

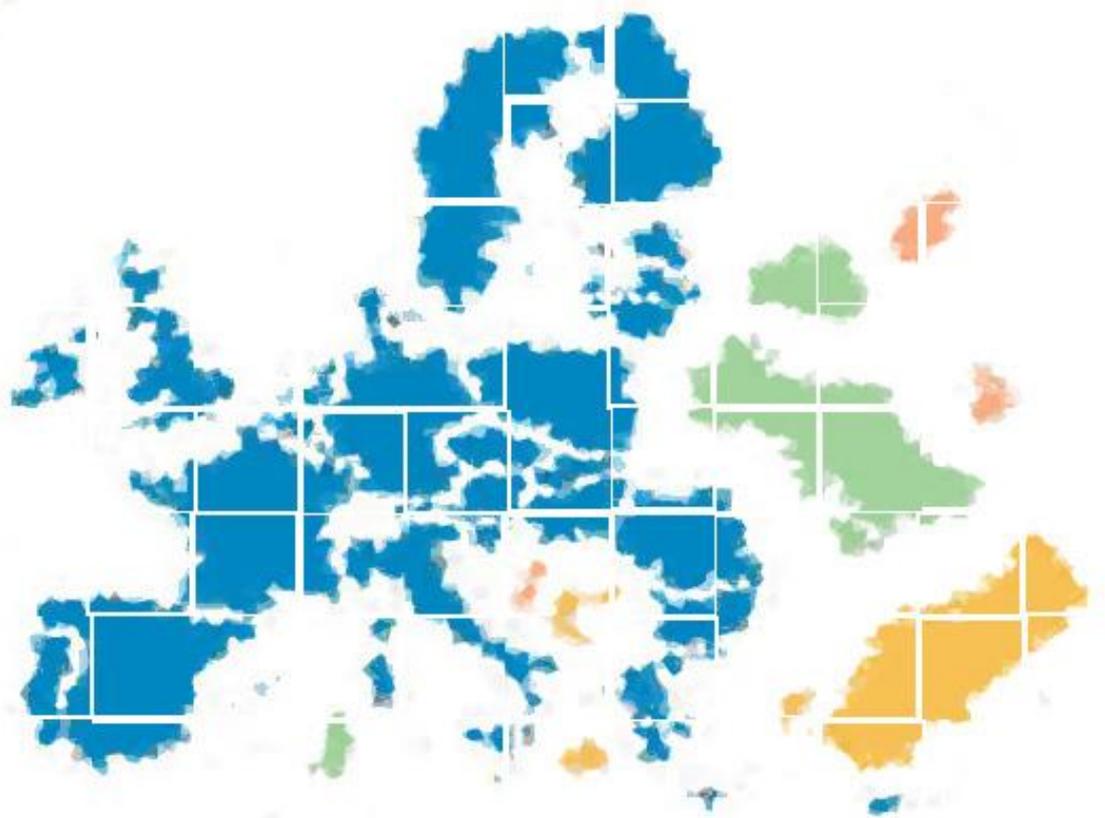
EU Frontiers

Policy Brief

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The Future of the EU beyond Rome: Views from the Visegrad Countries

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Center for European Neighborhood Studies

The Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) is an independent research center of the Central European University (CEU) located in Budapest, Hungary. Its main goal is to contribute to an informed international dialogue about the future of the European Union in the world, while capitalizing on its Central European perspective and regional embeddedness.

The strategic focus of the center is academic and policy-oriented research on the place and role of the European Union in its rapidly changing and increasingly volatile neighborhood. Through its research, CENS seeks to contribute to the understanding of the environment where the EU, its member states and partners need to (co)operate, and it aims at supporting the constructive development of these relations by providing opportunities for discussion and exchange. The center's geographic focus areas are Central and Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and Turkey, Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus and Russia.

EU Frontiers

The 'EU Frontiers' publication series aims to provide an account of actors and developments along the enlargement frontiers of Europe. It fills an academic gap by monitoring and analyzing EU related policies of the broad Central – and Eastern European region, studying the past and evaluating the prospects of the future. Furthermore, it follows and gives regular account of the EU Enlargement process both from an inside and an applicant perspective.



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The View from Hungary

by Péter Balázs

Hungary's relationship to the EU was not modified after the publication of the White Book about the future of European integration. The various scenarios did not impress the government in Budapest which has already been on a particular track of continuous confrontations with the EU.

The EU as the “public enemy” of Hungary

A fundamental anti-EU turn began in Hungary with the government change by 2010 when the Fidesz party took the power after a landslide victory and obtained two-third majority in Parliament. Prime Minister Viktor Orbán returned to government after eight bitter years in opposition. Equipped with the lessons of his first reign (1998-2002) and the unexpected failure at the end, he had a strategic plan to transform the political system assuring for him long continuity. “We will bind the hands not only of the next, but of the next ten governments” – he said. In a first approach, this strategic aim was not directly targeted against the EU as an organisation; however, its general direction was basically opposed to the set of norms and values codified and represented by it. The two-third majority opened the way to fundamental changes in the legislation including a new constitution as well.

This political turn coincided in time with the first ever Hungarian Presidency of the EU Council in the first half of 2011. In his introductory speech at the European Parliament in January 2011 PM Orbán was not asked about the programme of the Hungarian Presidency but the fresh media law of Hungary adopted on Christmas Eve of 2010. This was indeed the first legal act under the new political rule in Budapest deviating from the norms of the Trans-Atlantic community.

The Hungarian EU Presidency proceeded under a controversial, two-face guidance. On the one hand, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government bodies deployed serious efforts in order to achieve important goals. The “six pack” legislation stabilising the Eurozone, the EU accession of Croatia, the EU's Danube Strategy as well as the Roma Strategy witness the successful coordination between and among the member states and the EU institutions done by devoted Hungarian experts during the Presidency. In parallel with those achievements, Mr. Orbán launched his first attacks against various actions of the EU and, more and more, against the whole European construction and its leaders. He questioned the efficiency of the Union, expressed his deep doubts concerning its legitimacy, assaulted its “non-elected” leaders, focusing mainly on the European Commission etc. In his public speeches he compared frequently “Brussels” to “Moscow” tracing parallel lines between the European Union and the Soviet Union.

Political and institutional turn by 2014

In the legislative period of 2010-2014 the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs acted as a counter-balancing force against the fierce anti-EU attacks of the Prime Minister and some of his party friends. However, after the next victory of Fidesz at the 2014 parliamentary elections, Orbán dismissed the whole leadership of the MFA, renamed the institution into “Ministry of External Economic Relations and foreign Affairs”¹ and nominated his former spokesperson, Péter Szijjártó as Minister. EU affairs were transferred to the Prime Minister’s Office under the supervision of Minister János Lázár with special regard to the centralised control of the spending of EU funds. After 2014, the anti-EU campaign has become the shared priority of both, the Prime Minister and the Ministry dealing with foreign relations with a new name, in a new set-up and under a new leadership.

As a response to the emergence of the unprecedented refugee wave by 2015 Mr. Orbán launched a strong xenophobic attack against the migrants originating from overseas countries and immediately attached it to his anti-EU campaign. He claimed that the Union is following an “erroneous and inefficient” refugee policy. Having erected a fence on the 175 km long Hungarian-Serbian border, he pretended that his government is “defending Europe”, whereas the physical obstacle, as well as the anti-humanistic treatment of the few migrants which could enter to Hungarian soil, had only some marginal diverting effect on the large flow of migration tending towards Germany. The combined anti-EU and anti-migration discourse was used for a referendum in Hungary initiated by the government in October 2016. In the background, a huge and expensive advertisement campaign was launched as well as a direct mail called “national consultation”. Whole Hungary was invaded by oversized billboards calling the population to “Stop Brussels” – whatever the meaning of this foggy message was.

In 2017 a third key element has been added to the above campaign: focusing on the person of George Soros, the well-known American businessman of Hungarian origin supporting the idea of “open society” and helping NGOs promoting this objective. The Central European University of Budapest, founded by Mr. Soros, was also put into the crosshairs of government attacks. A conspiracy theory, according to the taste of extreme right forces in Hungary and in Europe, pretended that Soros and the EU organise jointly the mass immigration of people of Islam culture in order to change the traditions of European civilisation and put an end to the existence of nations and Christianity in Europe. This nightmare of propaganda is serving as a basis for the election campaign of Fidesz led by Orbán to the polls by April 2018.

¹ This is the exact translation of the Hungarian name of the Ministry; however, in foreign languages a reversed order is in official use: „Ministry of Foreign Affairs and External Economic Relations”.

Divided Visegrad position

The anti-EU drive calculates with the traditional national feelings of the Hungarian population protesting against various foreign dominations in the past. Xenophobia, which is targeting this time migrants from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan etc., finds its origins in the isolated, land-locked position of the country having no experience or memories about people of different cultures. The anti-Soros element hides anti-Semitic intentions which have historical traditions in the Central and East European region, too. What is somewhat surprising is the context, the bold combination of those three different components under one cover and within one single political strategy. The internal motivation of the action is dual: to disguise bad governance of several issues in the last seven years (health care, education, poverty, the Roma problem, the inefficient use of EU funds, corruption etc.) on the one hand, and to acquire votes from the extreme right. The international dimension was based on strong expectations of Orbán calculating with the political offensive of extreme right political parties in West European EU members (France, the Netherlands, Germany etc.). However, those latter prospects failed one after the other.

The Fidesz government of Hungary hoped support from the other Visegrad countries, too. As to the xenophobic aspects, such expectations were not unfounded. Even if the migration flow peaking in 2015 avoided this region (a strong transit occurred only in Hungary), the Slovak election campaign in 2016, as well as other political actions in the Czech Republic and Poland made use of anti-immigration slogans. Hungary took over the rotating presidency of the Visegrad group in July 2017 and attempted to use this position for gaining more support within the EU to build a coalition against the main line of EU institutions supported by core member states. This try did not earn much result either as even the Visegrad group proved to be divided. Only the PiS government of Poland shares the “illiberal” position of Orbán questioning and also ruining the rule of European law in harmony with EU membership obligations. Slovakia joined the process launched by Hungary at the European Court of Justice against the resettlement of refugees by quotas, but after the refusal of the claim by the Court retreated and accepted a symbolic solution (receiving a few refugees). By the end of the year 2017 Hungary and Poland are the only two EU member states provoking the rule of law standards of the organisation and challenging the application of Article 7. TEU.

The attraction of closer integration suggested by the White Book and based on the Eurozone including the large centre of the EU has consequences on the internal cohesion of the Visegrad group. After the publication of the White Book Slovakia has repeatedly emphasized that by having joined the euro the country already belongs to the EU’s “hard core”. The Czech government would consider the euro accession as well, but the political future of the country depends on the outcome of the next parliamentary elections by October 2017. Hungary and Poland constitute another pole refusing, for the

time being, the euro and proceeding systematically to the demolition of the European construction of the rule of law.

The “Hungarian scenario”

The White Book of the European Commission appeared in Hungary with the above background, in the middle of a strong anti-EU campaign. The few open reactions of the government show sympathy mainly with the second scenario with some completion. The Hungarian position can be summarised in three points. First, the Fidesz government would welcome the trimming of EU competences and the strengthening of inter-governmental cooperation within the EU framework. Second, re-nationalisation of integrated activities should not involve the actual transfer of funds in the framework of the EU budget (e.g. agricultural subsidies); the support of member states below the average EU development level should not diminish. Third, “multi-speed” has been refused by Hungary as differentiated integration would endanger the unity of the EU; rights and obligations should remain homogenous. The next parliamentary elections in April 2018 will constitute another milestone on the way of European integration of Hungary.

The View from the Czech Republic

by Vladimír Bartovic

The Bratislava process that culminated with the Rome Summit this March did not attract much political attention in the Czech Republic. Only one political party (Civic Democrats-ODS) had the ambition to present a position regarding ongoing debates about the future of the Union. This lack of attention can be seen both positively as the domestic political debate on European issues usually lacks rationality and anti-European forces are most likely to be heard, and negatively because of the void of proper debates about the Czech role in future EU orientations.

EU policy in the Czech election campaign

The Czech legislative elections scheduled for October 2017 will determine the Czech view on the future of the EU and the position of the country in it. Opinions of the relevant political parties in the country are very polarized in this respect. The above-mentioned Civic Democratic Party that used to be dominant political force between 2006 and 2013 nowadays presents Eurosceptic positions. Their European manifesto calls for flexible integration (except for the internal market) that doesn't have to lead to the same goal. The party would like to prevent further integration and start the process of returning competences to member states. The Social-Democrats (CSSD), Christian-Democrats (KDU-CSL) and Conservatives (TOP 09) are the only truly pro-European parties supporting the continuation of European integration and see the place of the Czech Republic in the integration core of the Union. ANO 2011, the movement likely to win the elections this fall is nominally pro-European as well, although the position its leader, Andrej Babis, on the future of the EU remains unclear. The other influential political parties in the country are anti-European (the Communists and smaller anti-immigration parties).

Given the above-mentioned fragmentation and the lack of political debate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Office of the Government are crucial in the definition of the Czech views on the future of the EU. These institutions follow the programmatic document of the government and its European strategy that acknowledge the need to support further integration and to ensure the place of the country in the integration core of Europe.

Czech position on the Bratislava Process and the White Paper

In the preparatory phase of the Bratislava summit, the Czech Republic stressed two issues: security and prosperity. Prague made it clear that it sees a role for the EU in fighting against terrorism, securing its external borders and developing its defence policy. The EU should also focus on securing the prosperity and economic growth that will secure the welfare of its citizens, through further development of the internal market, the creation of the

digital and energy unions, an active commercial policy and a stable Economic and Monetary Union. Another identified priority for the EU also is to restart the economic and social convergence of its member states.

Prague follows the mainstream European line by affirming that the EU should do everything in its power to preserve its unity and prevent further disintegration. While it doesn't support substantial changes to the legal and institutional structure of the EU (i.e. no treaty changes), it acknowledges that multi-speed Europe is a possible path to enable further integration while preserving the bloc's unity. The Czech government thinks that the politicization of the European Commission has been a mistake and that the Commission should return to its primary role of guardian of the treaties and honest broker between the member states, with the European Council strategically leading the Union.

The Czech Republic gave a lukewarm welcome to the Commission's White Paper on the future of the EU. In its opinion, none of the presented scenarios represent a comprehensive course of action for further EU development. The government completely refuses return to free market and acknowledges that further integration in EU-27 format in all the policy areas is not realistic. Still, the country's strategic priority is cooperation in EU-27 format. According to the government, regardless of the differentiated integration, all the EU member states should proceed in the same direction and share the same goals. Multi-speed Europe should serve the overall goal of achieving a secure, prosperous, cohesive and efficient Union, while being transparent and inclusive in order to avoid negative influence on non-participating member states. The government supports all the initiatives contained in the Bratislava process. Among external dimension of security policy and defence, it is the further development of the internal market and commercial policy.

Czech EU policy in the Visegrad Group

At the moment, the government doesn't feel comfortable within the Visegrad Four format since it doesn't share similar opinions with Poland and Hungary on many elements of the future development of the EU. Until recently it has also tried to show more balanced approach to the relocation quota persuaded by the European Commission than these two countries. Most probably in the light of the upcoming elections (and the very anti-immigration public opinion), the government has changed its position and together with Poland and Hungary refuses to relocate refugees from Greece and Italy.

The country is also concerned with the current developments in Poland and Hungary. The attempts of the Polish government to interfere into independence of the judicial system and Hungarian attacks against the Central European University and NGOs are perceived very negatively. Still the government or its representatives refrain from public comments as they do not want to criticize openly their Visegrad partners. Czech government representatives and diplomats tries to demonstrate that the Czech Republic

is a different case than Poland and Hungary and that the Visegrad cooperation is not anymore so prominent for the country when talking to the EU or important member states' representatives.

On the other hand, the government still regards the Visegrad as a useful format for the debate and promotion of the joint initiatives, including the most recent initiative of the V4 countries on European double standards in food quality.

The View from Slovakia

by Vladimír Bilčík

Slovakia is historically a good pupil of European integration. It joined the EU in 2004, adopted the euro in 2009 and to date remains the only Visegrad country in the Eurozone. Every Slovak government since 1998 has supported the country's full-fledged place in the European Union. Since its accession into the EU Slovakia gradually earned the trust of both EU institutions and other member states for its largely consensual performance in the EU throughout the first years of membership.²

It is important to remember this history against the backdrop of Slovakia's reactions to recent EU crises. Slovakia's refusal to give a bilateral loan to Greece, the breakdown of its government over an extension of an EU bailout fund in 2012 as well as its fight against quotas for relocation of refugees from Italy and Greece in 2015 somewhat tarnished the country's European image. Yet, the previously acquired political and administrative capital of a predictable and largely reliable player in Brussels has not disappeared.

Slovak EU Council Presidency³

A living proof of this is Slovakia's practical conduct of its EU Council Presidency in the latter half of 2016 that helped both define the wider boundaries of the current round on the future of Europe debate and Slovakia's own contribution to this debate. The UK's referendum on EU membership defined the political backdrop for Slovakia's Council Presidency⁴ and ongoing discussions on the EU's future.

Although many feared a possible Brexit, the UK's decision to leave the EU did not derail Slovakia's original plans for the Council Presidency. On the contrary, it added political momentum to the Council Presidency's agenda. Brexit did not affect the Council business in the latter half of 2016. Rather the UK turned out to be a constructive partner prior to the triggering of Article 50 negotiations in March 2017. As a result, Slovakia had been able to lead the last full-fledged Council business for the European Union of 28 member states before the Maltese Council Presidency in 2017 started to face London on the opposite side of the negotiating table on the terms of a British exit.

Moreover, Slovakia enjoyed a good deal of comparative luck in the latter half of 2016. Member states in Brussels managed to separate the issue of Brexit

² For more on Slovakia and post-communist Member States see Malová, D. et al. (2010) *From Listening to Action? New Member States in the European Union*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenského. Available at: <http://www.politologiauk.sk/publikacie/2016/1/2/malov-d-ed-from-listening-to-action-new-member-states-in-the-european-union>.

³ This section draws on the author's following contribution: Bilčík, V. (2017) 'The Slovak EU Council Presidency: In Defence of post-Brexit EU' *Journal of Common Market Studies Annual Review*, Vol. 55, Issue S1, pp. 64-72. (Available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcms.12619/abstract>)

⁴ *EurActiv.sk*, 21 June 2016.

from the regular Council agenda. Officials in Brussels⁵ underscored the practical attitude adopted by British diplomats in the EU. In short, the Council Presidency operated under business as usual with the UK on board.⁶ Two examples stand out. The UK helped to approve the EU budget for 2017 by December 2016. Compared to the year 2016, the EU budget for 2017 reflects the current political priorities of the EU with an increase of resources to tackle the migration crisis and foster the security of citizens (by 11 per cent) and to support economic growth and employment (by 12 per cent).⁷ London also helped approve a new agreement on the extension of the European Fund for Strategic Investments (EFSI) that also opens a new line of financing for defence projects.

Launch of the EU debate in Bratislava

While the UK decision to leave tabled a hitherto unimagined possibility of a potential EU breakup, the new constellation of European politics helped in fact raise the profile of the Council Presidency. It returned the European Council meeting - albeit incomplete and informal - back to a member state's capital – Bratislava in 2016 - for the first time since the exclusive institutionalisation of EU summits in Brussels. It thus gave a European role to the country's Prime Minister and involved the Council Presidency more in some of the EU's strategic agenda. Slovakia was thus directly involved in the launch of the current debate on the future of the EU.

An informal meeting of EU leaders had been proposed prior to the UK referendum in June 2016.⁸ The UK decision to leave the EU, however, brought almost an existential dynamic to the planning of the summit in Bratislava. While the legislative work in the Council under Slovakia's managerial leadership continued to operate with 28 member states on board, the European Council effectively organized its first post-Brexit meeting in Bratislava on 16 September 2016. In the run-up to the summit, Slovakia's Council Presidency began to meet in Brussels in working diplomatic formations of EU-27 to discuss strategic issues of linked to the EU's future.

The leaders of 27 member states adopted common conclusions and a common plan. They agreed that the strategic goal of the Union's survival must combine the preservation of Europe's achievements and at the same time define a new and widely shared *raison d'être* for the future EU. They signed a joint Bratislava Declaration and a more specific Bratislava Roadmap⁹ to

⁵ Based on direct interviews with several diplomatic figures executing various aspects of Slovakia's EU Council Presidency in the autumn of 2016.

⁶ Bilčík, V. (2017b) 'Council Presidency and Brexit: from unexpected calm to likely storm'. Think Visegrad Policy Brief, 1/2017. Available at https://think.visegradfund.org/wpcontent/uploads/TVPB2_Bilc%CC%8Ci%CC%81k.pdf.

⁷ Report on the Presidency by the Government of Slovakia published on 8 March 2017. Available at <http://www.rokovania.sk/Rokovanie.aspx/BodRokovaniaDetail?idMaterial=26300>.

⁸ *TASR*, NewsNow, 28 June 2016.

⁹ See for details <http://www.eu2016.sk/en/press-releases/bratislava-summit-outcome-bratislava-declaration-and-roadmap>

which some insiders of EU institutions began to refer as the Bratislava bible covering EU steps in the fields of migration, both internal and external security and economic development. The summit's proceedings showed a fairly strong common European stance despite immediate and open criticism from the Italian and Hungarian Prime Ministers.¹⁰ The so-called Bratislava process thus created a plan in the run up to the 60th anniversary of signing the Treaty of Rome and beyond.

Slovakia in the EU's core

The Slovak role during the Council Presidency bears an important imprint on the way that Slovakia has framed its contribution to the future of Europe debate. Since early 2017 Prime Minister Fico has expressed his support for Slovakia's place in the core of the EU. He also called upon Slovakia's political forces to unite around the goal of keeping Slovakia's place in the EU's core.¹¹ Fico welcomed Emmanuel Macron's victory in France's presidential elections. He is also set to cooperate in EU affairs with Germany through a newly established bilateral structured dialogue.¹² Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico and Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka met in Berlin to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Czecho-Slovak-German treaty on good neighborly relations in April 2017. Together with the German Chancellor they underscored the need to work together in the EU and to reinforce the European project.¹³

Slovakia's goal to remain in the core of the EU is yet to be flashed out in terms of any specific meaning. Most tangibly, the core already ties to Slovakia's successful membership in the Eurozone. The debate on further steps entails specific contribution to additional building blocks of the fiscal and banking union. Slovakia indicated some of its preferences already during its Council Presidency. According to Slovak State Secretary of Finance the country backs the establishment of the 'European unemployment insurance scheme' and is not opposed to a fiscal stimulus for the Eurozone.¹⁴

The debate on the EU's future is still likely to entail a whole range of policy areas and the country's ability to participate fully and effectively in the EU's project as such. This means tackling also divisive issues with Germany and France, such as the future of Schengen and especially social policy and labor

¹⁰ *EurActiv.com*, 19 September 2016.

¹¹ See PM Fico's commentary available at: <http://komentare.hnonline.sk/dnes-pise/961041-je-cas-odlozit-kavu>

¹² See details on a bilateral memorandum signed in August 2017, available at: https://www.mzv.sk/web/en/news/detail/-/asset_publisher/oLViwP07vPxv/content/m-lajcak-podpisal-memorandum-o-systemovej-medzistatnej-spolupraci-medzi-slovenskom-a-nemeckom/10182?p_p_auth=L0C08LSJ.

¹³ See the transcript from the joint press conference available at <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Mitschrift/Pressekonferenzen/2017/04/2017-04-03-pk-merkel-fico-sobotka.html>.

¹⁴ See Interview with Ivan Lesay available at: <http://www.euractiv.com/section/euro-finance/interview/slovak-deputy-minister-an-european-unemployment-scheme-is-important/>

migration within the Single Market. It also means intensive domestic work on innovation and smart investment that will lower the existing income differentials between older and new EU member states. It also means Slovakia's ability to take part in defense and security cooperation which is in a diaper stage but has moved with new opportunities for defense projects funded through EU sources as well as through the gradual implementation of the EU Global Strategy.¹⁵

Hence, the ambition to remain a player in the EU's core implies wide and sustainable EU and domestic political commitment. This is an important challenge. With the exception of the Neo-Nazis in Slovak parliament that score some 10 percent in public opinion polls, all other political parties support Slovakia's EU membership. However, there are forces that question the very existence of the EU core and thus Slovakia's place in it. The largest opposition party Freedom and Solidarity (SaS) launched its manifest of Slovak Eurorealism¹⁶ in 2017, in which it expressed criticism of the current EU. While the SaS claims to support continued membership of Slovakia in the EU, it proposes a return of several competencies to member states and other far-reaching changes in the EU that are virtually impossible to implement.

Central Europe and the Union¹⁷

Moreover, the current round of debate on the EU's future poses a challenge to Central Europe and its ability to agree on a basic common vision for the EU and the region's place in it. During the Slovak Presidency in the Council the Visegrad cooperation did not operate in Brussels. Slovakia's role in the latter half of 2016 was to serve the EU as an honest broker on a range of political and legislative questions and not to translate regional preferences to the EU level. During discussions about EU migration and asylum policies, for instance, Slovakia's Council Presidency was under pressure from both Italy, keen on more EU solidarity, and other V4 countries that held on to a strict position against the obligatory relocation mechanisms of asylum seekers across the EU.

Another question about the Visegrad cooperation concerns the degree of V4 connection and common stance vis-à-vis the EU after Brexit. This remains an open issue both structurally with Slovakia being in the Eurozone and the Czech Republic closely integrated with German economy and politically especially with some distinctly limiting positions about the EU articulated by current Hungarian and Polish governments.

In discussions about EU migration and asylum policies, Slovakia as a presiding country in 2016 was under pressure from both Italy keen on more

¹⁵ In May 2017 the Slovak parliament adopted a memorandum to increase defense spending to 1.6 percent of its GDP by 2020.

¹⁶ The document is available at: <http://www.strana-sas.sk/manifest-eu>

¹⁷ This section draws on Bilčík 2017b.

EU solidarity and other V4 countries that held on to a strict position against so called quotas on redistribution of asylum seekers across the EU. During the Council presidency Slovakia heavily revised V4's initial political position on flexible solidarity with countries affected strongly by migration to a possibly more inclusive EU proposal for effective solidarity.¹⁸ Yet, despite efforts to have a calmer discussion in the Council, Slovakia's Presidency did not manage to move the Union closer to a wider agreement on how to handle migration.

The EU is now at a point of collective brainstorming when it comes to migration, security, defense and Europe's future at large. In this context common V4 positions are selective and while sometimes the V4 exert a strong political voice, often there is little cooperation inside COREPER on a range of issues. Particular national interests and needs dominate day-to-day agenda not just in migration but also in climate, energy, budgetary or foreign policy issues.

As the Slovak EU Council Presidency helped to solidify the Union in a number of areas prior to actual dealings with Brexit negotiations, the Visegrad group now faces its own task to formulate a collective *raison d'être* with respect to post-Brexit EU. For Slovakia's firm place in the EU this means some hard work with respect to its neighbors and other European allies. The country's choice to be in integral part of a reinforced EU and Eurozone is, however, at the moment crystal clear.

¹⁸ <https://euobserver.com/eu-presidency/135981>

The View from Poland

by Łukasz A. Janulewicz

Poland's role as a member of the European Union has transformed dramatically over last two years. Previously hailed internationally as a success story of European integration and the country that resisted the European crisis,¹⁹ controversial reforms introduced after the recent change of government have returned Poland to the headlines as a trouble-maker.²⁰ Based on their previous stint in power between 2005 and 2007, the Law and Justice party that won the 2015 elections was expected to take a less cooperative line on EU affairs than their predecessors. A series of controversial reforms to the country's judiciary, particularly the constitutional court, and to public media sparked the ongoing probe into rule of law against Poland by the European Commission.

The Brexit referendum that set off the process of reflection on future EU took place just days before Warsaw took over the rotating Presidency of the Visegrad Group. Thus, it was not surprising that the Polish government strongly tied its involvement in this Bratislava process to Visegrad cooperation.

Poland in the run-up to Bratislava and Rome

The tone for the Polish position on future EU reform was set the day after the Brexit referendum by Law and Justice leader Jarosław Kaczyński. The focus lay firmly on institutional reforms:²¹ more unanimity voting, more control by the member states over the European Commission, a stronger role for national parliaments in EU decision making and strengthening the principle of subsidiarity. Furthermore, he called for changes to the EU treaties required to introduce such far-reaching reforms.

During a joint appearance at the Krynica Economic Forum, Kaczyński and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán conversed about a 'cultural counter-revolution' against Brussels.²² The spirit of Kaczyński's institutional musings was present in V4 statements on EU reform. Particularly a stronger role for national parliaments in EU decision-making featured prominently.²³ However, Polish announcements of developing these statements into specific reform proposals for the Bratislava summit and later for the Rome Summit failed to materialize. The Visegrad group published joint position papers for

¹⁹ For a particularly enthusiastic endorsement see the 2014 Economist report announcing 'Poland's new golden age' <https://www.economist.com/news/special-report/21604684-first-time-half-millennium-poland-thriving-says-vendeline-von-bredow>

²⁰ See for example <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/16/eu-takes-poland-to-the-woodshed-over-rule-of-law/>

²¹ <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/nach-dem-brexit-referendum-osteuropaer-gegen-uebereilte-integration-der-eu/13796162.html>

²² <https://www.ft.com/content/e825f7f4-74a3-11e6-bf48-b372cdb1043a>

²³ <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-the-160629>

both summits that did not move beyond the repetition of general principles.²⁴ Despite rhetoric about the V4 speaking with one voice, Poland and Hungary's more confrontational approach towards Brussels was not embraced by the Czech and Slovak governments.²⁵ While indeed capable of amplifying the voices of the four countries if they already agree, as in the case of refugee relocation, the V4 format quickly reaches its limits if the governments have divergent views.

A key problem for Poland's EU policy is its defensive and negative agenda. The focus on institutional changes by the Law and Justice government was reminiscent of this party's previous term in office, between 2005 and 2007. Back then, the focal points were the Ioannina compromise and the square root formula for voting rights.²⁶ Today, Warsaw's main concern appears to be preventing undesired EU initiatives, not concrete policy proposals for EU action despite highlighting the single market and security as areas of interest.

Additionally, the abovementioned conflict with the Commission, European Parliament and increasingly other EU capitals has overshadowed Poland's engagement with the Bratislava process. In a move that caused consternation in other EU capitals, including Poland's Visegrad partners, the Law and Justice government embarked on an ill-conceived and ill-executed attempt to prevent the re-election of Donald Tusk as President of the European Council.²⁷ One should not overstate the significance of this event for Polish EU policy in general, due to the specific nature of Kaczynski's personal vendetta against Tusk, but this episode has certainly not helped to establish Poland as a predictable and constructive partner for other EU capitals.

Rome and beyond: finding a constructive role

After the Rome summit, Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo stated that specific actions are now necessary.²⁸ The Polish government would do well in taking the initiative itself and try to develop a positive and constructive agenda. The V4 statements and the Rome Declaration emphasized issues like the single market, internal security and defense. It would be key for Poland to develop specific proposals in these areas to participate actively in the debates on the future shape of the European Union. If it instead keeps focusing on veto powers it might strengthen the process it wants to prevent so strongly: the emergence of 'Kerneuropa'.

De facto, multi-speed Europe has been a reality for decades. Attempts to block or otherwise undermine further integration by willing EU partners

²⁴ <http://visegradinsight.eu/all-quiet-on-the-eastern-front/>

²⁵ <http://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-czech-republic-slovakia-visegrads-illusory-union-bratislava-summit-eu-migration-orban-fico-sobotka-szydlo/>

²⁶ <https://euobserver.com/institutional/23808>

²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/09/donald-tusk-re-elected-as-european-council-president-despite-polish-opposition>

²⁸ <http://www.pap.pl/en/news/news,875433.eu-needs-change---polish-pm-at-rome-summit.html>

further alienate EU and even V4 partners. The sensitivities of Poland and the Visegrad countries regarding the inclusion of outsiders in differentiated could instead form the basis for developing a constructive *modus operandi* that enables ‘coalitions of the willing’ to move ahead, while safeguarding the interests and involvement of those (yet) unwilling. The model of the V4 as a fortress against Brussels might have worked temporarily in the context of refugee relocation but has already proven not to be a viable option in the long-run. Instead, it risks cementing turning multi-speed into two speed Europe.

The key role of the Eurozone for the wider European economy means that remaining on the periphery risks long term marginalization. On the other hand, Polish public opinion is very hesitant towards adopting the Euro and the government has no plans to move in this direction. Poland’s EU minister Konrad Szymanski stated that Poland does not plan to join until the Eurozone has fixed its problems.²⁹ However, it remains unclear how the Polish government would like the Eurozone to be fixed in order to feel inclined to join. Even more problematic, from a Polish perspective, is that the key solutions for fixing the Euro discussed within the Eurozone seem to include further integration. Staying outside could thus lead to exactly the ‘Kerneuropa’ scenario, which the Polish government wants to avoid. Furthermore, not being at the table when the Euro is fixed, Poland risks being left out of the decision-making processes and thus will have no say on the shape of the fixed Eurozone it might subsequently join. This does not necessarily mean joining the Euro in the short term, but requires an open and constructive engagement with EU partners to safeguard the interests of future Euro members, like Poland, in the further development of the Eurozone.

Looking ahead: Paths and pitfalls

The Bratislava process, despite the multitude of V4 summits, meetings and statements, demonstrated the limitations of the Visegrad format. It has substantial potential to amplify the voice of its members, but depends on coinciding national interests. It is not a forum to persuade the other partners towards another viewpoint. The attempt to unseat Donald Tusk was an extreme example, but demonstrated that even Kaczyński’s fellow ‘counter-revolutionary’ Orbán cannot always be counted upon to take on the rest of the EU. The Czech and Slovak governments have long sought to maintain good ties with other European partners and were concerned about the reputational outfall of too close an association with Poland and Hungary being on the warpath with Brussels.³⁰ Nevertheless, for Poland, the V4 remain important and should be cultivated in the post-Rome process. It is well established with good informal networks between the four government administrations.

²⁹ <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cee-summit-poland-szymanski-idUSKBN18M1ZA>

³⁰ <http://www.politico.eu/article/poland-hungary-czech-republic-slovakia-visegrads-illusory-union-bratislava-summit-eu-migration-orban-fico-sobotka-szydlo/>

However, where Poland's Visegrad partners have different preferences, other formats should be equally employed.

It remains to be seen how the dispute over domestic reforms will affect Poland's potential to find partners among other EU capitals. While voicing increasingly strong concern and criticism, member states have refrained from direct action and it still seems possible that they will take a pragmatic approach and remain open to work with Poland on other issues, unless the Polish government further escalates its conflicts with the Commission and the ECJ.

However, Poland's stance on refugee relocation highlights the risk of alienating EU partners in the long run. Calls like those by from Finland about tying structural and cohesion fund payments to the acceptance of refugees³¹ highlight the risk of 'revenge served cold' if Poland were to spearhead initiatives in the future or at the next negotiations over the EU budget.

On paper, the Weimar Triangle seems to pose a highly desirable format bringing Poland closer to Germany and France. The format has rarely produced substantial policy outputs, however, and the ongoing tensions between Warsaw and Paris undermines the prospects revival of this format for substantial work on EU reform. President Macron's visit to Central Europe, which omitted Poland and Hungary³² is another cautionary signal of emerging of pushback from EU member states.

Despite interest in tightening EU defense cooperation, it remains that Polish military matters are primarily associated with NATO, or in other words the United States. The potential pitfalls for EU defense cooperation were highlighted by the tender for new Polish army helicopters. Warsaw cancelled a previous deal with Eurocopter in favor of US manufacturers, enraging the French government.³³ Within the EU, the strategic outlook and threat perception make the Baltic and Scandinavian states as well as Romania more likely partners in this field than the V4, despite past experiences with the joint EU Battlegroup.

It should not be forgotten that openness is a key ingredient to the success of V4 proposals in the EU. Despite all the operational weaknesses of the Eastern Partnership, it was crucial for the success of the proposal to bring on board Sweden and launch it as a Polish –Swedish initiative. The V4+ format that involves other partners in an ad hoc fashion could serve as a welcome cover for the Polish government if the rule of law dispute emerges as a problem in obtaining bilateral support for policy initiatives. That is, if proposals were to be congruent with the interests of other Visegrad partners

³¹ <https://www.euractiv.com/section/elections/news/finland-make-eu-funding-conditional-for-members-turning-away-refugees/>

³² <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-centraleurope-idUSKCN1B20ID>

³³ <http://www.thenews.pl/1/10/Artykul/274488,French-president-postpones-visit-to-Poland-amid-strained-relations>

and if they were willing to provide such cover. It would also serve to improve the image of the V4 format towards a constructive partner in EU affairs and prevent it from becoming synonymous with obstruction and nay-saying.

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