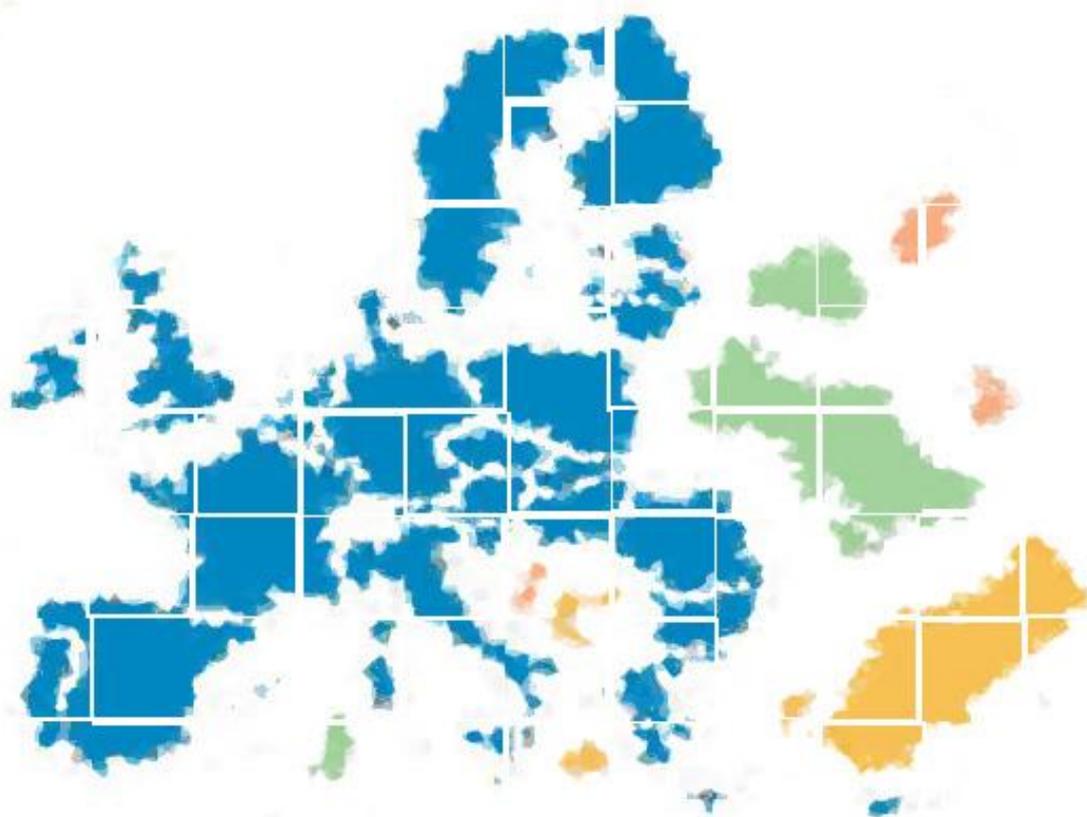


After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

Edited by Łukasz A. Janulewicz



November 2017

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.



This report has been produced with the kind support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Budapest. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors.

About the authors

Dániel Hegedűs is research consultant in the Nations in Transit program of Freedom House and visiting lecturer at the Humboldt University to Berlin. He has studied political science and history at the Eötvös Loránd University Budapest as well as European law at the Humboldt University in Berlin. In the past he has worked in different research, lecturer and project management positions at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP), at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), at the Free University of Berlin and the Eötvös Loránd University. He is author of more than forty academic and policy papers, and frequently comments on current events of European politics in German, Hungarian and English.

Łukasz A. Janulwicz is a Research Fellow at the Center for European Neighborhood Studies (CENS) at Central European University in Budapest. His research focusses on Visegrad cooperation, the foreign and development policies of the Visegrad countries, particularly of Poland, and these countries role in and relations towards the European Union. Łukasz is also interested in Polish-German relations. Previously, he taught European integration at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Kent. He researched Poland's foreign aid programme at the University of Warsaw and worked on European and Federal Affairs as a Parliamentary Researcher at the Landtag on Bavaria. He holds a M.A. from the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich and a PhD from the University of Kent.

Tomáš Strážay works as a Senior Fellow and Head of the Central and Southeastern Europe Research Program at the Slovak Foreign Policy Association (SFPA), Bratislava, Slovakia. He is a leading expert in the projects focusing on regional cooperation in Central Europe and EU enlargement. Since 2007 he has cooperated with the European Economic and Social Committee, Committee of the Regions and European Parliament as an expert advisor to the rapporteurs/author of briefing notes. He is one of the founders of the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform and editor of the International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs quarterly. Tomáš Strážay graduated from the Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, Bratislava in 1999 and received his PhD. from the Institute of Political Studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, Poland in 2010

The View from Hungary

by Dániel Hegedűs

Key structural determinants

European and international reactions to democratic backsliding in Hungary and the outburst of the European refugee crisis in 2015 altered the fundamental patterns of Hungarian foreign policy significantly. Hungarian foreign policy resembles in many respects the foreign policy priorities of authoritarian rouge states. Its key aspects embrace (1) avoiding possible international sanctions threatening the country due to its ever worsening democratic and rule of law track record, (2) conscious creation and intensification of European and foreign policy conflicts and a related, ideologically motivated concept of enemy, and their exploitation for domestic politics, (3) foreign policy opening toward (semi-)authoritarian governments motivated by ideological intersections and the need to counterbalance growing isolation within the European Union. In short, a growing discrepancy can be identified between the governing regime's foreign policy interests and Hungary's objectively defined national interests.

Undeniably, Hungarian foreign policy still pursued some rational policy goals in a largely responsible way, e.g. on defense cooperation within the EU and NATO, on the big European free trade agreements, like TTIP and CETA, or partially on Russia sanctions. However, these positive examples of rational pragmatism cannot conceal the abovementioned recently developed structural characteristics of Hungarian foreign policy.

Rejecting the relocation of 1294 asylum seekers according to the decision of the EU Council in September 2015, and framing "Brussels" as the ideological enemy of alleged Hungarian national interests lead to the first-ever anti-EU campaign organized by a member state government and financed by public funds. It fits in the structural frame above, as does Orbán's famous former "peacock dance" intended to outmaneuver EU sanctions by dialogue and superficial "creative compliance". The xenophobic and nativist discourse geared mainly towards asylum seekers became Prime Minister Orbán's silver bullet to dominate the public discourse and the political agenda in Hungary, and to preserve his party's popularity despite wide-spread political corruption, low policy performance in key sectors like health care and education, and the hollowing of democratic institutions. This political masterplan evidently has had repercussions to Hungary's position not only in the EU, but also in other crucial formats and bilateral relations, like Visegrad cooperation and German-Hungarian relations respectively.

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

The Role of Visegrad Cooperation in Hungarian foreign policy

In Hungarian foreign policy thinking, Visegrad Cooperation is traditionally seen as the most natural and most important regional cooperation format. It is certainly based more on a shared perception of history, Central European cultural identity, and geopolitical existentialism, than on the effective representation of overlapping interests. Despite gradual differences, Visegrad cooperation constitutes an unquestionable part of the mental toolkit of foreign policy elites in all V4 countries. The real success of the format is the fact of its self-evident existence, in spite of recurring strategic cleavages and conflicts within the group. Most remarkably, the different threat perceptions regarding Russia among the V4, and the respective foreign policy orientations toward the Kremlin pursued individually by the four countries, which led to a cooling down of Visegrad cooperation in 2014-2015 until the outburst of the European refugee crisis. According to the official Hungarian interpretation, Visegrad cooperation experienced a renaissance since the summer of 2015, based on almost unprecedented unity on a strategic issue. Strangely, Hungary's position corresponds to the main Western (and German) interpretation, seeing the Visegrad countries as troublemakers and naysayers, narrow-mindedly rejecting solidarity on one of the biggest political challenges of the last decades, while remaining recipients of European solidarity in the form of cohesion funds.

It is true that some way or another, all of the Visegrad countries have fallen short of solidarity towards the respective European decisions. Before the parliamentary elections in January 2016, Slovakian Prime Minister Fico was a refugee policy hardliner. The Slovak government decided in December 2015 to file a lawsuit before the CJEU against the Council's quota decision of September 2015, which Hungary joined later. Nevertheless, Bratislava decided to take some asylum seekers, but explicitly on a voluntary basis. The Czech Republic never joined the Slovak-Hungarian lawsuit, and unlike Poland, never seriously considered it either. Bearing in mind the domestic unpopularity of the relocation quota and the upcoming elections in the autumn of 2017, Prague never accepted asylum seekers for relocation. These seemingly individual approaches resulted in an infringement procedure against the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary in June 2017, and in a CJEU decision rejecting the Slovakian-Hungarian lawsuit in September of the same year. Moreover, they concluded in the split of the V4 into a "hardcore" Polish-Hungarian tandem and a "pragmatic" Czech and Slovak tandem. Subsequent attempts by the Czech and Slovak diplomacy to distance themselves from Warsaw and Budapest, emphasizing the differences in the four countries' refugee policy, demonstrate that Visegrad is rather divided on many issues.

With a critical look, Visegrad cooperation is in many respect more unified and more divided than ever at the same time. In spite of all differences

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

emphasized by Prague and Bratislava, the position of the V4 on asylum policy seems firm and coordinated. Various documents of high-level V4 meetings provide proof for that, and in spite of all Czech and Slovak diplomatic attempts, the Western interpretation of the situation has not become much more nuanced or forgiving. Visegrad currently has a rather negative image at the European level, primarily due to the allegedly homogenous refusal of solidarity in the context of the refugee crisis. Nevertheless, Visegrad is also more divided than ever, especially with an eye on national positions toward the future of the EU, multi-speed integration, and the deepening of the Eurozone. In contrast to Eurozone member Slovakia, Hungary, hiding with Poland their negative and destructive EU politics behind a refurbished concept of “Europe of Nations”, remains isolated in the debate about Europe’s future. It remains to be seen if the new governments in the Czech Republic and Austria will change the political landscape in the EU in favor of Hungary and Poland. Bearing in mind that a key *raison d’être* of Visegrad cooperation used to be the coordination of the national positions on EU decision making, growing cleavages between the parties about the future of European integration summon dark clouds over the future of the V4. Debates on further integration will be the key issue determining the perspectives of the V4.

Irrespectively of domestic politics, Hungary has at least two good reasons to emphasize the current homogeneity of the Visegrad group on the refugee issue, while glossing over the cleavages like different concepts about the future of Europe or the increasing lack of positive messages, policy goals and relevant cooperation fields within the V4. First, any public conflict within the V4 would reveal to domestic audiences how isolated Hungary has become in recent years. The Visegrad countries are Hungary’s last allies within the Western bloc and this cooperation is perceived as both relevant and one among equals. A crisis of Visegrad would result in a crisis of Hungarian foreign policy. Hungary is the only country among the V4 without any secondary option for pragmatic regional cooperation. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are involved in the Slavkov/Austerlitz triangle with Austria, promoted by all participates as a positive regional alternative to Visegrad. Poland launched the Three Seas Initiative, which, although welcomed by Hungary, could hardly represent an alternative to Visegrad. Disregarding differences in policy priorities and composition, the influence of Budapest in a regional grouping composed of 12 not 4 members is so different, which makes any serious comparison superficial. Visegrad constitutes an ideal type of the political “economy of scale”. It is a regional grouping with European relevance, allowing its members to exert significant influence individually on the priorities and functioning of the group. Smaller cooperation formats would result in lower relevance, while bigger ones in reduced influence for Hungary. The lack of any proper alternative makes Hungarian foreign policy vulnerable and explains Budapest’s emphasis on the strength and homogeneity of Visegrad.

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

Developments in Hungarian German-Relations

German-Hungarian bilateral relations share at least two main characteristics with Visegrad cooperation. First, it is always labelled with superlatives, especially by the Hungarian partners. Germany being the European Union's sole leading power since the breakdown of the Franco-German axis after 2012, the biggest FDI provider in Hungary's real economy, and its most important trading partner, relations with Berlin are often perceived in Budapest as the most important bilateral relationship for the country. Second, the German-Hungarian partnership was intensely plagued by frictions and tensions during the past several years, reducing cordiality without affecting the relationship's weight and importance.

Hungary's democratic backsliding since 2010 and the Orbán regime's often authoritarian flourish led to a "small ice age" in German-Hungarian bilateral relations, with high-level ministerial meetings becoming rare. Chancellor Merkel's trip to Budapest in February 2015 was intended to counterbalance the first-ever state visit of Russian President Putin to an EU Member State after the annexation of the Crimea, and to ensure that Hungary remains in line with the European compromise on sanctions towards Russia. It neither reflected the "face value" of German-Hungarian relations, nor did it signalize any positive bilateral development. The aversion between the former German foreign minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and his Hungarian counterpart, Péter Szijjártó, was not even denied by German diplomatic circles, leading to competing interpretations of even simple exchanges, like their last meeting in April 2016 in Berlin: official bilateral negotiations according to the Hungarian side, but only informal floor diplomacy on the occasion of a multilateral conference according German diplomacy. Nevertheless, the suppressed tensions between the two governments never led to any disciplining of the European People Party's (EPP) "enfant terrible", as Orbán's party Fidesz is often referred to. The reluctance and pragmatism of German diplomacy, largely motivated by considerations of European party politics, appeased and in some cases restricted its very sensitive partners in Budapest effectively. That allowed Berlin to avoid rising tensions with Budapest, unlike with Warsaw in the German-Polish scenario, and holding the communication channels open to the Hungarian government, preserving some leverage over its actions.

Regarding German-Hungarian bilateral relations, the refugee crisis resulted in hardly concealable tensions between Berlin and Budapest. Prime Minister Orbán particularly used the refugee crisis to discursively frame himself as both the challenger of the liberal mainstream and as the protector of European cultural identity. As he blamed Chancellor Merkel for endangering Europe by encouraging "illegal migration" with her alleged open borders policy, both European and Hungarian media soon referred to Merkel and Orbán as symbolic opponents representing the two strategic

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

choices for Europe, pragmatic liberal open-mindedness and nativist populism propagating closed societies.

This international media comparison served Orbán's interest and fit his playbook. By presenting the two politicians as equals, the international media overstated the influence and importance of the Hungarian Prime Minister, securing important political resources for him, both domestically and in European politics. Nevertheless, German-Hungarian relations partially preserved their pragmatic character, mainly due to mediation by the CSU and the EPP. On the one hand, Berlin never really pushed for sanctioning Budapest, neither due to its democratic track-record, nor its asylum policy, not even when Angela Merkel was straightforwardly treated as an enemy during the anti-immigrant campaign and referendum organized by the Hungarian government in 2016. On the other hand, Budapest never crossed important red lines, never vetoed the prolongation of Russia sanctions, and voted with the EPP to re-elect Donald Tusk as President of the European Council, despite Warsaw's open disappointment.

Outlook: How to carry on after the German federal elections?

"Budapest congratulates" was the laconic message sent by Prime Minister Orbán to Chancellor Merkel in the night of the German Bundestag-elections on September 24, with some hidden malicious joy behind the compulsory diplomatic politeness. Of course, the result of the German federal parliamentary election has an influence on Hungarian foreign policy in general, and within the V4 in particular, as it changes the abovementioned structural determinants of Hungarian foreign policy. More specifically, if they alter the German positions with regard to the potential sanctioning of Hungary, the European asylum policy, or the current debate about the future of Europe.

The reason for Budapest's malicious joy lies in the interpretation of the election results by Hungarian decision makers as a weakening of the next German government led by Angela Merkel. Notwithstanding the fact that her chancellorship was the best option for Orbán. A government led by the social democrats (SPD) would have been less indulgent toward democratic breaches and anti-European decisions in Budapest. The historically worst result of both CDU and SPD, parallel to the success of the right-wing populist/radical party Alternative for Germany (AfD), gave the impression to Hungarian government circles that Orbán was right all along, and Merkel in contrast was wrong.

Due to the result of the elections and the hardening tone of the CSU and Horst Seehofer, fighting now both for his personal survival as CSU leader and for his party's position in the Bavarian regional elections in 2018, Budapest has high hopes for pragmatic changes of the German asylum policy. This would lower the pressure regarding non-compliance with

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

European asylum policy, and on the other hand could enhance Orbán's recognition and prestige, while lowering Merkel's.

Furthermore, bearing in mind the complexity of coalition talks, and especially the huge differences between the CSU and the Greens regarding refugee issues, Budapest hopes that the powerhouses of German politics might be more inward looking in the following months, freeing Orbán's hands for the Hungarian election campaign and the ballot in April 2018.

An increasing domestic focus of German politics would benefit Budapest for another reason. The delayed re-launch of the Franco-German tandem, with strategic differences between Paris and Berlin regarding Eurozone governance, raises hopes in Budapest that the two-speed integration envisaged by the Macron Plan is not as close as it might have seemed prior to the German elections. Moreover, these hopes are fed by the fact that French-German differences on Eurozone governance will not be easy to overcome with the liberals (FDP) potentially controlling the finance ministry, unlike with a new grand coalition.

Although there are Hungarian concerns that a Foreign Office led by the Greens could mean new value-based criticism of Budapest's authoritarian arrangements, or that cohesion funds might drop with the liberals determining German spending in negotiations on the new European Multiannual Financial Framework, the Hungarian perception of the German election results is generally content. With the foreign policy pragmatism of the liberals even a slow and careful détente with Russia based on mutual economic benefits could be part of the new German government's future political agenda.

A more inward looking German politics would also reduce the pressure on the Visegrad group in two central fields. Postponing Eurozone reform would decrease the centrifugal effects within the V4 group, as would a conservative, non-inclusive turn in German refugee policy, and partially eliminate the reasons for Czech and Slovak distancing from Poland and Hungary. Bearing in mind the unique importance of Visegrad cooperation for Hungarian foreign policy, such developments would be warmly welcomed in Budapest.

An obvious lesson is that for the first time since the democratization of the East-Central-European countries, Hungary is not interested in a strong and active German European and foreign policy, to the contrary. By putting pressure on the non-complying Visegrad countries and pushing for reform of Eurozone governance with two-speed Europe related to it, Germany may indirectly contribute to dismantling Hungary's only remaining strategic partnership, the Visegrad group. This could result in the isolation of Budapest within the EU, remaining out in the cold with Warsaw and desperately protecting each other from sanctions.

The View from Poland

by Łukasz A. Janulewicz

There and back again: the burden of history between Warsaw and Berlin

Relations between Poland and Germany have regularly been complicated by history in the past and have entered another tense phase after parliamentary and presidential elections in 2015. The right-wing bloc led by the Law and Justice party in many ways returned to its confrontational attitude towards Berlin that had characterized its previous stint in power between 2005 and 2007. This historical context for Polish-German relations has intensified over the summer and run-up to the 2017 Bundestag election with ongoing demands by senior Polish government figures for German reparations for the devastation of Poland during World War II. It follows strong criticism of Berlin's support for the North Stream 2 pipeline and blaming Chancellor Merkel for "inviting" the large numbers of asylum seekers with her welcoming stance during the peak of the refugee crisis.

This forms a sharp contrast to the previous two governments formed by the centre-right coalition of the Civic Platform and Polish People's Party. They were steering Polish European policy close to Berlin's and the mainstream of EU decision-making. This was also a reflection the intense economic ties between the two countries, particularly the crucial role of the German market for Polish businesses. Instead Law and Justice chose a confrontational path on EU issues and have re-created the image of Germany as a bogeyman working to undermine Poland. A key part in this narrative is a re-framing of these strong economic ties from interdependence to one-sided dependency at Poland's expense. The prominent role of foreign, particularly German, investors is now perceived as a threat to Poland's long-term economic well-being. The government has also been particularly critical private media outlets owned by German companies. As this is largely detached from who governs in Berlin or that government's actual foreign policy. Certainly, the German social democrats have drawn the ire of Polish decision-makers across the political spectrum due to the legacy of former Chancellor Schröder and the North Stream pipeline. Overall however, despite several particularities at odds with Warsaw's preferences, outlined below, German party politics is unlikely to affect bilateral relations significantly while Law and Justice remains in power.

Beware Fortress Visegrad: Germany, Poland and the Visegrad Group

From a broader regional perspective, relations with Germany are creeping into the Visegrad group, even though Warsaw primarily focussed on dealing with Berlin bilaterally. However, the increasing closeness of Prague to Berlin and Bratislava's attachment to the European core are making Poland and Hungary uncomfortable bedfellows in dealing with Germany. Yet, if circumstances permit, the V4 format could form a highly useful vehicle to circumvent the tensions of bilateral relations for issues of pragmatic

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

cooperation. For the Polish government that would mean the ability to maintain the sharp rhetoric towards Berlin at home while moving forward with low profile pragmatic issues. German diplomacy, with its traditional taste for multilateralism, would certainly welcome any constructive proposal for EU reform coming from the V4. However, it is doubtful if the Czechs and Slovaks would be willing to provide such cover, or indeed if such a joint position could be found. The superficial and general joint declarations of the Visegrad group in the run-up to the Bratislava and Rome Councils indicate the challenge this would pose. Potentially, concrete steps within the PESCO framework could be a foundation for such steps. A key contribution of the three non-Euro V4 members could be a concrete proposal on how to include “outsiders” into the existing and potential future multi-speed areas of EU policy.

Also, Poland’s EU affairs minister Szymański and later development and finance minister Morawiecki highlighted that Poland might join the Euro in the future if the Eurozone fixes its problems. Thus, if these announcements are to be taken seriously, the Polish government should engage in a debate what criteria the Eurozone should meet in future reforms to enable Poland to join. This could provide an opening for Poland to partake in these crucial reform steps of economic governance in the EU but at the same time form a potential basis to fill the effectively defunct Weimar Triangle with new life. The German approach towards Poland has always been open for dialogue. Additionally, the visit of Prime Minister Szydło to Paris could mean that fences could be mended after the recent crises on the Warsaw-Paris line over the failed Caracal helicopter deal, the posted workers directive and President Macron’s previous open criticism of Poland’s government. The Polish government would also more likely feel better in this constellation as it offers the image of being an equal partner to the two leading EU powers. Without some constructive vision for the EU, both the V4 and the Weimar Triangle are likely to fall flat as effective foreign policy tools. The Weimar Triangle cannot be effectively revived without it and a V4 that is reduced to an anti-Brussels “Fortress Visegrad” is likely to increasingly alienate Prague and Bratislava, for whom this was useful on the issue of refugee relocation but is not desirable on almost all other issues.

The Devil you know: the election results and future Polish-German relations

Looking at the aftermath of the Bundestag elections, it is of course difficult to assess how Germany will move forwards from here on. When with the collapse all talks between Christian democrats, greens and liberals about a Jamaica coalition, either a minority government under Merkel or new elections are on the cards. After talks with Federal President Steinmeier, it also appears that the social democrats might reconsider their initial refusal to re-join Merkel in a continuation of a grand coalition. Either way, from the perspective of the Polish government there are no truly good options.

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

The participation of the greens, either in Jamaica or by shoring up a minority Merkel government, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the greens have been very supportive of Ukraine and outspoken on the Russian occupation of Crimea and the war around Donetsk and Luhansk. Such a voice would be most welcomed by Warsaw in any future German government amidst a party scene otherwise too friendly towards Russia by Polish standards. On the other hand, the same normative element that drives the greens to support Kiev makes it difficult for them to accept the domestic reforms pursued by the current Polish government. Also, the green stance on the refugee issue is diametrically opposed to Warsaw's.

The liberals, in turn, have a strongly sympathetic tradition towards Poland. The last liberal foreign minister, the late Guido Westerwelle, undertook his symbolic first foreign trip to Warsaw. However, the liberals have transformed significantly in the last four years in the political wilderness, which makes them somewhat of a question mark on foreign policy. Particularly the conciliatory statements of their leader Christian Lindner on the issue of Crimea have set off alarm bells in Warsaw (and certainly also a few other capitals). On the other hand, the liberal's strict fiscal policies and scepticism towards and form of substantial fiscal transfers or similar reforms within the Eurozone would ease the pressure on Polish Euro membership and relieve some immediate Polish concerns about multi-speed Europe. After pulling the plug on coalition pre-talks, it is unlikely that the liberal will play a significant influence on German EU and foreign policy over course of the next four years, unless possible early elections alter the picture. Despite these singular possible advantages from a Polish point of view, the liberals' strong civil liberties and rule of law tradition is equally at odds on Polish domestic reforms as are the greens.

The departure of the social democrats from the government was initially a good sign for the Polish government. Close ties to Russia and a too cosy relationship with the Kremlin make the social democrats an unreliable element in German politics, in Warsaw's perception. While the personification of this, former Chancellor Schröder, is out of active politics, his legacy of the North Stream pipeline remains, as do the Polish government's doubts about German social democracy as a whole. The current social democrat leader, Martin Schulz, also symbolises through his recent and very vocal tenure as President of the European Parliament the very Brussels "establishment" with which Law and Justice is at loggerheads over several domestic policies and the looming threat of EU sanctions under Article 7 of the EU treaty. The re-emerged potential of the social democrats re-joining the government after all is thus certainly not to Warsaw's liking. This leaves Angela Merkel's Christian democrats as the best option for Warsaw and leading members of the Polish government have publicly expressed this view despite some "Schadenfreude" about Merkel's poor result and the strong showing of the Alternative for Germany. The Polish government attributed this to Merkel's welcoming refugee policy, which Poland rejected vocally jointly with the rest of the Visegrad group. Despite

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

the abovementioned tensions and hostile rhetoric, another Merkel chancellorship leaves Law and Justice in a relatively comfortable position, thus the public expressions of this outcome as the preferred option. Indeed, Merkel's pragmatism and patience might mean that the crisis in Polish-German relations will be addressed by her famous "Aussitzen" or sitting it out attitude, hoping it will pass. On the other hand, German decision-makers have been becoming less patient and more sympathetic towards the idea of a tougher response to the controversial Polish reforms. It will also likely help that the German response to the refugee crisis is returning to the EU's old ways of the so-called "comprehensive approach", i.e. the attempt to manage migration flows primarily in countries of origin and transit countries. While Germany and other member states accepted the enormous inflow of asylum seekers facing the extraordinary crisis situation of 2015, Warsaw as well as Budapest have been publicly triumphant that their hard-line approach and total rejection of refugees from the Middle East has in their perspective "won". While this convergence and the silent death of mandatory refugee relocation will ease tensions on the Warsaw-Berlin and Warsaw-Brussels lines, the German approach towards Polish domestic reforms will remain to be seen and continue to affect bilateral relations.

Lastly, the two remaining parties on the far-left and far-right are still out in the cold when it comes to forming federal governments in Germany. Both the Left party and the Alternative for Germany are anathema to any Polish government for various reasons. Amongst others, the Left's dubious relationship to pre-1989 communism, the hostility towards the United States and NATO or sympathies for Putin come to mind. And while the Alternative for Germany shares a similar view to the Polish stance on migration, the views of several leading functionaries sympathetic towards Germany's Nazi past are completely unacceptable to any Polish government.

Thus, it remains that there are no easy options for the government in Warsaw to hope for. The least bad might have been Jamaica but this seems off the table for now. Another grand coalition would keep the social democrats in power and be thus less favoured by Law and Justice. That is of course, unless it could be a welcome pretext to maintain the tensions in the bilateral relationship for reasons of domestic Polish politics. Ultimately, however, the main hope for the Polish government will be to keep Merkel in power in any constellation, based on the logic, from the perspective of Law and Justice, of "the devil you know".

The View from Slovakia

by Tomáš Strážay

Slovak-German Relations: Aligning with “Kerneuropa”

Germany has always been perceived as a close partner for Slovakia, a neighbor without a common border. The reasons include the wide range of aspects. To begin with history, it can be argued that Slovak-German relations are free of tensions of any type.

Secondly, Germany is an important foreign investor and trade partner for Slovakia. Germany has been the most important trade partner for Slovakia for many years and is going to play the pivotal role in Slovakia’s trade relations also in the future. Direct foreign investments, represented first of all by the massive and still increasing investment of Volkswagen, are highly appreciated in Bratislava. Volkswagen is the biggest investor in the Slovak economy and also the biggest employer. On the other hand, investment in Slovakia has a strategic value for Volkswagen as well – even the summer strike over wages that caused the interruption of production did not lead the Volkswagen management in Germany to reconsider its plans to invest in the facilities in Slovakia.

Thirdly, Berlin is perceived as an important political ally for Bratislava, both on bilateral and EU levels. The membership in the Eurozone allows Slovakia to be present directly at the negotiation table with France and Germany. The recently signed Memorandum on an enhanced dialogue provides the basis for a more intensive development of political and expert ties among various stakeholders in Slovakia and Germany, including governments, parliaments and local actors. The memorandum demonstrates the willingness of the Slovak government to build even closer ties with Germany. At the same time, it also indicates the interest of Berlin to keep Slovakia on the inner orbit of European integration. In addition, the side product of the memorandum could be, as prime minister Fico pointed out in his article for the daily *Hospodárske noviny* on 8 August, that Slovakia might “build diplomatic bridges” between France and Germany on one side and Poland and Hungary on the other.

In no other EU country, the mythological “core of the EU” has been discussed so intensively as in Slovakia. Among others, Prime Minister Fico stressed several times that the inclusion of Slovakia in the “core” is in the vital interest of the country and the only choice for its future development. Since Germany, together with France, are considered to be the most important actors in the “core” construction, intensification of ties with Germany is a natural element of the process. On the other hand, Slovak representatives, led by the prime minister, consider the Visegrad Group as an important tool for developing relations with the closest neighbors – Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland, but also as an instrument for strengthening the voice of Slovakia on the EU level. Emerging differences among the V4 countries in their attitudes towards the future of the EU, however, led the prime minister,

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

but also the state secretary of the MFEA, to issue a widely medialized statement about the choice between the EU and V4. It says that V4 is not an alternative to the EU. But is it really the case that Slovakia will need to make such a choice in the future?

Ever closer Union or ever closer Visegrad?

The Visegrad cooperation has been of particular importance for Slovakia, especially after the change of the government in 1998 when the authoritarian government was replaced by a pro-democratic (and pro-EU) one. The help of other V4 countries that enabled Slovakia to catch up in the integration processes is still remembered by political leaders in Slovakia. Though V4 has never become a coherent block in which all the countries would always speak in one voice, but rather a coalition of the willing, it is perceived as an important tool for strengthening Slovakia's voice both on regional and EU levels. The recently highlighted issue of double standards of food quality might serve as one of several examples. V4 is also perceived as the most important regional initiative for Slovakia, despite the occurrence of other regional formats, such as Slavkov/Austerlitz Triangle initiated by Austria or TSI (Three Seas Initiative) promoted by Poland and Croatia.

The differences in positions of individual countries are nothing new in V4. The institutional set up characterized by the absence of formal institutions – with the exception of the International Visegrad Fund there is no other significant standing institution in V4 – allowed the V4 countries to occupy different positions even in the issues of strategic importance (e.g. relations with Russia) and concentrate solely on joint interests. The absence of knowledge of this aspect of the functioning of V4 led journalists – and political analysts, too – to draw time to time dark scenarios about the future of Visegrad. Nevertheless, V4 commemorated its 25th anniversary in 2016 and – despite all the “downs” – survived and continued to develop. An informal character of V4, which goes hand in hand with high flexibility, together with the well-developed sectoral cooperation and openness to cooperation with other (non-V4) countries can be considered the clue for understanding the survivability of V4 even in harsh times.

The level of trust and cooperation among the V4 countries that was achieved in more than 25 years is something that makes V4 exceptional, not only in the region. V4 has played a stabilizing role in Europe and is expected to continue to do so. The more V4 will be able to provide pan-European solutions to important challenges, the more its respect will grow. The V4 countries certainly can – also in bigger coalitions of like-minded countries – pursue regional interests, but should also declare their openness to reach a compromise with other EU members, especially in the issues of pan-European importance. The way to a closer cooperation in the Visegrad format certainly does not go through the changes in institutional design and procedures, but actually through the preservation of the existing ones. It may

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

sound as a paradox, but what made V4 significant was its informal character and legally non-binding decisions.

After the German Elections: More EU integration, continued V4 cooperation

The results of elections in France and Germany confirmed the course of a deeper integration of the EU. For the countries that want to integrate more this is an opportunity to do so. Slovakia has declared the intention to remain on the inner orbit of European integration. Other countries – including Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland – would perhaps need more time to make a decision. But this should not prevent them to take part in the decision-making process on the EU level or exclude them from the integration processes. Slovakia certainly can play a role of their advocate in the “Eurozone club”, but the main decisions need to be taken in Prague, Budapest and Warsaw.

The process of the deepening of European integration would have an impact on V4, but not a destructive one. The level of coordination that has been achieved in the V4 format is a guarantee that V4 countries will continue to develop cooperation in a number of areas, with sectoral cooperation playing a pivotal role. Geographically, Slovakia is in the heart of Visegrad and this fact cannot be neglected. Other V4 countries are not just political partners for Slovakia, but also economic ones. When we would count bilateral trade of Slovakia with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland we would see that the numbers are higher than in the case of the biggest trade partner – Germany. Also, Slovakia’s trade with the Czech Republic or Hungary is bigger than with Austria, despite the fact that Austria is a Eurozone member. This fact also undermines fears regarding a multi-speed Europe that are being spread in some V4 countries. Multi-speed Europe is reality for years – some of the EU members are Eurozone-ins, while other are Eurozone-outs. Similarly, some countries are in Schengen and other are not. In addition, multi-speed cooperation also is characteristic for V4 as well. For instance, defence cooperation between Poland and the Czech Republic is much more intensive than with Slovakia or Hungary, and so on and so forth. But all the differences were marginalized thanks to an informal character of the Visegrad cooperation, which is also a precondition for a well-functioning V4 in the future.

Summing up, the question of a choice between the EU and V4 is not a legitimate one. It is the same as we would compare apples to potatoes. The EU is an economic and political union of (still) 28 member states, while V4 is a regional initiative. V4 was never intended to substitute the EU, but to be an integral part of it. And so far, there are no intentions to establish the “new” Visegrad outside the framework of the EU.

V4’s place in the overall European architecture is justified, also due to the fact the EU has been supportive for the development of cooperation in regional groupings. Informal character and flexibility of V4 can even be

After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4 Cooperation?

inspirational for other regional initiatives in the EU. It happened several times that the V4 countries opposed the so-called EU mainstream, so they got the label of troublemakers. But V4's agenda has always been interlinked with the EU. The role of the Visegrad Group in the EU could expand more if V4 would move from the position of agenda-taker or even agenda-killer to a more frequent agenda-setter.

EU Frontiers - Policy Brief No. 22

November 2017

**Edited by
Łukasz A. Janulewicz**

**Contributions by
Dániel Hegedűs, Łukasz A. Janulewicz, and Tomáš Strážay**

**After the Bundestag Election: What Lies Ahead for German-V4
Cooperation?**

**Published by the
Center for European Neighborhood Studies
Central European University**

**Nádor utca 9, 1051 Budapest, Hungary
Phone: 0036-1-327-3000x2391; E-mail: cens@ceu.edu
Responsible publisher / Series editor: Péter Balázs
ISSN 2498-7875**



2017 © All rights reserved