some of their Visegrád partners? This question is raised in particular for Slovakia, member of the Euro area and a country which until now has insisted on its desire to be part of the EU's "hard core", an ambition that is either not shared or only to a minor extent by the three other countries.

7 ■ Beyond the Visegrád of governments...

After being broadly ignored, the word "Visegrád" earned itself a negative connotation among European decision-makers and journalists. This is understandable, given the various abuses that have occurred in the countries of the Group, each in its own way, regarding democratic vulnerabilities and populist temptations. However, the focus on the concept of the "Visegrád Group" is excessive, as the situations in the four countries are different and they are part of a post-crisis backdrop on a fully European scale. The Visegrád Group was not an empty concept before 2015 and has not become an "axis of evil" within the EU since. The best way for the other EU Member States and institutions to "manage the Visegrád Group" would be to take it as it is: one means among others of dealing with the countries in the Group, one tool among others for these countries to promote their interests within the EU or on the world stage. The Visegrád countries are part of other groupings within the EU: Poland in the "Weimar triangle", Slovakia in the Euro area, the Czech Republic and Slovakia form the "Austertlitz format" with Austria, etc. Therefore, the Visegrád Group is a reality that should not be underestimated or overestimated, that is relevant in particular to maintain stable relations of peaceful cooperation within a region that is traditionally highly sensitive, but which may also be

so regarding interactions with the rest of the EU or to inspire other regions - such as the Western Balkans or the EU's eastern neighbours.

Lastly, **it is also important to look beyond the purely intergovernmental vision of the Visegrád process. There are other dimensions: civil society, local democracy, academic circles, etc.**

Whether Viktor Orbán likes it or not, the Central European University is also an expression of the Visegrád spirit. Civil society, which was dear to the signatories in 1991, is also using this format for international cooperation. Thus, a coalition of associations working on energy and climate issues from the V4 countries and Austria established the "VISEGRAD+ for Renewable Energy"²⁴ platform in 2019. Another example is that on several occasions, the mayors of the capitals of the V4 countries - all from parties opposed to the governments in place - have taken a public position on issues related to immigration, the environment, transparency in public affairs and the fight against populism²⁵. In short, the ambition of Visegrád is also the development of a cultural, human and civic space which re-engages with the past realities of this "Mitteleuropa", that the upheavals of the 20th century have annihilated, but which remains a reference - that is often mythologised²⁶ - and a heritage that are both essential for understanding this region. After all, is it not the emergence of a Central European civil society going beyond national borders and continuing the drive launched by three former dissidents in Visegrád just thirty years ago that would be the best antidote to the nationalist and populist withdrawal that is currently not only undermining Central Europe, but European democracy on a scale of the entire continent? ■

24. http://e3g.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/docs/Memorandum_Visegrad_for_renewable_energy_PDF.pdf

25. With in particular the "Pact of Free Cities": cf. the article "How grassroots democracy can cure the ills of central Europe", signed by the mayors of Bratislava, Budapest, Prague and Warsaw, 16/12/2019, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_grassroots_democracy_can_cure_the_ills_of_central_europe/

26. Cf. Yaël Hirsch: "Nostalgie de la Mitteleuropa et engagement politique. Vies et destins de trois poètes déracinés : Else Lasker-Schüler, Benjamin Fondane, and Czeslaw Milosz" in *Raisons politiques*, 2011/1 (n° 41), pages 121 to 139, <https://www.cairn.info/revue-raisons-politiques-2011-1-page-121.htm> (in French)

■ Additional information

■ Cartes d'identité des pays de Visegrád Information on the Visegrád countries

HUNGARY	
Population (2020)	9,77 M
GDP/capita in PPS (EU-27=100, 2019)	73
Surface area	93 011 km ²
Number of MEPs	21
Capital	Budapest

POLAND	
Population (2020)	37,96 M
GDP/capita in PPS (EU-27=100, 2019)	73
Surface area	312 679 km ²
Number of MEPs	52
Capital	Warsaw (Warszawa)

CZECH REPUBLIC	
Population (2020)	10,69 M
GDP/capita in PPS (EU-27=100, 2019)	93
Surface area	78 868 km ²
Number of MEPs	21
Capital	Prague (Praha)

SLOVAKIA	
Population (2020)	
GDP/capita in PPS (EU-27=100, 2019)	70
Surface area	49 035 km ²
Number of MEPs	14
Capital	Bratislava

Source : Eurostat

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