

The Visegrád Four: a new European centre of power?

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The events of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015 undeniably had a severe impact on the European Union and its member states. While Germany, Austria and Sweden taken the spotlight as the main destination countries, the flow of migrants that year passed through several other European countries, especially in Central and South-Eastern Europe, leaving marks everywhere. In Greece, we have seen the (partial) implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, turning the country's eastern islands into giant de-facto refugee shelters. Further north, Macedonia and others closed their borders to migrants in early 2016, thereby blocking the "Balkan route".

Following these events, one group of countries soon emerged as the fiercest internal critic of the EU's approach to migration: the Visegrád states Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia and Poland. While Hungary was the only of these countries to be directly affected by the events of 2015, governments in all Visegrád states openly opposed Angela Merkel's refugee policy from early 2016 on. The results of this dynamic are today impossible to overlook. Visegrád, led by Viktor Orbán, Jarosław Kaczyński, Robert Fico and Miloš Zeman, firmly established itself as an alternative centre of power in Europe.

In this paper, I will set out to analyse this changing role of the Visegrád states within the EU and its implications on decision making in Europe. I will particularly look at their approach to migration called "effective solidarity", which has recently been proposed by the Slovak EU-presidency. On this basis, I will argue that while Visegrád did manifest itself as a force to reckon with, they are not able to provide real solutions to the most pressing European problems.

1 | The Visegrád group and the European Union. A history

The establishment of the Visegrád group in 1991 is of course strongly linked to the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain two years before that. It was this peculiar setting in which the then-Presidents of Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland came together in the northern Hungarian castle town of Visegrád to agree on closer political and economic cooperation. The purpose was clear: this common group should help the three countries quickly establish a democratic, capitalist

system and subsequently join NATO and the EU. Through cooperation, the initiators rightly thought they could achieve this goal quicker and easier.

One characteristic that has defined this group from the very beginning is that it did not form any institutional foundation – no joint council, no common agencies or offices. Instead, cooperation between the three – soon to be four – states took place in high-level meetings between Presidents, Prime Ministers and governments. The Visegrád group is therefore – in contrast to many other international organisations – a very flexible and open institution.¹ This fact also clearly reflects in the development of the group over the next 25 years.

1.1 | Visegrád before EU accession

The 1990s constitute the early, yet most influential phase in Visegrád's development. This development until EU-accession in 2004 is often divided into three distinct phases. The first two years until late 1992 – often referred to as “Visegrád 1” – were most strongly influenced by the guiding idea of the group: joining EU and NATO as soon as possible. Joint Visegrád activities therefore focused almost entirely on foreign policy, though also the establishment of mutual trade liberalisation fell into this period.²

This was followed by a long phase of decline, though some scholars prefer the term “transition”³. In 1992, the political climate in the region deteriorated significantly with the authoritarian Vladimír Mečiar coming to power in Slovakia and the isolationist Václav Klaus in Czechia. Needless to say, this constellation made international cooperation within the group way more difficult which resulted in fewer high-level meetings and less international progress overall. However, economically the four countries continued moving closer together during this time, since they signed the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in late 1992.⁴

After changes in government in both Slovakia and Czechia, the Visegrád group left this state of hibernation in 1998. This third phase – sometimes called “Visegrád 2” – was again remarkably dynamic, the primary aim now being to help Slovakia catch up in the EU and NATO accession process, after it's been declined entry into NATO in 1997. With the establishment of the Visegrád fund with its

¹ Patrycja Bukalska and Mariusz Bocian, “A New Visegrad Group in the New European Union. Possibilities and Opportunities for Development,” 2003, 18.

² Martin Dangerfield, “The Visegrad Group in the Expanded European Union: From Preaccession to Postaccession Cooperation,” *East European Politics & Societies*, 2008, 638–640.

³ *Ibid.*, 641.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 640–643.

headquarters in Bratislava, the group also for the first time established formal structures.⁵ The activities of the Visegrád group reached its height during this time and accession to the EU followed suit in 2004, this time including Slovakia.

1.2 | Visegrád after EU accession

With the accession into the EU, the Visegrád group fulfilled the purpose it was created for in 1991. All four states were now EU-countries and members of NATO; the communist system of state and economy has been radically transformed and the group firmly established and well-acknowledged in Europe and beyond. Many commentators therefore thought it would cease to exist, lacking this basic mission. This however, did not happen.

There were some voices already around 2003/2004 that proclaimed a continued and stronger role for Visegrád in the future. Patrycja Bukalska and Mariusz Bocian, for instance, proposed in 2003 that the group should continue to exist and shift its focus to joining the Schengen area, continuing the work of the Visegrád fund, assisting each other in utilising EU funds and coordinating their activities in the EU Council.⁶ These high hopes could not be fulfilled at this time. While being successful in the field of foreign and EU policy – all four states joined the Schengen zone in 2007 – the Visegrád group overall proved unable to establish itself as a real centre of power in the EU. As Christopher Walsch put it, they were simply “reluctant to construct a common Central European Identity”⁷, not distinguishing themselves too hard from the “old” member states.

This only started to change quite recently and the refugee crisis played a major role in this. While following Eurobarometer results from 2004 onwards, it has already been shown that the Visegrád states saw increasing levels of Euroscepticism after accession⁸, this Euroscepticism long did not translate into political action. It only came to the fore in full swing when the refugee crisis hit Europe in 2015. This event changed the nature of the Visegrád group forever and in this light, it is almost ironic to point to the words of Václav Havel in 1994, when he warned us that if Europeans don't continue to base themselves on the best European values the “future will fall into the hands of a cast

⁵ Ibid., 643–647.

⁶ Bukalska and Bocian, “A New Visegrad Group in the New European Union. Possibilities and Opportunities for Development,” 21.

⁷ Christopher Walsch, “Visegrad Four in the European Union. An Efficient Regional Cooperation Scheme?,” *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 23, no. 1/2 (2014): 25.

⁸ B. Najman and Y. Zanko, “When Political Supply Creates Its Own Demand: The Case of Anti-EU Politics in Visegrad Countries,” 2016.

of fools, fanatics, populists and demagogues waiting for their chance and determined to promote the worst European traditions”.⁹

2 | Open opposition: Visegrád taking on a new role

2.1 | The EU’s management of the refugee crisis

The events of summer of 2015 hit the European Union unprepared. With its ill-fitted Dublin-regulation, stating that it is the first EU-country a migrant sets foot in that must process the asylum claim, the EU was completely incapable to deal with the massive inflow of Syrian and other refugees. Soon, thousands upon thousands of refugees were travelling through Europe, collecting on the beaches of Greece and – not to forget – the train stations of Budapest. While Angela Merkel took a pragmatic step when opening German borders to the migrants stranded in Budapest in increasingly desperate circumstances, the Visegrád group would have none of that.

When the European Commission went on to propose relocation of refugees across Europe – first only for 160,000 from Greece, Italy and Hungary – the Visegrád four openly opposed any such scheme on the grounds that EU countries should instead find “sovereign solutions”.¹⁰ Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán around that time famously said that he will not have others dictate “who we must admit into our houses and home country”.¹¹ Hungary and Slovakia even filed a lawsuit at the European Court of Justice against any mandatory migrant quota and all Visegrád states openly supported the blocking of the “Balkan route” in early 2016 with some even sending troops to protect Macedonia’s border.¹²

2.2 | The notion of “effective solidarity”

For most of 2015 and 2016, the Visegrád group’s policy was essentially limited to this: opposition out of principle without offering any solutions but closing borders and ignoring the Geneva Convention (all while insisting that Schengen is the greatest achievement of the EU and shall not be abolished).

⁹ Ibid., 1.

¹⁰ Diana Ivanova, “Migrant Crisis and the Visegrád Group’s Policy,” *International Conference KNOWLEDGE-BASED ORGANIZATION* 22, no. 1 (2016): 35–36.

¹¹ Ibid., 37.

¹² Ibid., 35.

The Slovakian Presidency of the EU-Council finally presented an alternative last autumn called “Effective solidarity: a way forward on Dublin revision”.¹³ The key points of the plan were:

1. The introduction of a three-pillar system, categorising the “severeness” of the “migrant situation” in EU countries from “normal” via “deteriorating” to “severe”
2. Once a country’s situation is deemed deteriorating, an EU “solidarity mechanism” would set in. This can either take the form of relocating migrants or simply financial aid
3. In “severe cases”, the EU Council would furthermore decide on “additional supportive measures, on a voluntary basis”

There are many obvious flaws with this plan. It assumes that the situation in EU countries can be easily and objectively categorised, which it clearly can’t. What number or percentage would qualify for a “deteriorating” situation? Which for a “severe” one? But apart from this basic misconception, who should even evaluate that? I can only assume that – as for everything else in the plan – Slovakia envisions the EU Council to decide, so nation states can obstruct the process from the very beginning, not even labelling a situation as “deteriorating” in the first place.

Moreover, financial aid or additional financial contributions to the EU asylum agency and border guard – as the plan suggests for “deteriorating cases” – are not sufficient and offer no solution to the problem at hand. Even worse, this plan would mean leaving thousands upon thousands of migrants stranded on Lesbos and then sending money to Athens in return. This is hardly any solidarity at all and certainly no “effective” one. And finally, there is also the question what is meant by “additional supportive measures”. This is not only vague – these measures should also be voluntary for EU members.

Unfortunately, in this form Visegrád’s – in this case Slovakia’s – alternative plan on migration is wishful thinking at best and a cheap excuse at worst.¹⁴

Conclusion

There are people – also in the scholarly community¹⁵ – that defend the Visegrád’s approach to migration and call for more national and protectionist measures taken in other countries. From a

¹³ Nikolaj Nielsen, “Slovak Presidency Proposes ‘Effective Solidarity’ on Migration,” *Euobserver.com*, November 18, 2016, <https://euobserver.com/migration/135960>.

¹⁴ You can read my full blog article on the issue here: Ralf Grabuschnig, “Slovakia’s Migration Plan and Lacking EU-Solidarity,” *Mytakeon.eu*, November 20, 2016, <http://mytakeon.eu/slovakia-migration/>.

practical and European perspective, however, this approach is only counterproductive. While the EU's current answers to the refugee crisis are far from perfect¹⁶, it is widely agreed that a common European approach is the only fair and effective way to deal with this crisis.¹⁷ The Visegrád four therefore block any substantial European approach to migration from taking shape. It has become more than obvious that simply closing borders and building walls – as is the case in Hungary – are no answers to the problem at hand. Instead, it takes away a major European achievement: the borderless Schengen area. Unfortunately though, the more substantial ideas put forward in Slovakia's "effective solidarity" plan do not hold up to scrutiny either, as all measures foreseen there are vague, overall insufficient and on top of that voluntary. They cannot form the basis of any meaningful and comprehensive European migration plan.

The Visegrád group has come a long way since 1991. It achieved EU and NATO membership in little more than a decade, all Visegrád states are now part of Schengen and one, Slovakia, even adopted the Euro. Through this process, Visegrád has increasingly established itself as a new centre of power within the EU, as a power to be reckoned with. The refugee crisis of 2015 has strengthened their unity but it has also shown the group's limits. It becomes increasingly clear that nothing they have done or proposed in connection to the crisis offered any alternative way forward. Instead, Visegrád's new role as the EU's fiercest internal critic adds even more complexity to the European project and will further complicate EU policy making, also when it comes to challenges like Brexit.

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¹⁵ Such as the afore cited Diana Ivanova, who even goes as far as calling Visegrád's approach to migration a search for "rational solutions in the face of migrant aggression", Ivanova, "Migrant Crisis and the Visegrád Group's Policy," 38.

¹⁶ In particular the outsourcing of the problem to Turkey: Juliane Schmidt, "Europe and the Refugees: A Crisis of Values," Policy Paper, (2016).

¹⁷ Also see the policy paper by Clémentine d' Oultremont and Anna Martin, "The Migration Crisis: A Stress Test for European Values," Policy Paper, European Policy Brief, (2015).

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