



The Misunderstood?

The Visegrád States and the Conference on the Future of Europe

Alexander Beribes

- › The Visegrád Group of 2021 is an occasional alliance comprising the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, with Poland and Hungary dominating the format and often subordinating it to their national interests.
- › For the East Central European states, Europe signifies a safe haven for their sovereignty in the wake of painful experiences during the 20th century.
- › In the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe, a distinction needs to be made between challenging positions, and those which fundamentally contradict the spirit of the EU.
- › The Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU 2022 provides the opportunity to take a closer look at the positions adopted by the Visegrád states, and to exploit the potential for more intense cooperation.

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The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is to begin on 9 May 2021. A goal of this citizens participation process is to explore the question of what needs to improve in Europe, and the role it should play in the world. Heads of the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of the European Union, representing the member states, will ultimately decide how the results are to be dealt with. Against this backdrop, it is worth addressing attitudes adopted by EU member states on the future of Europe. This paper focuses on the Visegrád states, which are often perceived as troublemakers, particularly in Western Europe. The reality is more complex, however.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has now overshadowed the European discourse for more than one year. The Conference on the Future of Europe – originally a proposal by the French President Emmanuel Macron – affords the opportunity to take a fresh look at Europe’s vision of itself, and to bring new impetus to the European debate.

The aim behind the CoFoE is to be a powerhouse for ideas, as well as to build on previous experiences from citizen participation formats at the European level. Here it is worth mentioning the various citizens’ dialogues of the European Commission that have been taking place in all EU countries since 2012.¹ It also includes new components, such as an online platform, designed to enable all citizens to participate in the discussion process in all official EU languages.

The Joint Presidency of the CoFoE also sets itself the objective of bringing together various visions for the future: a herculean task. Advocates of European federalism strive for a European federal state. National conservatives, on the other hand, want the EU to be understood as an alliance of nation-states.

Different views on how the EU should look in the future recently became clear again during negotiations on the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, and the EU recovery fund. Here, the focus was placed on the Visegrád Group (V4) in particular, whose positions were perceived to be disruptive by many.

The Visegrád states often act jointly in European policy matters. For instance, it was in Krakow to mark the 30th anniversary of the V4 in February 2021 that their heads of government also agreed to work together in the framework of the CoFoE.² How should this announcement be perceived? Which Europe do the Visegrád states stand for, and is it appropriate to speak of an alliance in the case of the V4? These are the questions this paper seeks to answer.

Searching for
unifying factors.

One for All and All for One?

In 1984, Milan Kundera wrote in his essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, that the Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Czechs constitute the most vulnerable part of the West.³ This, he underlined, was linked to the fact that Central Europe had vanished from the consciousness of the West.

Following the collapse of socialism, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia set for themselves the strategic goal of becoming part of both the European community of states and NATO. The V4 was initiated in February 1991 in Visegrád at the suggestion of the Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall to coordinate the Euro-Atlantic integration process.⁴ For the Visegrád states, “Europe” primarily signified a safe haven for their own sovereignty in the wake of the painful experiences of the 20th century. This type of understanding of Europe did not exist in the “West”. Instead, the European policy debate was dominated by the narrative of Europe as a peace project.

The V4 has been a loose coordination format since its inception. The only institution is the jointly financed International Visegrad Fund with the headquarters in Bratislava. Since the turn of the millennium, the latter has also been committed to consolidating inter-social cooperation by funding projects and scholarships. In keeping with the 30th anniversary of the V4 this year, heads of governments have decided to increase the annual budget to ten million euros as of 2022. This is tantamount to a three-million euros increase within ten years.⁵

Having said that, the Visegrád Group is not only an inward-looking coordination framework. For instance, coordination talks are now being conducted prior to meetings of the European Council and the General Affairs Council, which, however, do not always result in united positions. Furthermore, consultations with political leaders from other European countries and beyond take place in the “Visegrád-Plus” framework.

We should also emphasise the military dimension of the cooperation. In 2011, 20 years after the founding of the V4, the Visegrád states decided to set up an “EU Battlegroup”. Such EU battle units have been part of the EU’s crisis response tool kit since 2007 and should be ready for operation within ten days at a radius of up to 6,000 km around Brussels. The “EU Battlegroup” of Visegrád states led by Poland was already on permanent standby in 2016 and 2019 and will take up responsibility again in 2023.

There is no consensus about whether the V4 should also be open to other states. The Czech Republic and Slovakia, in particular, are arguing the case for Austria to be admitted into the group. Given that this has not yet been politically viable, 2015 witnessed the launch of a loose “Austerlitz” format with Austria at the level of heads of government.

Federal Chancellor Merkel had participated in meetings of Visegrád states in 2019 and 2020. The fact that the V4 is our most important trading partner, even more than China and far more than Russia, makes it clear just how close relations between Germany and the East Central European states have now become.

Europe as a safe
haven for their
own sovereignty.

Loose coordi-
nation format.

In 2023, the
“EU Battlegroup” of
the Visegrád states
will be on perma-
nent standby for
the third time.

Ranking	Partner country / partner countries	Turnover (exports + imports) in 1,000 EUR
1	Visegrád states	286,638,807
2	People's Republic of China	212,388,589
3	Netherlands	172,724,935
4	United States of America	171,567,879
5	France	147,520,532

Federal Statistical Office. Ranking of Germany's trading partners in foreign trade (2020).⁶

The V4 attracted a lot of attention in connection with the refugee and migration crisis that began in 2015. On 22 September 2015, European Interior Ministers decided, by a majority vote, to distribute 120,000 refugees within Europe. Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia were overruled.⁷ Poland was at first the only Visegrád state to vote in favour,⁸ but after the parliamentary elections a few weeks later, in which the national conservative Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice) emerged as the winner, it made a radical change of political course. It was not long before the image of a non-solidary and increasingly politically isolated V4 alliance emerged in the European debate.

Is this image accurate?

Although the Visegrád states are often perceived as monolithic, they differ in their positions in many cases. It is impossible to ignore their diverging perceptions of Russia. No other EU Head of Government has met as often with Russian President Putin as the Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán in recent years. Already in 2013, the Russian President described Hungary as his "priority partner in Central Europe".⁹ Whereas Poland's national security strategy adopted in 2020 defined Russia as the most serious threat.¹⁰ In light of enormous differences within the V4 regarding relations with Russia, the Visegrád states are trying not to broach the issue.

The Visegrád states often differ in their positions.

A joint approach is, however, clear to see regarding the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. The Visegrád states attach strategic importance to these, providing financial assistance from the International Visegrad Fund. Most study scholarships in 2018 went to Albanian citizens, for instance.

Euphoria surrounding the relationship with China, which a few years ago was palpable in all Visegrád states, has now faded. This became particularly evident in connection with the "17+1" format, which comprises 17 Central and Eastern European countries¹¹ as well as China. For example, it was initially unclear whether all Visegrád states would be represented at the highest level at the February summit this year, despite China's President Xi Jinping having been present for the first time. This disenchantment is mainly due to the fact that Chinese investment behaviour and investment volume remained below expectations. Only Hungary stands out. It has become the European base for the controversial Chinese company Huawei. Furthermore, the Shanghai-based Fudan University will open a campus in Budapest; the first Chinese university institution in the EU. Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán demonstrated his pragmatism vis à vis China by having himself vaccinated with the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm.

Differences are also manifested in intra-European contexts, for example regarding the EU's "social pillar". Here, however, political affiliations play a more dominant role than national ones.

Ideas on the Future of Europe

On 1 July 2020, Poland took over the rotating V4 Presidency for one year.¹² The Polish presidency programme describes the Conference on the Future of Europe as an “appropriate framework to discuss new ideas”.¹³

The Visegrád states do not yet have a joint position on the Conference on the Future of Europe. However, differences in their approaches are already visible. The Czech Republic and Slovakia reject amendments to the treaty at the end of the discussion process, whereas Poland and Hungary accept them.

Yet no joint position
on the CoFoE.

What is these countries’ view of Europe?

Poland and Hungary have dominated the Visegrád Group since 2015 and have used it as a forum to influence European policy discourse according to their own interests. For instance, in 2015 the Polish PiS was determined to usher in a “good change” (“Dobra Zmiana”), which is something the party would also like to achieve at the European level. In 2018, President Duda spoke about how, for Poland, it is important to fix the EU and make it more democratic, which for him means giving more power to the nation-states.¹⁴ That same year, Duda gave a lecture at the University of Zurich, in which he outlined his ideas on the future of Europe.¹⁵ According to President Duda, Europe is based on three pillars:

- 1. Community of Equals:** The principle of unanimity must not be relinquished, as it ensures the sovereign equality of all EU states.
- 2. Community of Ethics:** The integration process has a moral and administrative dimension alike. Europe should not simply be reduced to treaties and an emphasis on the primacy of European institutions. The key “pre-political” values in Europe are loyalty, solidarity, and forgiveness.
- 3. Freedom:** The foundation of European democracy are the national governments. European institutions cannot determine their role. They are “servants, rather than masters of European nations.”

The Polish President’s speech must be considered in connection with that held by Prime Minister Morawiecki in the European Parliament that same year, in which he called for redefining the balance between nation-states and the European level.¹⁶

The Hungarian Prime Minister supplements the narrative of a “Europe of sovereign states” with an East-West dichotomy. This means there are currently two future visions: a liberal, migration-friendly Western Europe, and a Central Europe that is family-friendly and based on Christian traditions.¹⁷

The Czech Republic and Slovakia present a different image to that of Hungary and Poland. Thus, they played scarcely any role in connection with the path of confrontation taken by Budapest and Warsaw in negotiations on the 2021–2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, and the EU recovery fund. This is not a one-off incident. Slovakia has been following a different approach for some time, which became especially clear to see during its Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2016. For instance, the concept of “flexible solidarity” was elaborated as regards dealing with the refugee and migration crisis. In doing so, Bratislava signalled its willingness to find a solution. During its last presidency in the V4, the Czech Republic set itself the goal¹⁸ of consolidating the relationship of trust with European institutions and improving the image of the Visegrád Group.¹⁹

Generalisations are
inappropriate.

Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU 2022

On 1 July 2022, France,²⁰ the Czech Republic²¹ and Sweden²² will assume the so-called Trio Presidency in the Council of the EU for a total of 18 months. Meanwhile it is confirmed that the CoFoE is to present conclusions during the French Presidency of the Council of the EU. This should not be understood as the end of the Conference on the Future of Europe, but rather as an intermediate stage aimed at taking the process to a new level. In this regard, the Czech Republic will have to moderate between the various positions during its Presidency of the Council of the EU. What is unclear is who will then form the government, as elections to the Chamber of Deputies in the Czech Republic are scheduled to take place in autumn this year.

The Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU provides the opportunity to take a closer look at the positions adopted by the Visegrád states, and to more intensively exploit the potential for cooperation. It should be noted that Slovakia will occupy the V4 Presidency in parallel with the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU, which means the former can be expected to adopt a rather consensus-orientated approach in the area of European affairs.

Final Section: Good Europeans, Bad Europeans?

The Visegrád Group of 2021 is an occasional alliance. In the past, the Visegrád states have proven their ability to pool their political resources on an ad hoc basis. At its core, however, the format of the group is not institutionalised.

The V4 has become estranged from the visions of its founding fathers Lech Wałęsa, Václav Havel and József Antall. European integration is viewed by Budapest and Warsaw in particular – and less so Bratislava and Prague – as posing an increasing threat to national sovereignty. Hungary and Poland continually emphasise how a return to Europe's Christian roots is needed, which have been abandoned by the "West".

The CoFoE presents the opportunity to discuss different visions of the future. In line with European pluralism, it will however be important to differentiate between challenging positions, and those which fundamentally contradict the spirit of the EU. In doing so, it is important not to evade the question about the relationship between national and European sovereignty.

In his speech at the European Parliament in 1988, Pope John Paul II spoke of the two lungs of Europe: the Eastern and the Western.²³ Europe needs both in order to breathe, was his narrative at the time. The EU of today is indeed different from the European Economic Community of 1988, and yet the idea expressed by Pope John Paul II is timeless. Europe can only continue its success story if it stands united and refrains from ironing out the differences that shape it. That is why distinguishing between good and bad Europeans is as inaccurate as it is harmful.

When speaking about the role of the V4 or the states in the Eastern part of the EU as a whole, it is necessary not to overlook the issue of these countries' visibility in European institutions. To date, Poland is the only country in the Eastern EU to have provided a President of the European Parliament (Jerzy Buzek, 2009 to 2012), and a President of the European Council (Donald Tusk, 2014 to 2019). Among the current heads of the EU institutions, not a single one is from the Eastern EU. Following the 2024 European Parliament elections, it would be important to ensure increased visibility of the EU's Eastern part in terms of representation, particularly considering that it marks the 20th anniversary of the Eastern enlargement of the EU.

The Visegrád Group's issues will be brought to the fore in 2022 owing to the Czech Presidency of the Council of the EU 2022.

Occasional alliance

Differentiation is vital.

Among the current heads of the EU institutions, not a single one is from the Eastern EU.

Another aspect on the theme of visibility also needs to be borne in mind: It was in 2004 that the Visegrád states initially became part of a **Western** European unification process. Lisbon, Nice, Amsterdam, Maastricht are cities in which EU treaties have been signed. One way of promoting European cohesion would be if the next treaty were named after a city in the Eastern part of the EU.

- 1 The first citizens' dialogue took place on 27 September 2012 in the Spanish Cádiz.
- 2 Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, the Republic of Poland, and the Slovak Republic on the Occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the Visegrád Group, 17/02/2021, www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2021/declaration-of-the-prime (accessed on 25/03/2021).
- 3 Cf. Kundera, Milan: The Tragedy of Central Europe, in: *New York Review of Books*, Volume 31, No. 7, 26/04/1984
- 4 In those days, the Visegrád Group consisted of three states (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary). Czechoslovakia officially dissolved on 1 January 1993. The Visegrád Group then included the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary.
- 5 In the year 2012, the annual budget of the International Visegrád Fund comprised seven million euros. Cf. annual report of the International Visegrád Fund, 2012, https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/uploads.mangoweb.org/shared-prod/visegradfund.org/uploads/2018/01/ivf_annual_report_2012.pdf (accessed on 28/03/2021).
- 6 Cf. website of the Federal Statistical Office (Destatis): Ranking of Germany's trading partners in foreign trade, 2021, www.destatis.de/EN/Themes/Economy/Foreign-Trade/Tables/order-rank-germany-trading-partners.html?__blob=publicationFile (accessed on 28/03/2021). Data from the individual Visegrád states were added together in this context.
- 7 Finland abstained from voting.
- 8 The Prime Minister at the time was Ewa Kopacz (Platforma Obywatelska).
- 9 Website of the Kremlin: Meeting with Prime Minister of Hungary Viktor Orbán, 2013, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17400>, (accessed on 28/03/2021).
- 10 Cf. website of the National Security Bureau: The Republic of Poland's national security strategy, 2020, www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf (accessed on 28/03/2021).
- 11 The format originally consisted of 16 countries. Greece joined in 2019.
- 12 Hungary will assume Presidency of the Visegrád Group on 1 July 2021.
- 13 Programme on the Polish Presidency of the Visegrád Group, www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/2020-2021-polish (accessed on 31/03/2021).
- 14 Cf. website of the Polish President: President for „Bild am Sonntag”: We want to repair the Union, 2018, www.president.pl/en/news/art,888,president-for-bild-am-sonntag-we-want-to-repair-the-union.html (accessed on 31/03/2021).
- 15 Cf. website of the Polish President: The Future of Europe: The Foundations of Unity of the States of Europe, 2018, www.president.pl/en/news/art,874,he-future-of-europe-the-foundations-of-unity-of-the-states-of-europe.html (accessed on 03/04/2021).
- 16 Cf. Debate with the Prime Minister of Poland, Mateusz Morawiecki, on the Future of Europe, 2018, www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2018-07-04-ITM-004_EN.html (accessed on 03/04/2021).
- 17 Europe Uncensored – European Leaders on the Future of Europe, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=FxpFUlaD1FU (accessed on 03/04/2021).
- 18 1 July 2019 until 30 June 2020.
- 19 Kucharczyk, Mateusz: Czechy chcą zmiany wizerunku Grupy Wyszehradzkiej w Europie, 2019, www.euractiv.pl/section/grupa-wyszehradzka/news/czechy-chca-zmiany-wizerunku-grupy-wyszehradzkiej-w-europie/ (accessed on 03/04/2021).
- 20 1 January until 30 June 2022.
- 21 1 July until 31 December 2022.
- 22 1 January until 30 June 2023.
- 23 Cf. website of the Vatican, www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1988/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19881011_european-parliament.html (accessed on 03/04/2021).

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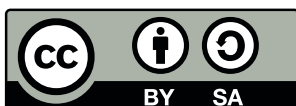
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