

THE FUTURE OF LIBERAL VISEGRAD PROJECT



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Editor's note

The establishment of the Visegrad Group in 1991 formalized the cultural, historic and economic bonds of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The group was formed during the years of liberal optimism, as it seemed that these countries were on the straight path to open societies and independence. While the V4 countries are competitors in many areas, the group has an international political relevance and the relations are tighter on the fields of defence, energy, research and civil society. In some areas the cooperation reaches out beyond the borders of the V4 countries thanks to the International Visegrad Fund. The Visegrad countries became members of the European Union at the same time 15 years ago. However the EU accession did not fulfill the way to a liberal democracy. In fact not just the common legacy and cooperation is discussed recently but also the democratic backlash in these countries.

This volume wishes to assess the Visegrad Group from different aspects. Foremost we are interested if the group still has political relevance within the EU and on the international level. This issue is also relevant from the aspect of the new leadership of the European Union, since no important position will be fulfilled from the V4 group. We also wish to discuss the group's relation to illiberalism, if the V4 accelerates the illiberal tendencies or if the V4 countries should not be deemed as the same case from this aspect at all. Furthermore, the volume also focuses on economic issues, like dependency on old member states and opportunities for V4 entrepreneurs. Finally, our aim was also to discuss the areas of tighter cooperation and neighbourhood policies in the post-soviet states and the Western Balkans.

The chapters of the volume are reflecting this ambition. In his chapter Milosz Hodun discusses the Polish vision of the Visegrad group. This vision was proclaimed by president Andrzej Duda at the time Poland took over the annual rotating presidency. The author reviews how the Polish government wishes to utilize the Visegrad group in strengthening its position vis-à-vis Western European powers. The regional aspirations of Poland can be traced back however to the interwar period, when the so called Intermarium, that is an Eastern European cooperation between the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black sea. Šárka Prát focuses in her chapter on the spread of illiberal democracy in the region. She also examines counterinitiatives of the democratic backlash. Furthermore, Prát raises the question if the Visegrad cooperation still has a relevance in contemporary East Central Europe. She highlights an interesting new phenomenon, the Alliance of Free cities, an alternative to the Visegrad project. In his piece, István Szent-Iványi writes about the roots of the Visegrad group in the 1980s. He distinguishes three periods of the Visegrad group: the CEFTA decade (1994-2004), the first decade of the EU membership (2004-2014) and the V4 as platform for cooperation between illiberals and populists (2014-). In the last chapter Viera Zuborova considers the political polarization in Visegrad countries and the emergence of political paranoia and authoritarian personalities in mainstream politics.

Milosz Hodun: **POLAND'S REGIONAL AMBITION. FROM INTERMARIUM TO V4 TO THREE SEAS**

Back on Track

On July 1st, Poland officially assumed the annual rotating presidency in the Visegrad Group (V4). Polish presidency coincides with two important anniversaries, namely the 30th anniversary of the Visegrad cooperation itself and the 20th anniversary of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Andrzej Duda, addressing a V4 summit in Warsaw, attended by the prime ministers of Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia, declared that Polish presidency will be inspired by the motto “Back on Track” and said that it meant a return to a path of development, to contacts among people, and to economic cooperation. This presidency will have four main objectives: (“Priorities of the Polish presidency”, 2020)

1. Strong V4 in a strong Europe (Objective related to the coordination of V4 countries' activities within the EU)
2. Return to normality (Objective related to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences)
3. People-to-people contacts (Objective related to integration and cohesion objectives within V4)
4. Digital V4 – e-V4 (Objective related to the development of V4 cooperation in the digital sector)

Obviously, Polish government will try to use this presidency not only to influence the politics in and policies of the European Union, but also to strengthen its own position vis-à-vis main Western European powers. “It is through an effective influence on the European agenda that our four countries can partly shape the global order and have a real impact on our immediate environment,” can be read on the official V4 web site (Visegrad Four, 2020). This presidency will be marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and its devastating consequences. Poland will have to bear the difficult responsibility of representing the V4’s position during negotiations on the details of the European Recovery Instrument and Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative, but also on structure of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) for 2021-2027, including the Cohesion Policy and its implementation system.

As if that were not enough, among the key objectives set by Poland for the months to come one can find cooperation in strategic sectors such as digital affairs and digital infrastructure (including 5G), deepening cooperation in security areas and infrastructure development.

It looks very ambitious, doesn't it? Perhaps too ambitious bearing in mind what V4 really is today. And today V4 seems to be a rather loose alliance of the four Central European countries that exchange information and develop programs for better cooperation in a growing number of fields. The main advantage of such a group - and it can be clearly seen in the Polish presidency declaration - should be a synergy effect, the fact that four countries together represent a much stronger force than the group's individual members. It has always been the idea underpinning the cooperation between the four post-communist states. It was at heart of the Group when it was established three decades ago. The V4 (or rather V3) was created as the Benelux of the East. But Benelux became a model of success of sub-regional cooperation that demonstrates how to achieve greater levels of integration whilst the V4 can be labeled merely as its poor and moderately effective copy.

The original purpose of the V4 had been to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. When all four countries joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union serious doubts appeared whether the group could have a meaningful role in the post-accession period. Ol'ga Gyárfášová and Grigorij Mesežnikov wrote: "Common interests of Central European countries are not a pure cliché. They are very real, and Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are fully aware of that. This does not mean that national interests of every V4 country necessarily correspond to the interests of the V4 as a whole; however, there are many areas of overlapping interests" (Gyárfášová & Mesežnikov 2016). And this diagnosis describes well what the V4 has been in the last 15 years, a block that tries constantly to define itself balancing between the community of needs and needs of respective governments. The V4 is an idea about exemplary cooperation condemned to an instrumental role by interests of national parties in power.

These interests have key meaning for the development of the group. V4 is often labeled by the rest of Europe as autocratic, ultra-conservative, Eurosceptic, etc. For European public opinion the V4 often appears to be one unit, somewhere East of Germany, that became enfant terrible of the respectable family known as the EU. In other words, V4 has been hijacked by the Hungarian government of Victor Orban and the Polish government under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński. Since Hungary became the infamous leader of Europe's illiberal revolution, and Poland followed fiercely a few years later, the entire region has been in the spotlight. "Reforms" signed by FIDESZ and PiS that target the rule of law, free press, civil society, minority rights mixed with hateful, excluding language of public debate set by, among others, MPs and state-owned media in Budapest and Warsaw, have shaped the region's appearance in the world (Drinóczi & Bień-Kacała 2019).

Worse even, the V4 is also seen as selfish and unreliable. V4 refuses to compromise, and its strategy is built on nationalistic agenda of its members. This image was created

especially during the discussion on migration and climate policy (E.g. Harper, 2019), and most recently during the discussion on the new EU budget for 2021-2027. The first one was particularly important and it can be concluded that 2015 constituted the beginning of a new era in V4, era of virulent internal opposition against the EU and its values (Kazharski, 2020).

But the truth is that the region is far from being homogeneous. Of course, the Czech Republic and Slovakia have also had their share of challenges and problems with democracy but the political landscape there is far different from the one in Poland and Hungary. In all modesty, Robert Fico and Miloš Zeman, are not devoted liberal democrats, and there is many questions raised by international institutions and local NGOs about Andrej Babiš's career and Matovič's agenda, but both the Czech Republic and Slovakia have not been not falling miserably in all rankings indicating the state of freedom and are not facing assessments to prevent the authorities from breaching the EU's founding values (Rule of law framework, 2020).

But the most visible division between Hungary-Poland and the Czech Republic-Slovakia is not the only one. The differences are visible in the group's relations with the EU. It came very clearly during the Council's vote on the status of posted workers. While Slovakia and the Czech Republic in the end approved the dossier on amending the directive thanks to French lobbying, Hungary and Poland (as well as Lithuania and Latvia) voted against it (Zgut, 2017). Another example, the most painful for PiS, was when MEP Beata Szydło was the only one who voted against Donald Tusk's re-election as European Council's President. She lost 27:1 and none of the V4 partners helped her there. The division between the V4 members can be provoked not only by ideology but also by the attitude of its members towards the integration as such, the inner need of protecting their own image as trustworthy members, or, simply, by interests of other countries. The group is incapable of sticking together.

For Prague and Bratislava the political cost of V4 membership is higher and higher. And both are seeking substitute partners in the EU. Berlin, Paris, even Vienna, are willing to give them this alternative. Czech and Slovak diplomats have been eager to develop a consensus within Germany and France on policy issues other than migration because they are concerned about becoming increasingly marginalized at the EU level (Möller, 2019).

Finally, there is nothing that can divide politically V4 more than Putin's Russia. On one side there is Poland with its traditionally anti-Russian attitude that keeps bilateral relations on a very low level, on the other side there is Slovakia with pro-Russian sentiments in the political leadership and within the society. Slovakia was at the time the sole V4 country in which the level of trust in Russians was higher than it was in America (33% vs. 23%) (Zgut, 2017). Hungarian government's good relations with

Russia are disguised behind a mask of pragmatism. In the Czech Republic, conversely, President Miloš Zeman openly espouses pro-Russian views in different fields, starting from sanctions against the Kremlin.

Ambitions

V4 has been a useful instrument for the new Polish government, as, since the migration crisis- that by the way also gave power to PiS in 2015 the Group was transformed into a platform for criticism of the EU and its general agenda. PiS, having in its manifesto Eurosceptic or simply anti-European slogans, was pleased to utilize the group in its crusade against Brussels. The most significant element of Poland's new foreign policy paradigm redefinition by PiS was based on a deep pessimism as regards the future of European integration (Balcer, 2016). "Europe of sovereign nation-states" became an unofficial slogan of Central Europe, repeated ad nauseam during meetings dominated by Warsaw and Budapest. But V4 was also not enough for the PiS ambitions. Not only, because the group was not coherent in key areas and alliances, and some of the leaders could not have always been counted on, but also it was too small to offer an alternative to the European Union. V4 has only been a sub-regional organization within the EU, instantly connected to the Western world and its well established institutions. In other words, from PiS' perspective the V4 made sense only as a whiner or- putting it more euphemistically- dissenter inside the existing European sphere but not as its substitute. And PiS wanted more than this.

PiS had been heavily criticized, both internationally and by the opposition back home, for ruining Poland's position in the EU and offering nothing in exchange. And it is worth reminding that before the 2015 general elections Poland was commonly seen as one of the biggest success stories in the Eastern Europe. Warsaw has established itself not only as a "normal player" among the old member states but also moved to the position of a frontrunner among newcomers to the EU, and became a regional champion, one the engines of the EU (Kratochvíl&Misík, 2016). Poland's role was the result of its size, economic power and determination of all post-1989 governments. In the EU Poland was seen as a country that can set its own agenda (eg. Eastern Partnership, European Neighborhood Policy, Russia) and the most influential member in coalition-building. Poland was a political leader of Central and Eastern Europe and Warsaw became the voice of the entire region representing its point of view and sensibility vis-à-vis the Commission, but also Berlin or Paris. What is more, Polish position in the region was additionally strengthened by the fact Warsaw was seen as the main advocate of Ukraine in the EU (E.g. Gotev&Kokoszcyński, 2014). All this went down to the annals of history. Jarosław Kaczyński's radicalism, his headstrong critique of the Western model of integration, his hateful comments about the European elites mixed with internal "reforms" that jeopardize the rule of law, human rights of Polish people and Poland's full

membership in the Union, resulted with the fact that other European countries did not want to be represented by Warsaw any longer. Most of the Eastern member states opted for direct bilateral relations with the most powerful capitals in the EU. Sadly, even Ukraine stopped seeing Poland as its natural representative, preferring Germany and France to do the job. PiS, having no other doctrine or concept to offer for its foreign policy revolution, decided to come back to the mostly forgotten or ignored idea of the Intermarium.

Intermarium

The Intermarium project refers to a geopolitical concept developed in the early 20th century by Polish leader Marshal Józef Piłsudski, involving the region from the Baltic to the Black seas. The idea of the creation of a third power bloc between Western Europe, particularly Germany, and Russia, emerged from the period in which the Austro-Hungarian Empire was being dismembered in line with the Treaty of Versailles that brought an end to the First World War. (Laurelle & Rivera, 2019) The main reason behind it was mainly to oppose foreign imperialism through creation of a federation of countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Piłsudski believed that Russia is “Asian beast hidden behind a European mask” and once, following the dissolution of the Russian Empire, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine formed independent states only an alliance of those states in a federal body could safeguard their respective sovereignties. Land-wise the idea referred to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth from the 16th and 17th century (Chodakiewicz, MJ., 2012).

The first failed attempts of creating an Eastern European Federation in the 20th century happened already in Versailles after the World War I (Imagined Geographies, 2019). In the aftermath of the Polish-Soviet War (1919–21), it became obvious that a federation of Eastern European countries, based on a Polish-Ukrainian axis, will not materialize. The new federation’s idea presented by Piłsudski was an alliance with the Baltic and Balkan states. But it was rejected by most of the countries and only the Polish-Romanian pact was established in 1921. Later Piłsudski replaced it with the concept of a federation with the semi-clandestine Promethean League (Liga Promotejska).

The idea of the Intermarium varied depending on the times, sometimes stretching from the Scandinavian countries up to the Balkans. In the late 1930s, Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Romania were added to the concept under the initiative of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Józef Beck, Piłsudski’s protégé. Beck elaborated an idea of *politique d’équilibre* aiming at an equal distancing from both Germany and Soviet Russia. Intermarium was supposed to become a third power bloc between them; and later the concept of a “Third Europe,” an offensive alliance with the aim of furthering the political influence of Poland within Europe (Imagined Geographies, 2019, p.9). The discussion of

the project was censored in Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War, with the Soviets very much interested in censoring and destroying the concept. After 1989 it was revived. In 1994 the League of Intermarium States Parties was established however it worked till the end of 1990s and did not influence broader policy of the engaged countries (Starzyk & Tomaszewska, 2017). There are claims that the idea of Intermarium appeared again in the Polish foreign policy in form of V4 and Eastern Partnership, as both are regional projects with security (including the energy) and their main objective.

But Intermarium resurrected in Polish foreign philosophy with Lech Kaczyński (president of Poland, 2005-2010). He couldn't stress more his beliefs that the sovereignty of Poland cannot be reached without the independence of Lithuania, Belarus or Ukraine (Giedroyc Doctrine). Kaczyński's foreign policy focused on historical and symbolic aspects, was often labeled as utopia, but he also tried to realize some specific projects in the area of security (Szelachowska, K., 2016). It cannot be forgotten that Lech Kaczyński was not shaping nor leading Polish diplomacy singlehandedly, as his term coincided with the time in office of Donat Tusk as prime minister and Radosław Sikorski as minister of foreign affairs (both Civic Platform), who definitely preferred the Western orientation. It was a turbulent period of power struggle between the president and the government about the vision of external relations.

When Andrzej Duda won 2015 presidential elections and a few months later Jarosław Kaczyński's list came first in general elections, securing absolute majorities in both chambers of the Polish parliament, something that never happened before in Poland's post-communist history, PiS could have finally taken full responsibility of foreign affairs. Nonetheless, as it has been already stressed, in this area PiS did not have much to offer. Just like their internal political manifesto, their external agenda was mostly negative, funded on criticism of the EU and the strongest European capitals as biggest obstacles to introducing the intuitional and moral revolution envisioned by Jarosław Kaczyński. On one hand side, it was the most far-reaching reorientation in foreign policy in the last quarter of a century, which, at the level of policy declarations made by representatives of the government circles and their intellectual supporters, implied the abandonment of a number of key assumptions that had created policy after 1989 (Change in Poland, 2016, p.1). On the other side, it did not have much to put forward beyond the "We're rising from our knees" slogan. Due to the absence of other options to underpin the change of direction, right wing eyes in Poland turned towards Intermarium.

Andrzej Duda favored cooperation with Central and Eastern European states and Sweden. His first foreign visit was in Estonia and it had big symbolic meaning, bearing in mind Estonian relations with Russia (Russian minority in Estonia, Russian cyber attacks on Estonian administration). Duda visibly sticks to the Eastern direction of his foreign visits. Being under the influence of his political patron Jarosław Kaczyński- twin brother of Lech Kaczyński who died in a plane crash in Smolensk, Russia, in 2010- Duda run

foreign policy in a direction that has been interpreted as reminiscent of Intermarium attempting to recreate the Polish plan of building a natural defensive alliance among like-minded neighbors in the face of the Russian threat. On the eve of his inauguration new Poland's president re-launched the idea of a between-the-seas alliance under the label of Three Seas Initiative (TSI), sometimes referred to as Trimarium.

Trimarium

The TSI grew out of a debate sparked by a report co-published by the Atlantic Council and Central Europe Energy Partners (CEEP), an energy lobby group, with the goal of promoting big Central European companies' interests in the EU (Imagined Geographies, 2019, p.19). The report, entitled "Completing Europe—From the North-South Corridor to Energy, Transportation, and Telecommunications Union" was presented in Brussels in 2015. It was co-edited by General Chairman of the Atlantic Council James L. Jones, Jr., former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, and CEO of Polish state-owned gas company Lotos Paweł Olechnowicz. The report recommended construction of a North-South Corridor of energy, transportation, and communications that would link the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic and Black Seas.

Trimarium is not Intermarium. It is not anymore a federal dream inspired by Piłsudski but a much limited project focused on two interconnected pillars, economy and safety. The first one can be divided in several sectors, like energy, transport, and logistics. The aim of this cooperation is to use the potential of the Central and Eastern European states and to bridge the historical gap in development between the region and Old Europe. In 2017 further areas of TSI cooperation were outlined, namely culture and science, but they have remained in the sphere of declarations. It is not only president Duda who promoted the concept of TSI but it was embraced by the entire Polish government. The importance of TSI was underlined many times in speeches of minister of foreign affairs Witold Waszczykowski (Conception of Intermarium, p.25) and his successors, Jacek Czaputowicz and Zbigniew Rau.

In practical terms the TSI partners met for the first time on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York on 29th September 2015. The TSI was inaugurated in 2016 jointly by Poland and Croatia, and it should be noted here that one of the most visible results of the TSI has been enhanced cooperation between Poland and Croatia led by a tandem of two conservative presidents who simply liked each other, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Andrzej Duda. The event in Dubrovnik was held under the slogan "Strengthening Europe: Connecting North and South" in 2016.

Along with the 12 initial participants – Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia – 15 other

participant countries chose to join specific projects, notably Ukraine. A dozen TSI countries cover 28% of the EU's territory and 22% of its population (114 million people). The Dubrovnik Summit that formalized the project was followed by summits in Warsaw (2017), Bucharest (2018), Ljubljana (2019) and Tallinn (October 2020). The Summits include a business forum, where representatives of the European Commission, the USA and Germany also participate.

During the Globsec forum, held in May 2017 in Bratislava, President Duda, defining the TSI, said that through it "(...) we want to be not just a beneficiary, but first of all a co-author of European unity. Unity expressed in a dense network of roads, railways, air connections and energy links. The success of the Three Seas Initiative will ensure the positive functioning of the European market and is to raise our region's credibility not only in the eyes of our European partners, but also globally" ("President of the Republic of Poland / News / President Andrzej Duda: CE in favour of EU, NATO open-door policy", 2020).

The 2019 Ljubljana summit explained the objectives of the initiative:

The overarching pillars of the Three Seas Initiative are threefold – economic development, European cohesion and transatlantic ties. The changing nature of the global environment calls for their strengthening in order to be able to face new challenges and overcome dynamic threats. Firstly, the Initiative seeks to contribute to the economic development of Central and Eastern Europe through infrastructure connectivity, mainly, but not only on the north-south axis, in three main fields – transport, energy and digital. The second objective is to increase real convergence among EU member states, thereby contributing to enhanced unity and cohesion within the EU. This allows avoiding artificial east-west divides and further stimulates EU integration. Thirdly, the Initiative is intended to contribute to the strengthening of transatlantic ties. The U.S. economic presence in the region provides a catalyst for an enhanced transatlantic partnership (Ljubljana summit, 2019).

The declared dedication to the European integration was a relief for many observers.

What brought attention to the summits was presence of international guests. Donald Trump joined the Warsaw event and said the project would "transform and rebuild the entire region and ensure that your infrastructure, like your commitment to freedom and rule of law, binds you to all of Europe and, indeed, to the West". (Wemer, 2019) European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas appeared in Bucharest and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier visited Ljubljana in 2019. The European Commission (EC) has been officially supporting the project since the Bucharest Summit. The Commission has emphasized its objectives in very neutral terms as improving the connectivity of the region but also with the rest of the European Union. The EC identified the projects that will receive funding. The total amount now

foreseen is more than EUR 155 billion from the Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund (Thomann, 2019). Many of the TSI priority projects have been approved for partial financial support from various EU funds or for loans from the European Investment Bank.

Since 2018 also the German involvement in TSI is evidently visible. Berlin's participation is motivated by the desire to strengthen cooperation with Central Europe and reduce divisions in the EU. It also aims to limit US economic ambitions in the region (Zornaczuk, 2019). The latter reason was unquestionably a trigger for Germany to look closer at the Initiative that had been originally seen as a potentially hostile platform of European troublemakers, Poland and Hungary. Berlin also discovered the potential for German companies to join the TSI investments in infrastructure. Germany's status as a partner country was included in the final declaration of the Bucharest summit and Heiko Maas suggested that his country as a Baltic state it should become a member.

From the other side, in October 2019, a resolution was introduced in the US House of Representatives "expressing support of the Three Seas Initiative in its efforts to increase energy independence and infrastructure connectivity thereby strengthening the United States and European national security" (H.Res. 672). In February 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced a US commitment of up to USD 1 billion in financing for TSI countries to promote energy security and economic growth. During the Bucharest Summit, US energy secretary Rick Perry announced a new "Partnership for Transatlantic Energy Cooperation" (P-TEC) initiative to help "raise these projects to the top of the political and economic agenda for their wider visibility and attractiveness" (The Three Seas Initiative explained, 2019). He added that the TSI could attract substantial investment from US and multinational businesses to work in partnership with governments to build new energy and transportation infrastructure.

Energy appears to be the main strategic area of activity within TSI, as its countries depend heavily on Russian energetic material (in case of some countries, like Estonia, the dependency is almost 100%) ("Eurostat", 2020). The TSI will look to capitalize on the new Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals in Świnoujście and Klaipėda, as well as a potential future terminal to be built in Krk in Croatia. Connecting these new sources of LNG south from Poland and Lithuania, and north from Croatia could substantially lessen the need for Russian gas imports in the region. The goal here is to ensure energy security so that no one can "blackmail" the countries in this part of Europe, as Polish President Andrzej Duda has put it (Górka, 2018). In addition to these LNG sources, the TSI will also look to support the connection of regional energy networks to the Trans Adriatic Pipeline between Greece and Italy, as well as connect new Romanian Black Sea gas reserves to the region. Amongst the multilateral projects that have been agreed upon during the Bucharest Summit were the: Poland-Latvia gas interconnector, the Bulgaria-Romania-Hungary-Austria gas interconnector, the

Eastring Pipeline, the Romania-Hungary-Slovakia connector, Adriatic Pipeline, Baltic Pipe Pipeline with the expansion of existing Polish pipelines, the Poland-Slovakia as well as Poland-Czechia connectors. All these projects will help not only lessen the Russian dependence, but also will allow, after many years, integrate the gas infrastructure in the region helping to benefit from the common gas market emerging in the EU (Three Seas Gas Initiative Possible?, 2019). Investments in energy will be also a response to the growing pressure on the introduction of low-carbon technologies. One of the consequences of these projects should be very visible for people living in the region, the gas prices should get lower.

But the security agenda of TSI cannot be seen only from the angle of energy security. Although military cooperation cannot be found among the TSI priorities it should be mentioned for the full picture of the Initiative, especially in the context of strong interest and support TSI gets from the USA. In 2017 President Trump said “The Three Seas Initiative will not only empower your people to prosper, but it will ensure that your nations remain sovereign, secure, and free from foreign coercion” (Remarks by President Trump, 2017). Poland’s ambition is to become “the core of the NATO and US military presence in the region” of Central and Eastern Europe (MFA Republic of Poland, 2019). And TSI is seen as a tool to reach this goal. From the other perspective, all bilateral initiatives between the Polish government and the Trump administration in the area of military cooperation (e.g. Fort Trump, Pompeo’s 2020 defence agreement) are presented as key projects for the entire region. For many TSI countries the alliance with the USA is considered necessary to contain Russia and expand their room for manoeuvre in the EU. The focus on the Russian threat gives Poland the opportunity to position itself as a regional geopolitical pivot point on the Eastern Flank of NATO (The Three Seas Initiative, 2019, p.38).

The TSI’s security pillar seeks to increase regional military mobility by developing a joint transportation network and thus is tightly connected to the Initiative’s transportation pillar. These two goals are to be reached through three main projects: the regional roadway project Via Carpathia, and the Rail Baltica railroad, which links Klaipėda in Lithuania with Thessaloniki in Greece and provides European standard-gauge railways for military transport to the Baltic countries from Poland, and the Central Transport Hub (CPK), a mega-airport close to Warsaw. In addition to the investments in roads and railways, new projects will also include water transport infrastructure, the so-called river roads and aviation infrastructure.

In this context, TSI is very important for China, as it constitutes the gateway to Europe from the perspective of overland BRI development: the southern BRI corridor leads from Turkey through Bulgaria and Hungary and the eastern corridor will lead through Belarus to Poland (Eder, T.E. 2018). TSI is “where Belt and Road meets Bretton Woods” (Lewicki, G. 2020, p.23). In many Three Seas countries – including Poland – China wants to tap into

local infrastructural needs and invest in the development of logistics centres and other infrastructural projects.

In addition to the hard infrastructure TSI format includes a consistent initiative in jointly developing the digital infrastructure of the region (The Kosciusko Insitute, 2018). TSI will extend in the near future to digital technology including fibre optics, broadcasting stations and the 5G network (The Three Seas Initiative, 2018). Better cooperation between TSI countries in the area of ICT can ensure a better inter-connectivity among them and could compensate the limited available capital for research and development (as compared to Western member-states) (New Strategy Center, 2018).

On the 5th June 2019, during the Summit in Ljubljana, CEOs of Polish Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego and EximBank Romania announced officially the establishment of The Three Seas Initiative Investment Fund. (“BGK”, 2017) The Fund will focus on transport, energy and digital infrastructure projects. The Fund's resources will come from various sources. The institutions which established the Fund have both made investment commitments, and the total amount exceeds EUR 500 million. The plan is for the Fund to engage, on a commercial basis, in infrastructure projects with a total value up to EUR 100 billion, while the needs in the Three Seas region have been estimated at over EUR 570 billion. (List of priority, 2018) Estonia, Latvia and Hungary recently pledged investments in the fund and other TSI countries are expected to follow. The Fund will show its first viable projects in October 2020 (“Central Europe’s”, 2020).

Potential

Surprisingly for many, the Three Seas Initiative became a lasting element of the Central and Eastern European landscape. Something that was expected to be just a periodic show-off created by the Polish right wing populists looking for new tools to frighten “the Old Europe” ended up being a constructive platform of cooperation for a dozen of states. It looks like the key to the TSI's success was precisely the abandonment of the idea of establishing a new international organization, sort of Eastern-European Union, EU's alter-ego built on ultra-conservative world-view and the concept of maximum national sovereignty.

In other words, TSI succeeded because it is not Internarium. It reflects only a light shade of Internarium. And only very sharp and determined political objectives can justify describing the TSI as an immediate continuation of Piłsudski's concept from the 1920s. But it does not mean that attempts of equating these two are totally absent in public debate. Contrarily, they do exist and are fuelled by different political interests. They are present in the right wing corner of the Polish political spectrum, where zealous supporters of the current government want to see, and actually can see, the TSI as a successful

embodiment of imperialistic dream à la polonaise. But such a narrative is also present in Putin's Russia (E.g. Sadlowski, M. 2020). Kremlin's analysts fail to recognize that Warsaw no longer views the regional cooperation between the Baltic Sea, the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea as it did one hundred years ago but rather conceives it as a means for development of the region to the benefit of all.

It is true that it is hard to imagine the TSI without Russia. TSI members share first-hand, vivid memories of the Kremlin's geopolitical dominance, which makes them determined to combat military, energy, infrastructural, or misinformation-related threats from today's Russia. But TSI is not about negative reactions or destructive responses to Russia. It is more about building constructive solutions for challenges created by Russian geopolitical interests. And this is only a part of the story, as the TSI aims at building constructive solutions for much broader challenges; challenges resulted from the post-WWII history, from the backwardness arising from the foreign exploitation, communist heritage and late integration with the European Communities. Central and Eastern Europe wants to benefit from modernization. As the Estonian president Kersti Kaljulaid stressed: "The Three Seas initiative is a practical approach to fill the void in the countries that were formerly behind the Iron Curtain and are now a part of the European Union" (Green, 2020).

The European dimension is the core element for solidification of the TSI. Its critics underline that the Initiative is nothing but a geopolitical block, that beyond being anti-Russian, is anti-German and anti-Brussels at its core; that its modus operandi is to implode the European institutions. Much of this criticism is based on a projection on the whole Initiative of the political and ideological agenda of the current Polish government. But from the Ljubljana Summit it became clear that the TSI will not be developed as an anti-EU project. It was explicitly stated in the summit declaration and was underlined by TSI's country leaders, including Poland. In 2018 Head of the Polish Presidential Office Krzysztof Szczerski said that the 12 countries are "determined to preserve both the unity of Europe and trans-Atlantic ties," stressing that an integrated Central Europe translated into a more united European Union (Szczerski, 2018). Warsaw understood that its regional partners are not willing to participate in funding of any alternative for the EU, but they aim at building a targeted, practical and result-oriented platform that will facilitate the overall development of the Eastern part of the EU. According to this standpoint the TSI must be participative and coherent with Old Europe, directed towards the greater goals of the European Integration. Poland seemed to accept the fact that if it wants to be seen as the mother of this success the TSI must be rooted in the EU and respect European values. Such a cooperative and modernization-oriented Initiative met, after initial hesitation, with great interest from the side of the European Commission, Germany and other important players in the continent, what can be decisive about its real success in the future.

For the PiS government this success is especially important as in general Warsaw, since 2015, has been seen as destructive at EU level and with nothing serious to offer in its relations with other European capitals. A TSI that can improve bilateral and multilateral regional relations in the continent is able to slightly change this image. Poland as the biggest of the TSI states and its firmest promoter stands on the very precipice of capitalizing from the potential achievements of the Initiative.

“Potential” - it is a keyword. What has been so far described as a success is merely a creation of a block with a vision and ambitious plans. The TSI remains a regional declaration whose economic and infrastructural goals are still unrealized. None of the big projects has been finished. And Poland that presents itself as a solution has been so far too many times a part of the problem, for example blocking some of the much needed gas investments on its southern border. Also Polish parts of the emblematic regional investments like Rail Baltica are delayed. (E.g. Najwyższa, 2019) and national megaprojects like the Central Communication Hub that are supposed to serve the entire region and help ensure its safety exist only on paper and many commentators doubt they will ever be carried out.

The further development of the Initiative depends on the will of the regional leaders. It was created as a presidential activity signed by two conservatives, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović and Andrzej Duda. The first one lost the election in early 2020 and was replaced by a socialist, Zoran Milanović. Milanović had in the past called the TSI a “senseless mistake”, “an old delusion”, “a redundant and unnecessary initiative” and “a ridiculous idea”. He wanted to see Croatian foreign policy to be closely allied to the EU mainstream. But once he took the office said that he would not obstruct the initiative and he will be present at the Tallinn Summit in October. It can be concluded that the TSI has been entrenched enough in the region that it will be developed regardless of any political shifts that may occur as a consequence of elections. And liberals should not be afraid of the block either. Contrarily, a TSI that is closely attached to the European and Euro-Atlantic organizations, with modernization and bridging the development gap on the continent set as its main goals, is an attractive instrument to implement core liberal postulates. Presence of Zuzana Čaputová, a symbol of modern Central European progressivism, in TSI meetings is a good example to follow. Last year Čaputová said that if V4 cooperation is to be meaningful, it can’t only be about protecting regional interests. ““It has to be about promoting democratic values, the values of freedom and the rule of law and values of European integration, as was stated in the original agreement on whose basis the V4 was created,” she added (Caputova, 2019).

The very idea of the TSI is in statu nascendi. “Its final shape remains to be determined, though the dynamic nature of politics allows us to predict confidently that this process will never – and should never – be completed. In order to function, develop, and thrive, Trimarium will have to evolve and be modified repeatedly in order to adjust to the new

challenges that will emerge in the future” (Zulawski & Baeva, 2017, p.9.). But this perpetual characteristics of TSI development can never serve as an excuse preventing the TSI from establishing and strengthening rules and institutions. Without them the TSI will not be able to play any complementary role in the EU, it will be one more ad hoc project, or merely a common name for a series of conferences and a good-looking logo.

Finally, the development of the TSI does not constitute the reduction or elimination of the V4. These are two different projects, with different scopes and goals. Of course, there is a lot that unites them: both involve Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland with a prevailing role of the latter one, both are formats plugged to the EU trying to influence its agenda and solve a number of actual and potential problems in the region. But V4 has a potential of building much closer integration based on shared interests, priorities and – above all – implementation strategies (Cabada, 2018). It goes without saying that the V4’s *raison d’être* must be re-defined but it can be much broader than the one of the TSI and the integration between its members can be much deeper. Funds directed for culture and educational projects can facilitate shaping regional identity, but it is crucial that this identity is positive and built on European fundamentals. To accomplish that changes in the Central European governments are necessary. Conservative populists have significantly lower chances in succeeding in stimulating regional integration, if they stick to their nationalistic agenda, than the so-called mainstream parties that are open for pooling their sovereignty to reach greater common goals. Liberals, with their pragmatism and optimism if it comes to international cooperation, multilateralism, and respect for minority groups, are especially predestined to lead such processes to positive ends.

“The V4 countries were not able to elaborate jointly the infrastructural projects, to talk with one voice in the EU and NATO, collectively define the risk areas and cooperate in the process of their elimination. The V4 economies do not produce positive synergies, but strongly compete among themselves – mainly with effort to attract the foreign investments. The V4 also does not produce a “mark”: it is still weakly organized, also within the societies of the member states. The V4 does not create the network for the cooperation, as we can observe in the cases of Benelux or Nordic cooperation” (Kuzelewska, Bartnicki & Skarzynski, 2015, p.146). On the other hand, the V4 is a long standing, stable organization that has succeeded a few times at revitalizing their mission in order to reach some regional goals and could do it again. V4 can still make a positive contribution to the transformation of Ukraine, democratic Belarus, the countries of the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans, as the enlargement process continues to be one of the priorities of the V4. Finally, the V4 could benefit from a tight coordination inside the TSI influencing the most strategic decision of the TSI and setting the tone of block covering 1/3 of the EU.

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Dr. Šárka Prát: **THE REVIVAL OF LIBERALISM IN CENTRAL EUROPE**

The Visegrad Group (also known as the "V4" or simply "Visegrad Four") replicates the hard work of the countries of the Central European region to work together in a number of grounds of common interest within the all-European integration. Czechia, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary have always been part of a sole civilization sharing cultural values and mutual roots in diverse religious traditions, which they desire to preserve and reinforce further. The Visegrad group traces its inspiration to the congress of Visegrad in 1335 where leaders of the central European kingdoms of Bohemia, Hungary, and Poland met to peacefully resolve disputes (Rácz, 2015). This meeting between Kingdoms was a historical milestone in creating liberal connections through peaceful cooperation in Central Europe. Since its formation, the original Visegrad project was cemented in protecting the region for other regional threats, which still holds true today, and used liberalism as a broad political ideology characterized by an emphasis on individual freedom, the autonomous moral value of the individual, and the responsibility to oneself. The required freedom was guaranteed by unquestionable civil and political rights (freedom of speech, religion and assembly, equality before the law, active and passive suffrage, etc.), which belonged to every citizen, regardless of their gender, race or social status. The modern Visegrad project protecting these values began in 1991 in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of communism in the Eastern Bloc. Its main goal was to rebuild Central Europe's Western identity after decades of Communist Authoritarian rule. The goal of this group was not only to eliminate totalitarian and communist elements from their member states but change the very nature of Central European society so that a totalitarian system could never take root in the region again. This entailed the institution of parliamentary democracy, restoration of freedom of religion, the press and association, ensuring the rights of ethnic minorities and the creation of a market economy (Visegrad Group, 1991). The Visegrad group worked to achieve these goals by joining western democratic institutions, such as NATO and the EU, which emphasized the importance of Democracy. In addition to pulling away from communism and joining the West, the formation of the V4 managed to maintain the peaceful cooperation between constituent ethnic groups and prevent any regional ethnic conflict, such as what was occurring in the former Yugoslavia at the time. The Visegrad Project, therefore, has two concrete stated political goals: "to eliminate the remnants of the communist bloc in Central Europe" and "to overcome historic animosities between Central European countries". After successful accession to the EU and NATO, the V4 has continued to strengthen regional cooperation through small scale grants while also giving a strong voice against Russian aggression in neighbouring Ukraine. Yet, many have speculated that the Visegrad group would lose relevance when it lost its "raison d'être" preparing the countries for integration into the European Union.

The threat of illiberalism and potential solutions

The Visegrad countries are located in regions of Europe with the lowest levels of Liberal democracy in the European Union. Hungary and Poland are the 3rd and 4th least democratic Countries in Europe, respectively, while the lowest ranked countries of Romania and Croatia both share borders with Hungary.

EIU Democracy Index Scores for selected countries 2006–2019

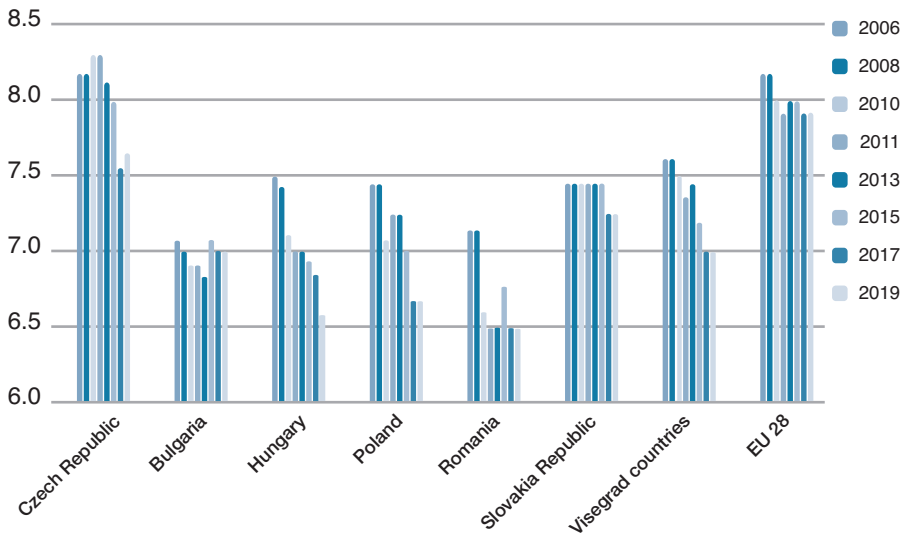


Figure 1: EIU Democracy Index Scores for selected countries 2006-2019 (10 being highest)

Source: From Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index

After the collapse of communism in the Early 1990s, the region made strides to embrace liberalism and join liberal European institutions. Around 2008, this trend reversed, and the region began to develop more illiberal attitude. The term illiberal democracy was in fact coined by Hungarian Minister Viktor Orbán in 2014 when he said “It does not reject the fundamental principles of liberalism such as freedom, and I could list a few more, but it does not make this ideology the central element of state organisation, but instead includes a different, special, national approach” (Orbán, 2014). Since 2017, there have been some signs that the trend was beginning to stop or reverse in some countries (Barber, 2019). The region has also become less liberal as large numbers of its youth and preliberal activists have migrated to western European Union countries, such as Germany and the UK. This deficit of youth and pro-democracy activists has made it harder for liberal groups to gain real political power due to lack of leadership and numbers.

This can be seen in the Czech Republic where last year's celebrations of thirty years of freedom in the Czech Republic showed joy and gratitude, but also disappointment and disillusionment. There was a feeling that "something" failed fundamentally, as today we are again concerned about the rise of authoritarian politicians and the fragmentation of democracy, populism and the awakening from the dream of the ultimate victory of liberalism over all the evils of the world. This problem stems from the beginning of the transformation into free states. The former Soviet satellites did not find their own way of organizing society, but instead simply imitated the West, to the disappointment of Western idealists. Perhaps we can relate to this as humans, as we seldom desire something directly, as it can be seen as vain and snobbish. Direct desire can be doomed to escalation, devotion, or simply disappointment when the desirer realizes they have humiliated themselves in their fruitless longing. Did this not happen in Central and Eastern Europe? Illiberal or anti-liberal nationalist tendencies are an expression of this disappointment and humiliation. Germany was, and still is, proud of its welfare state and its co-decision system, where trade unions played a key role in corporate governance. But the West Germans never tried to export these aspects of their political system to the East through the EU. The official reason was that Central and Eastern Europeans could not afford them, but perhaps it was also because the weakened state protection of Central and Eastern European workers and citizens could create favourable investment opportunities for German industry.

Realizing this worrying turn away from liberal politics in the Central European Region, it is paramount to understand how to combat it with the highest degree of efficiency. There are several possible ways to deal with the issue. On the national level the best strategy would be to facilitate local activism which pushes against relevant illiberal acts in the country. An example to be given is of the Committee for the Defense of Democracy (KOD), which draws on the roots of Solidarity (the movement that was key for the fall of communism in Poland) and stages massive protests in response to PiS illiberal policies, such as the control of state media and decreasing independence of the national courts (Rupnik, 2016). Apart from the policies that directly decrease the levels of democracy in the country, these movements should focus on corruption. It is necessary to tackle corruption, because it has been shown that high levels of corruption lead to general distrust of politics and democracy (Acht & Enste, 2018). Therefore, by dealing with the corruption in the ruling party the long-term support for liberal policies should rise. Even more, the economic incentive could be enticing for the population, as they could gain directly from decreased levels of corruption. The international response should concentrate around monetary and political support of such local activist organizations; however, it should not stop there. Specifically, the response of the European Union should be fiercer than it currently is, as the backsliding of its member countries could prove detrimental. There are numerous options it could take, such as: establishing conditionality on receiving funds from the Union, as it should not honour decisions taken by courts that are clearly not independent (such as in Poland and Hungary); and pushing

forward Article 7 against offending countries (Polyakova, 2019). It is further necessary not to forget the underlying structural issues that lead to the popular support of populist illiberal parties. These are firstly demographic, such as emigration and ageing populations, which contribute to the problem as the demographic group that most ardently supports liberalism is weakened. Secondly, they are economic, as the worsening financial state for certain strata within the society lead to return worrying about material security and distrust of the elites, which can be easily exploited by the populist movements (Inglehart & Norris, 2017). In conclusion, it is necessary to combat illiberalism on different fronts and not just wait till it exhausts itself.

Does the Visegrad Group have any relevance in contemporary Europe?

While the V4 grouping was mostly focused on low level scholarships across the region after EU accession, it began to regain political relevance when its member states banded together to push back against EU mechanisms for mandatory quotas for asylum seekers to European countries (Krastev & Holmes, 2019). After the migrant crisis the group played a larger role in preventing its member states from engaging in corrupt practices and promoting Central European liberalism and liberal democracy. Two terms that are close to each other, but by far not the same. Liberal democracy was taken as a specific form of democracy. One that guarantees its citizens unquestionable rights and is characterized by elected government officials, free and regular elections, universal suffrage, the right to run for office, freedom of expression, the right to alternative information and freedom of association. Central European liberalism referred to an ideology, i.e. a systematized political doctrine formed by a complex of theories about man and society, which seeks not only to explain the real world, but also to change it.

There could be posed some doubts regarding the relevancy of V4 as no member states hold a top EU position. However, this fact on its own does not mean that the group or the individual countries do not have significance in the European Parliament, but rather that low voter turnout and voting patterns, consistent with the rest of the EU, indicate that the region does not view European Parliament elections as particularly significant and does not have a strong regional voice in the parliament.

	2014	2019
V4	21,01	35,13
EU	42,61	50,66

Table 1 : European Parliament Elections Turnout
Source: European Parliament, 2019.

In 2019, voter turnout was 15 points lower in V4 countries than the EU, with the Czech Republic and Slovakia having the lowest from all the EU states. The V4 grouping also generally votes for the same European Parties as the rest of the EU—The Center right European people’s party and center-right Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats. The most significant position held by a citizen of a V4 country in the European parliament, is Jan Zahradil’s premiership of the soft Euro-skeptic party (ECR), which received 62 of the parliament’s 705 MEPs.

While admittedly the joint goals of the V4 countries in the EU are primarily political, it is further necessary to consider the potential for economic cooperation within the group which could be seen as the biggest relevancy in Europe. Although the four countries are competing for foreign direct investment (FDI) between each other due to the similar nature of their industries, they have shown willingness to work together on the international sphere. In April 2018, the Ministers of Economic Affairs of all member countries signed a Joint Declaration on the Future of Economic Cooperation, in which they emphasize the need to coordinate their position to boost competitiveness, to encourage modernization of different sections of their economies (including participation in the EU’s Digital Innovation Hub (DIH) or Industry 4.0 National Technology Platforms) and underline the need for more liberal data sharing amongst the members (Visegrad Group, 2018). In theory, the countries could in this way boost their own relevance through economic cooperation, and if counted together, the V4 would be the 5th largest economy in the EU and 12th globally (Harper, 2019).

However, in practice there are many obstacles to fluent economic symbiosis amongst the member countries. Most vitally, the economies of the V4 are heavily dependent on the old countries of the EU, like the Netherlands, Austria or Germany. For instance, in the Czech Republic around 75% of the FDI comes from the old EU countries and almost 40% of its foreign trade is with Germany (CZSO, 2018). For other countries the story is quite similar. That is not to say that there is no trade or investment within the V4, as for example 25% of Slovakia’s export is inside the group, yet is not as significant overall. Due to this dependence, full cooperation is hindered, as the individual countries have stronger incentives to form trade agreements with the western EU countries (Cabada, 2018). Although it is true that the V4 had recently managed to gather together and pull for one rope on the European political scene (notably against the quotas on migration and against requirements on clean energy), this ‘success’ unfortunately did not translate into the economic sphere. That is particularly because currently the V4 is profiling itself to be a ‘negative alliance’, meaning that it does not have any decisive common goals, but rather only stands together against the goals of others (the EU in this case).

Despite this, the V4 is an organization that has ample potential for economic cooperation, particularly for fostering investment between each other and adopting a

stronger position on the international trade market. The region has reaped enormous benefits from its membership in the European Union, as through various funds it has managed to particularly improve its infrastructure (Deloitte, 2017). The infrastructure and investments from the EU has made the V4 countries very desirable countries for investment, full of untapped potential and relatively cheap and good-skilled labour. On the top of this, the V4 ranks amongst the fastest growing economies in the EU. Germany especially had realized this potential and engaged heavily within the region; however, there is no reason for why the V4 countries shouldn't grasp the opportunity themselves. Increase in inter-investment in the region can potentially decrease the dependence on western countries in the EU and makes the bloc more prepared to face significant economic crises. All the above is necessary to move the theoretical promises from the Joint Declarations into real life policy practice. Yet, it is key to point out that any cooperation should not lead to worsening economic relations with other EU countries, as that could prove to be detrimental for future economic growth.

Impact of coronavirus on V4 countries

The prosperity of the region was built on the offer of decent quality goods and cheap labour. It is the countries of Central Europe that are now in danger of a demographic decline, and the prospects for major improvements in efficiency or innovation in the economy are not great either. Future prosperity is all the more threatened by the current corona crisis. Due to the lockdowns, which were mandated as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, it is already clear that there will be long-lasting economic consequences. IMF figures project that the whole region will suffer a large economic contraction. The Czech economy is expected to contract just over 7.5%, Slovakia 6.2%, Poland 4.6%, and Hungary only 3.1% (IMF, 2020). Unemployment is also expected to rise in line with these projections. The forecast for the region is significantly better than the forecast for Europe as a whole based on the severe lockdowns in Italy, France, Spain, and Germany, which make up a large portion of the European economy. Overall, the V4 group will undergo significant economic hardship in 2020 which will disproportionately affect Czechia and Slovakia.

The COVID pandemic also has a considerable impact on the Czech labour market, as a result of the trend it is setting for working from home. Some Czech companies recently suggested that within the next few years up to half of their workforce could work remotely (Fung, 2020) and experts widely agree that this trend is here to stay (Loten, 2020). It will aim to redesign the work experience of non-production employees to enable them to work remotely after the pandemic, underlining that a similar trend was already in place before, as employees who (occasionally) worked from home went up. Both private and public companies are planning to reduce their office space and close are planning to make remote work a permanent option for the roles which allow

it (PwC, 2020). There have been a number of arguments against distance work, usually focused on a possible loss of innovation potential coming from informal office chat. However, these have not yet been proven and, more importantly, can be outweighed by a number of potential benefits. First, while the proximity of workers could be contributing to innovation it is just as likely to be a cause for distraction. Second, the diversity of having workers coming from and living in different countries, cultures, urban or rural areas, and letting them interact, even only online, can be an even bigger driver of innovation. Third, working from home can be financially beneficial to both employers and employees, especially in the case of outsourcing labour to countries with lower costs of life. The fact that hiring workers from such regions can give them a locally competitive salary while saving companies based in more expensive states money is well known. Additional benefits such as the reduction of the pollution and stress caused by commuting are another positive externality. While the benefits of remote work were known before the pandemic, the concept has received a big boost as companies have been forced to implement it temporarily and, by investing in infrastructure and breaking psychological barriers, will likely continue to use it. This could represent a new trend in the Czech labour markets, as companies begin hiring workers in regions with lower costs of life and employees begin to migrate towards them. Of course, such a development could be further helped at national levels (Shotter & Parkin, 2020). To add to this, individual members should aim to make themselves more attractive for remote workers looking to move there and for companies looking to outsource. This could be achieved by increasing investments in digital infrastructure and improving the computer literacy and foreign language skills of their population through all levels of education – school, university and adult – in order to make their workers more attractive; as well as aiming to reduce bureaucratic barriers in order to attract potential expats. With such measures, Czechia would be better prepared for a future increase in employee mobility resulting in more movement both towards the Union and within it.

On the other hand, the political consequences of the pandemic seem to not be overly severe, as so far it has solely strengthened the hand of the government in the Czech Republic and made protests less likely. Polling also shows that since the COVID-19 pandemic the largest three parties in the Czech Parliament have gained support. In the first months of lockdown, Andrej Babis's Ano party as well as the Pirate party and ODS have all had modest gains at the expense of many smaller parties (Focus Taiwan, 2020). There were several domestic rallies including the global anti-racist protests and a minor protest against government mishandling of the crises. For international relations, the pandemic has further stoked tensions between the Czech Republic and Taiwan after the president of the senate of the Czech Republic thanked Taiwan for donating surgical masks. The elections are not due until next autumn, but until then, it is very far away and it is not possible to make any forecast at all now – it will simply depend on how the economy manages the situation, that will be the main criterion.

The future of the Visegrad Group

All V4 states are, at the same time, member states of the European Union (EU) and, hence, their fate is inextricably linked with that of the Union (and vice versa). Looking into the future of the V4 collaboration in the next 10 years there are some crucial policy areas that should be tackled. The core issue is their divergence on fundamental values, especially the importance of liberal democracy and, to a lesser extent, a common foreign policy. The V4 became an important basis for a shared identity and political concept in the region to facilitate the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland's aspiration to break away from authoritarian communist domination. Previous leaders such as Vaclav Havel focused on promoting collaboration to fulfil this idealist view of the region. In the current political climate, nationalists focused on narrow ethnic and national self-interest have shifted their objectives away from collaboration or international liberalism. This is creating a divide with Poland and Hungary on one side and Czechia and Slovakia on the other. This undermines the shared goals and identity of the block. In addition to the ideological question, important issues, like a shared policy towards Russian aggression in Ukraine, have continued to divide the states with Poland and Slovakia advocating the continuation of sanctions against Russia, while the Czech Republic waives, and Hungary openly opposes them (Strzałkowski, 2018). The foreign policy problems are exacerbated by Hungarian premiere Orbán's unusually warm ties with Russia. Despite these problems, the V4 countries maintain close economic ties. If current trends continue, the V4 will lose much of its cultural and political significance instead of becoming an economic grouping.

The V4 also could become a larger forum of cooperation built upon its own vision of democracy and political preferences that diverge from the European mainstream. If this were to happen, the alliance would most likely rule through intergovernmentalism with a confined nationalist agenda and lowest common denominator bargaining. Worst case scenario entails the disintegration of the group where cooperation is slowed. The V4 freezing their alliance would produce an event where they, as individual states, look towards outside allies to continue to strengthen their political and economic impact, such as in the case of Slovakia and the Czech Republic where the countries might steer their foreign policy towards Austria to create a "Slavkov Triangle". In doing so, the V4 would give up its influence at the European level and to some extent, cease to exist. This is not to say that the V4 would be dismantled, but instead the alliance would be used as a way to explore converging interests on a lower, ad-hoc level.

Alliance of Free cities – alternative to the Visegrad project

Central Europe itself is not a player of global significance. In any trouble or crisis, its prosperity is linked to developments throughout Europe and its security depends on NATO. It is part of a larger whole, which, however, also means that any problems in this

region are a problem for all those affected and who have to do with it. However, when discussing the future of the V4, it is interesting to consider the potential alternatives such as Alliance of Free cities (Deutsche Welle 2020). In late 2019, four leaders of the countries' capitals met to sign the free cities alliance, which has the stated goal of promoting the role of cities as political actors within the EU. This pact is significant because the mayors are attempting to bypass their national governments and obtain European funding for their cities directly. It also shows that although populist parties are still winning elections at the national level, there are local actors who can give a real opposition to these policies. The pact was signed by the Mayor of Warsaw, Rafal Trzaskowski, the mayor of Budapest, Gergely Karacsony, Matúš Vallo mayor of Bratislava, and the mayor of Prague, Zdeněk Hřib. All of these politicians have come from a liberal progressive ideology. Trzaskowski and Karacsony are also particularly significant in Poland and Hungary because they managed to defeat candidates from the powerful ruling parties. This pact shows that there are voices in the V4 who do not support their respective governments' populist illiberal policies. This alternative to the V4 is important, but it cannot replace the V4 because the city government simply does not have the power to overshadow national governments on major issues. In any case, the whole region faces major challenges and this time there will be no signposts. Almost all options are acceptable, except those suggested by illiberal charlatans, whose common feature is the manipulation of facts and the effort to centralize power. In a few decades, the region will certainly not be the same as before. It will depend on the ability of his leaders to lead an open, democratic and critical debate on the prospects for the future. It will be in this style and language that people in these countries of this region will not be divided, but rather united.

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István Szent-Iványi: **METAMORPHOSIS VISEGRADIENSIS: THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP**

„If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.“

Prince Salina

Tomasi di Lampedusa

The Leopard

Today, the Visegrad Group is viewed by many as a Eurosceptic, retrograde cooperation platform of populist, illiberal-led countries, a counterforce to the European unity process. However, those familiar with the birth circumstances of this regional co-operation know that this has not been the case for a long time, nor is it condemned to be at present, given the fact that there are particularly encouraging developments for the future. By starting the story at the beginning, we hope to foster an optimistic future image of this long-lasting cooperation.

The early roots

Although the founding fathers considered it important to trace the origins of the Visegrád Group back to 1335, when the meeting of the Hungarian, Polish and Czech kings took place in the city of Visegrád, the actual roots of this diplomatic cooperation are significantly shorter, starting around the 1980's. During the easing phase of the Cold War, especially after Gorbachev came to power and the introduction of the glasnost/perestroika, new hopes arose in the intellectual circles of the Central European states under Soviet control. Although few believed that they could get rid of the whole system of socialism and Soviet guardianship in a short time, more and more people thought that the Central European countries (then meaning Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, supplemented by Austria in the imagination of the braver ones) could fight for a special status, greater freedom and more rights for themselves under the pretext of their Central Europeanness.

Independently of each other, but finding each other around the same time, more and more intellectuals with an independent and opposition sentiment recognized the interdependence of the people of Central Europe and called for closer cooperation. Almost simultaneously, Czesław Miłosz, a Polish Nobel Prize-winning poet, Milan Kundera, a famous Czech emigrant writer, György Konrád and Hungarian writer Péter Muutos, manifested their faith in Central Europeanness, just to mention a few defining names. The writers and intellectuals spoke primarily of a common cultural space,

a common tradition, and argued for the recognition of the links between said customs and traditions. Furthermore, two excellent Hungarian historians, Jenő Szűcs and Péter Hanák played a prominent role in the foundation and the promotion of the idea.

Jeno Szűcs's eminent study, published in samizdat form in the 1981 „Bibó” memorial book explains influential theory concerning three historic regions of Europe (Szűcs, 1981). In accordance to Szucs, there exists an intermediate region between Western and Eastern Europe, which roughly covers the former Hungarian, Czech and Polish kingdoms and which, although more connected to the western half of Europe, has many oriental features. A version of this theory was represented by the historian Péter Hanák, who identified this historical region with the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, clearly including today's Austria in the picture. From here, it was only a step away for politicians to embrace the idea of Central Europeanness. The most prominent politician embracing this idea was Austrian politician Erhard Busek, who, together with diplomat and foreign policy expert Emil Brix, published in 1986 a policy book under the title „Projekt Mitteleuropa” (Busek & Brix 1986). This program was particularly popular in our region and offered a kind of attractive alternative even at the time of the two blocs' confrontation, as it promised participating countries that they could stay out of potential horrors of the „overkill” in addition to promising more freedom to Central European citizens. All this was greatly strengthened by the nostalgia for the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the „happy peaceful times” imaginarily tied to it. Spiritual fashions also supported the strengthening of the Central European sense of belonging: Art Nouveau, the Jugendstil, the intellectual and cultural trends of the turn of the century became popular again, such as Freud's psychoanalysis, Mahler's music, Klimt and Schiele's painting or Otto Wagner's and Loos's architecture.

Let us not forget that the last era of the Habsburg Monarchy (1867-1914) was not only in economic and spiritual terms the heyday of the Central European region, but also due to the increased dominance of liberal values promoted during those times. This was an era of great transformation and modernization. Everything was permeated by a belief in the unbroken progress of liberalism, accompanied by a period of modernization that has never been seen before in the region.

The nostalgia of the eighties was built on these traditions and values. This was particularly attractive in the „Sovietized” countries of the region. Nevertheless, at first, this Central Europeanness seemed more like an attractive, yet idealist intellectual movement, a daydream, rather than a viable political project. However, by the end of the decade, during the so-called „year of miracles”, it appeared as though things that seemed previously unthinkable could become possible. The Central European political, economic and social cooperation finally managed to make its way to the political agenda and subsequently entered into its implementation phase.

The birth of the Visegrád Cooperation (or Visegrád Group)

The birth of Visegrad Cooperation was preceded by another form of Central European cooperation, the so-called Quadragonale. The Quadragonale was established in November 1989 in Budapest with the participation of the Italian, Austrian, Yugoslav and Hungarian governments, following the initiative of Austria (as advised by Austrian Vice-Chancellor Erhard Busek, developer of the Central Europe Project) (Cviic, 1999). In 1990, the vision of the project was enlarged to and took on the name of the Pentagonale, then Poland joined in 1991 and the cooperation has since been called Hexagonale. The promising initiative aimed for close political and economic cooperation between the people of Central Europe, but due to the 1991 Yugoslav crisis, it was unable to fulfill its original mission. It continued to operate as the Central European Initiative (CEI) in 1992, but by then it had become marginalized and had lost its original mission and significance.

However, the Hungarian government did not give up its plans for cooperation in Central Europe, and after the cease of the Quadragonale, it created a new platform: the Visegrád Cooperation, established as a Hungarian initiative.

The Visegrád Cooperation is thus the materialized and still existing implementation of this Central European project between the countries of the region. The dominant intellectual trend of the historical turn of the regime change, the meta-ideology, was liberalism. It is no coincidence that many of the regime changers drew a foretaste of change from the liberal traditions of the last bright era of the former Monarchy. The founding fathers of the cooperation belonged almost invariably to the conservative-liberal and liberal ideologies: Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall and President Árpád Göncz, Czech President Vaclav Havel and Foreign Minister Jiří Dienstbier, Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and Foreign Minister Jan Skub. At the initiative of Hungary, with the participation of Poland and Czechoslovakia, the founding declaration was signed on 15 February 1991 in the Visegrád Castle, the symbolic venue of the former meeting of the three kings (Schmidt, 2016).

The initial objectives of the cooperation had clearly been the elimination of the remnants of the previous system, the achievement of full independence (the Warsaw Pact and the CMEA were still in force and Soviet troops still stationed in the three countries at the time, although their withdrawal had already begun), as well as the promotion of economic cooperation and the coordination of the Euro-Atlantic integration efforts.

It appears undisputed that from the Hungarian point of view, an unspoken fear also played a role in the promotion of the cooperation, so that the ring of hostile countries surrounding Hungary, previously forming the „small-entente”, could not be re-established.

The sublime moments of the founding were surrounded by ominous shadows. The situation in the Baltic States was tense; not long before in Vilnius Soviet troops fired at protesters demanding independence, and Soviet troop withdrawals from the Visegrad countries were temporarily suspended (The reasons behind this decision are now believed to be technical rather than political, but this could not be known for sure at the time).

In these circumstances, the founding fathers agreed to jointly initiate the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact military organization. This took place ten days later, on February 25th, 1991 at the Warsaw Pact summit in Budapest, to the great delight of all participants, without any substantial Soviet resistance (the complete dissolution of the Warsaw Pact was also jointly initiated by the Visegrad countries in June).

Many feared that with the break-up of Czechoslovakia in 1993, cooperation in the Visegrad region would also enter into crisis, but this did not happen, the sole consequence of this event was the expansion of the previous tripartite cooperation to four members without any major setback. At the same time, the two successor states did render the cooperation process among the Visegrád countries, for diverse other reasons. Perhaps not even the founding fathers had thought, although they certainly hoped, that the Visegrad group would be the most successful form of regional cooperation to date, not only in the region but perhaps within the EU as a whole. The success of the initiative is evidenced by the fact that in its nearly three decades of history, several countries have already indicated their intention to join (Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Baltic States), yet, even though the founders have from the beginning agreed to a certain degree of cooperation with neighboring countries (Visegrád +), yet they do not wish to expand the current number of member states of the cooperation.

The CEFTA decade (1994-2004)

Each of the Visegrád countries faced serious economic challenges. The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) has been in a state of displeasure for years, the eastern markets have collapsed, domestic liberalization has pushed down domestic products due to market liberalization, the foreign economy has shrunk, and losses in the former COMECON market have not been offset by western markets. It has become an important task for the leadership of all Visegrad countries to create and contractually guarantee favourable external market conditions. At the time, there were basically two possible directions for increasing the room for manoeuvre in foreign markets: a Western European, mainly EEC (later EU) and a regional direction.

The founding fathers very soon realized that economic cooperation was an essential element of this formation and that a framework had to be created to promote it.

The Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) was the main contractual framework and platform for regional trade and economic cooperation. The leaders of the three Visegrad countries adopted the proposal for its establishment very early, at the 1991 Krakow Summit, and signed a memorandum of understanding in Krakow on 16 December 1991. However, the entry into force of the treaty had to wait a long time, partly due to difficulties in preparation as well as due to the break-up of Czechoslovakia and the uncertainties surrounding it. Finally, the CEFTA entered into force only on 1 February 1994 (Kupich 1999.)

After 1993, due to the skeptical attitude of the Czech Republic and the nationalism of Slovakia, the then young cooperation experienced difficult times. The Czech Prime Minister of the time, Vaclav Klaus (1993-1998) did not hide his reservations about the Visegrad Cooperation. He made no secret of the fact that he considers the Czech Republic to be exceptional and superior in all respects, more developed than the other three countries, and expressed that treating his country together with the other „unworthy” ones was a „a serious injustice in history”. I myself have witnessed the fact that at a prestigious international conference he demonstrated the superiority of the Czech Republic to his audience with a rather debatable medical analogy. He argued that most of the countries in transition are still in the medical examination stage, some are already waiting for surgery and some are already lying on the operating table, but the Czech Republic alone is now healthy, swollen with strength, already at recreation, far ahead of its peers. Well, Klaus has repeatedly publicly threatened to leave the Visegrad cooperation and, according to his own statements, did not do so simply because of the positive effects the cooperation provided through being part of the CEFTA. As an economist and former finance minister, he was very much aware of how reliant his country was on the trade agreement at the time.

Slovakia posed problems of different kinds for the cooperation members. On the one hand, until the conclusion of the Hungarian-Slovak Basic Treaty (1995), its conflict with neighbouring Hungary became more and more acute (Driessen, 1997). The conflict escalated partly due to the construction of the Bős-Nagymaros hydroelectric power plant, as well as due to the nationalism of the Meciar leadership and the continuing violation of minority rights. Between 1992 and 1998, Meciar was in coalition with the ultranationalist Slovak National Party, Jan Slota's SNS, which certainly had an impact on national politics. Nevertheless, Meciar's overwhelmingly negative international reputation was a worrying aspect to not only the Hungarians but also the Czechs and Poles, who also feared that the unfavourable international perception of young Slovakia would cast a bad light on them as well.

Despite these difficulties, CEFTA had a very positive effect on the development of economic and trade relations between the four countries in the first years of its operation. While previously the economic relations between them had stagnated at a low level, after

the entry into force of CEFTA, they could record double-digit annual growth in trade between them. In the second half of the 1990s, the Visegrad Cooperation was seriously jeopardized for the reasons mentioned earlier, and it is no exaggeration to say that CEFTA was the only functioning institution that ultimately maintained and helped this regional cooperation platform during the years of crisis.

The success and usefulness of CEFTA is demonstrated by the fact that it has steadily expanded with new members (Slovenia 1996, Romania 1997, Bulgaria 1999, Croatia 2003) and still operates with seven more Member States. The membership of the four founding countries was automatically terminated in 2004, at the same time as EU membership (EU membership, by definition, excludes participation in another free trade agreement). In the decade before EU membership, CEFTA was the most important platform for cooperation between the V4 countries.

The first decade of the EU membership (2004-2014)

Although originally there were plans to not join all the Visegrád countries into the EU, and in 1998 accession negotiations began only with the so-called Luxembourg Six, ie Slovakia was not among those selected, finally the „big bang” theory won and on 1 May 2004, all four Visegrád countries became full members of the EU. With the attainment of EU membership, CEFTA membership was phased out, however, a new and very important function arose from the cooperating platform: it has since become an ad hoc yet regular forum for conciliation regarding important issues on the EU agenda.

Thus, the Visegrad Cooperation has become an indispensable player within the EU. It is no coincidence that Chancellor Merkel once said angrily that if she heard the term Visegrád, she would be upset. Initially, the big countries, especially Germany and France, made a noticeable effort to end the Visegrad negotiations, but when the Visegráds rightly suggested that while the “big four” (Germany, France, UK and Italy) hold regular meetings before summits, they should also they have a right to do so; they no longer had a substantive counter-argument. Today, the legitimacy of these informal negotiations is not questioned by anyone. The effectiveness of the Visegrad negotiations lies precisely in the lack of institutionalization, flexibility and informality. There is no obligation to discuss all matters and reach a common position: they only agree on matters where there is a potential common interest and a common position is expected. It is important that there is no coercion to agree, neither formal nor informal. If, in the end, there is no common position on a matter, it does not count as a failure, as everyone represents their own original position. Of course, the agreements here also have their limitations. There are several known cases where the “big ones” successfully dismantled the unity front and eventually one or the other country withdrew from the common position. This was the case, for example, in 2007-2013. During many years of negotiations on the financial

budget framework, when the Visegrad four had a firm common position almost to the last minute, and then the big ones “bought out” Poland with a favourable offer, the common position collapsed and eventually the others were forced to give it up. The judgement of the first ten years of EU membership is mixed and varies considerably from country to country. This period was basically determined by adaptation and catching-up efforts. The Visegrad countries were not equally successful in this. It is worth briefly examining the catching-up process by country.

Of the four countries, Poland is the most successful in the catching-up process, but Slovakia also bears very good results. The Polish economy grew steadily during this period, usually above 5% per year, but even in the two most difficult years of the financial crisis (2008-2009), it was the only one in the EU to be able to produce 1-2% growth (Gurgul & Łukasz, 2011). Obviously, the exceptionally high level of EU support also played a significant role in this. The previously weakening Polish agro-economy has been overhauled and has become one of the most competitive agro-economy's in Europe. Slovakia has also produced a very remarkable result. It is the only Visegrad country to have joined the euro area in 2009. As its economy was largely based on the automotive industry, it became quite vulnerable during the 2008 financial crisis and suffered a relatively significant economic downturn, coupled with high unemployment (around 10%) (Vojtovic & Krajnakova, 2013). The country's economy recovered quickly after the financial crisis, and in the middle of the last decade, they were kept upright by the pride of measuring the economic performance of the Czechs, who had always belittled them, in PPP terms. The Czech Republic started from the most favourable position. Already in the first years of the regime change, the highest standard of living and the highest GDP per capita were here. In part, this also fed the Czech sense of excellence. The Czech economy started from a significantly higher level, but its growth slowed down and even showed signs of stagnation, and the distance from Slovakia narrowed greatly, but Poland also moved closer. Nevertheless, the Czech catch-up can be considered a success and the Czech Republic is already ahead of several former Member States in terms of GDP per capita (Greece, Portugal). Hungary is the least successful member of the four. While it was a leading student in the region for a long time and second only to the Czech Republic in terms of development and economic performance, it has lagged far behind in the past ten years, holding the slowest catching-up rhythm out of the four countries, and in the past decade, first Slovakia then Poland went in front of our country on economic indicators.

Hungary entered the EU with ambitious goals. Then Prime Minister, Péter Medgyessy, envisioned eurozone membership for 2008. However, this did not become anything. During this period, Hungary experienced two crises: it faced a serious economic crisis and a political crisis following the destabilisation of domestic politics. It is no coincidence that the financial crisis of 2008 hit us the hardest out of the four, the economic downturn was almost 8% in 2009, and the country escaped bankruptcy only through a joint

financial rescue package from the IMF and the EU. From 2004 until 2013, we were under constant excessive deficit, which threatened us with a loss of funds throughout which, fortunately, did not happen in the end (Egedy, 2012).

Although some domestic political stability and economic improvement returned following the change of government in 2010, the country's international image continued to deteriorate, problems with the rule of law persisted in connection with the government's activities and the erosion of the democratic system became increasingly apparent. Regarding the state of the democratic system and the intensification of illiberal tendencies, worrying developments in the other Visegrad countries have also strengthened. During this period, the political preconditions for populism and then illiberalism, in addition to the political forces that built on them, appeared in three countries. Lech Kaczynski was elected President of Poland in 2005, and his brother, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, fulfilled the trend by becoming Prime Minister of Poland in 2006. His short-lived government projected what became the dominant trend in Poland after 2015. In 2006, Robert Fico became Prime Minister of Slovakia, a decisive political leader in his country for a decade and a half. Although his party (SMER) was called Social Democracy, his policy orientation differed significantly from mainstream European Social Democracy. With the exception of two short years (2010-2012), when an occasional coalition temporarily tipped him out of power, until 2020, Fico was the country's "strong man". In the Czech Republic, between 2003 and 2013, for two cycles, Vaclav Klaus was the President of the Republic, who was already sceptical of the Visegrád cooperation, although he was by no means a classical populist as he was too intellectual, elitist and a snob. Yet his unmasked Euroscepticism contributed greatly to the rise of anti-European and populist tendencies in his home country.

As can be seen from this brief overview, the outlook is clearly positive with the exception of Hungary, but there are already signs that have underpinned the current unfavourable picture of the Visegrad cooperation.

The platform for cooperation between illiberals and populists (2014-)

The unfavorable image of cooperation between the Visegrád countries in many countries in the West has intensified recently. In the Visegrád countries, many see the European unity process as the instigator of populist views, retrograde, xenophobic views. Let's add that if we just look most recently, it's not unfounded either.

Obviously, this is a process of which its roots go back much further and, already in the first decades of membership, there was a tendency for this role in all countries, still it only became apparent and decisive after 2014. As this is a continuous process, the

setting of any start date is arbitrary, but if we make an attempt to do so, it can be linked to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's famous Tusványos speech, which he gave to the audience of the Free University of Tusványos in July 2014. This was the first time that a Visegrad leader had defined illiberalism openly and responsibly as a state ideology, stating that "In this sense, the new state we are building in Hungary is an illiberal state, not a liberal state." The speech had a strong international resonance and was generally seen in Europe as an open challenge to the model of liberal democracy. Orbán's speech also raised concerns in foreign policy, as he spoke of the decline of liberal democracies, as opposed to the so-called star countries, Russia (which at that time annexed the Crimea and waged a command free war with Ukraine), China, and Turkey.

Orbán's speech after the second two-thirds victory was not only a show of his self-confidence, but also represented a trend that at that time had swelled the self-confidence of populists across Europe. This year, however, in typical form, this trend was only a real government factor in Hungary. In Slovakia, Prime Minister Robert Fico was not far with his populism and exercise of power, and his aspirations were very similar to his Hungarian counterpart (they understood each other very well, despite Fico's government undisguised anti-Hungarianism), but, there were two important differences. First of all, Fico never had a constitutional majority, so he did not have the opportunity to radically transform the state system, to completely "gleichschalt" constitutional institutions, although he would have demanded it. The other difference is that, partly out of caution and partly out of common sense, Fico was wary of an open frontal attack on EU core values or the model of liberal democracy and never attempted to create a "counter-model" and try to promote it in the West. Therefore, he moved much more "under the radar" than his Hungarian counterpart, although there was not much difference in their perception.

Although we marked 2014 as the boundary for this era, actually, the balance of power within the Visegráds changed fundamentally a year later, in 2015. The changes are partly related to tectonic movements in Poland and partly to the migration crisis.

In the spring of 2015, to the surprise of many, the Polish presidential election was won not by the incumbent and otherwise popular President Komorowski, but by his lesser-known challenger, who had little experience in politics but was supported by PiS, referred to as Fidesz's sister party. This was a grim and worrying sign for the autumn parliamentary elections and after that it came as no surprise that the Law and Justice Party (PiS) also won the parliamentary elections. As might be expected, the Budapest-Warsaw axis was established immediately and the internal power relations in Visegrád were clearly decided in favour of the illiberals and populists. The Slovak leadership handled this extra weight without any problems or slips and only the Czech Republic hung out somewhat from the line. But not completely! In 2013, the first direct presidential election was won by Miloš Zeman, who had previously been the country's prime minister in the Social Democrats

(1998-2002), but withdrew from there in 2007 and won the head of state with the support of a non-parliamentary party. With his habitus, views and political culture, Zeman was a representative of the same populist orientation that was intensifying in the Visegrad countries at that time.

Another important factor, one might say a heavenly blessing for the populists of the four countries, was the migration crisis of 2015-16. The EU was undoubtedly faced with an unprepared and confused challenge. The instrument of asylum policy until then was completely unsuitable for dealing with the wave of mass migration. The humanist principles that defined the previous refugee policy also failed, proving unsuitable for resolving the situation. The trouble was compounded by the deep gap between European countries in dealing with the case. There were countries that were completely indifferent, not at all affected by the wave of asylum seekers, so they didn't really want to deal with it, there were those who represented a culture of inclusion, and ultimately those who were completely aloof from reception. The Visegráds led the way with the drive of Hungary. The Visegráds blocked all European attempts to address the situation together and then loudly criticized and slandered the EU for its helplessness and inability to act. Here, too, the Hungarian government was the first to not only campaign against refugees, but also to create a constant mood against the EU.

In the autumn of 2015, all four Visegrád countries unanimously rejected the EU's only anemic attempt to deal with the situation on a temporary basis, the compulsory distribution quota for asylum seekers (López-Dóriga, 2018). The case ended up in the European Court of Justice, which, after several rounds in mid-2020, ruled in a final judgment that Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic had violated EU law by refusing the quota. Slovakia was able to stay out of the verdict because, although they also rejected the quota, they eventually accepted the asylum seekers "under the grass". Clearly, the common rejection position in the asylum field re-cemented and strengthened Visegrád cooperation. It was almost the only truly common cause in which there was complete agreement within the four. This unfavourable position was also largely the basis for the unfavourable Western perception of the V4s.

Although in 2016, following the EU-Turkey agreement, the influx of asylum seekers subsided and the case began to lose its former importance, the year did not turn sour for Visegrád populism. First, the exit parties won the Brexit referendum, which was undoubtedly a great blow to the pro-European forces, both domestically and internationally, and the Visegrád leaders were able to take good advantage of this turmoil. Another important event was the U.S. presidential election, where a populist candidate defeated Hillary Clinton, who was considered a representative of the liberal elite. It is no coincidence that Viktor Orbán then declared with swelling confidence that 2017 will be a year of rebellion. He thought that next year's important elections, and here he was thinking primarily of the French presidential election, the German and Austrian

parliamentary elections, illiberal politicians who sympathized with similar principles would make significant progress everywhere.

Well, that calculation didn't come in at all. In France, President Emmanuel Macron won confidently, representing a radically different stance on most issues than the Visegrád leaders, Germany failed to break through the AfD and Chancellor Merkel re-formed a government with the Social Democrats, in Austria, although the extremist FPÖ came to power for a short time as a minor coalition partner, it did not win the elections and soon fell out of power. The next big test of strength, the 2019 EP elections, did not bring the hoped-for breakthrough for the illiberals either. Although the share of extremist forces has risen somewhat among MPs, it has fallen far short of what was hoped for in a third, which could have meant a blocking minority, and therefore serious blackmail potential, on certain issues.

Moreover, within the apparent solid unity of the Visegráds, the first serious cracks appeared after the migration crisis subsided. Evidently, the four-tooths had changed into two groups: a Polish-Hungarian avant-garde and a much more cautious Czech-Slovak duo. The V2 + 2 formula also appeared among the experts, which was meant to reflect this cautious internal distance.

The weakening of internal cohesion was signaled by the so-called Slavkov Triangle, which is a cooperation platform for Austria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Initially, it only started as a regional platform for infrastructure and energy cooperation, but from 2017 onwards, it increasingly seemed that it could become a rival to Visegrád Cooperation and provide an opportunity for Czechs and Slovaks to break away from the increasingly negative Polish and Hungarian leadership.

The opportunity to dismantle and weaken Visegrád cooperation was not missed by Western leaders, who had long been concerned about the functioning of this formation. Both Chancellor Merkel and President Macron contacted the Slavkov platform with some ulterior motives, and Macron negotiated with the Slavkov leaders in the summer of 2017 in Salzburg instead of a meeting with the Visegrad Four, originally from Budapest. In the end, the Slavkov Triangle – not least because of the turbulence of Austrian domestic politics and the good fortune of Visegrád co-operation – did not live up to its expectations and become a real rival, unable to marginalize or render irrelevant the V4 formation.

The international hopes of the Visegrad illiberals failed, but they were comforted by the fact that in 2018 Viktor Orbán won a two-thirds parliamentary majority again and in 2019 the Polish PiS won the parliamentary elections with a superior, even greater advantage than before. Apparently, the illiberal positions remained solid, but the dark clouds had already gathered in 2019 in the sky of the illiberal-dominated Visegrád.

Visegrád reset? The hope revives

I began with the fact that the intellectual current that established the Visegrád co-operation and resurrected Central Europeanness was to a greater extent nourished by a nostalgia for the turn of the century Monarchy legacy. It sought to rehabilitate not only its artistic, scientific and cultural, but also its political values. However, the dominant trend that laid the foundation and nurtured the economic and spiritual prosperity of this age was liberalism. The founding fathers of the Visegrád Cooperation all respected this tradition and were themselves either conservative-liberals or signifier-free liberals. The first half of the 1990s was characterized by the dominance of liberal meta-ideology. In contrast, today's Visegrád has largely deviated from the values and probably the intentions of the founding fathers. Historical determinists (be they Hegelians or Marxists) and functionalists argue that this is exactly how it should have happened, not all a delusion but a historical necessity or functional compulsion.

As one of the active witnesses of the age, an active participant in events, to a very little extent an influencer, allow me to discuss this. I am convinced that at least as much contingency played a role in shaping the current image of the Visegrád Cooperation as was dictated by historical necessity or functional compulsion. That is why I believe that the Visegrád Cooperation can find its way back to the spirituality of the founding fathers and the original mission they dreamed of. The question arises: is there a basis for my optimism or is it just chasing a dream?

Signs of positive change, if not to the same extent, are already clearly visible in all four countries. The first stop of the turn was Slovakia, where a terrible rage triggered the tectonic changes in Slovakian domestic politics. Back in the autumn of 2018, investigative journalist and bride Jan Kuciak was assassinated (Mrvová & Turček, 2018). The brutal murder provoked elemental outrage in society, leading to weeks of unquenchable mass demonstrations. Although Fico believed that with Pellegrini's inexperience as Prime Minister, he would remain in control of the situation and the country, the "dark horse" Pellegrini soon emerged from the cloak of his patron and became an autonomous actor. This was not the turnaround, but the presidential election in the spring of 2019, in which Zuzana Caputova, a candidate for liberal Progressive Slovakia, confidently defeated the man of the regime, former European Commissioner Maros Sefcovic, who was far from a favourite. This had already clearly signaled the twilight of the Fico regime, but the protracted agony only ended in February 2020, when Igor Matovic's party (OLaNO) defeated the SMER party, which had been dominant for a decade and a half, ending the era of Fico's populism. In Slovakia, therefore, a breakthrough has taken place, a new era has begun.

In its economic policy, the current leading ruling party also professes liberal principles, otherwise it is more conservative, but part of the coalition is the party of the economic

neoliberal SaS party and Kiska, former President Za Ludi, who is also considered liberal. However, the party, Progressive Slovakia, which is the most mainstream liberal in Europe, did not get into parliament due to missing a few hundred votes. However, the rearrangement of the political field and the advancement of liberal forces are clear.

The signs of change are also clearly visible in the two seeds of illiberalism. In Poland, in the October 2018 municipal elections, opposition candidates performed particularly well in the capital, large cities, and in the western areas of Poland in general. Rafał Trzaskowski, a joint candidate of the Civic Platform (PO) and Nowoczesna, has won a big advantage over the PiS candidate, but he also has opposition mayors in Krakow, Poznan and Gdansk. Although PiS still confidently won the 2019 parliamentary elections, it lost its majority in the Senate, where the opposition already has a majority of votes. Even more encouraging is the development that in the 2020 presidential election, President-elect Andrzej Duda was only able to defeat his opponent, Trzaskowski, by a small majority, the mayor of Warsaw. Even before the election, 60% of respondents were confident in polling President Duda, but as soon as a credible, charismatic and inspiring counter-candidate appeared on the scene, the president's advantage melted to a minimum. In front of the opposition, there is now hope that with the right candidates, they will have a real chance of winning the next election.

Even in Hungary, in the seemingly impregnable citadel of illiberalism, hope shone. Although Fidesz still won the 2018 election with confidence, it was already due in part to the fragmentation of the opposition and the lack of truly groundbreaking and credible candidates. From the 2019 European Parliament elections, Viktor Orbán hoped that he would be able to deal a fatal blow to the disintegrated and ruined opposition. Although he won the election, the opposition performed significantly better than he had hoped. The real winner of the election was the Momentum Movement, which has been on the scene since 2017 but is still weak in the parliamentary elections. It is a modern, progressive party that currently has a strong generational character, which does not have a clear worldview, but is also considered liberal in Hungary, and belongs internationally to the ALDE, the European Liberal Party Alliance, Renew Europe (Macron + Liberals). The liberal label is probably not clearly accepted in Hungary because, due to the character murder of ideological opponents, this label has a distinctly negative connotation for a significant part of the public.

The October 2019 municipal election brought a significant change in the balance of power. Budapest and ten other cities with county status, as well as dozens of smaller cities, became opposition mayors and opposition majorities. All of this could be a positive sign for the opposition's future chances. As these lines are being written, it seems that in the thus far divided opposition, the determination is ripe to adopt a coordinated electoral cooperation in the 2022 elections that could represent a real chance for a change of government.

Of the four countries, the Czech Republic had the least chance of illiberalism shaping the country's image. Although the President of the Republic can clearly be classified in this trend and he was able to win again in 2018, by then he had only narrowly defeated his rival. In the Czech Republic, the basic institutions of liberal democracy have never really been in danger, although there are strong signs of political influence in the media. The 2017 election was clearly won by the party, founded in 2011 by billionaire businessman Andrej Babis. The ANO is basically a member of the Renew Europe group, a member of the mainstream liberal party, the European Liberal Party Alliance, the ALDE. According to all surveys, the ANO is the most popular party in the Czech Republic to date. This is despite the fact that Andrej Babis, the party's president and the country's prime minister, is a highly controversial figure. He is attacked at the same time because of his past (former communist party member, some say the STB, also an agent of the secret service), his dubious business affairs (Stork's Nest, Agrofert affair), his media influence and because of his popular politicization. At the same time, Babis' government has not yet been criticized by the Warsaw and Budapest cabinets, and neither the opposition nor the international press feel that the rule of law is in serious jeopardy. In its foreign policy, it is completely Western-compliant, its relations with both Russia (three Russian "diplomats" were expelled from Prague in connection with a spy scandal in August this year) ("Czechs expel two Russian diplomats over hoax poison plot", 2020), and China are particularly cool, restrained (repeatedly criticized the Chinese leadership for its close ties with Taiwan).

An important player in Czech public life is Zdeněk Hřib, Mayor of Prague, who has been in office since November 2018. He ran in the elections with the support of the Pirate Party, but based on his activities, he can be classified as a progressive-liberal. He is also very active in foreign policy and an active participant in the cooperation of the Visegrád capitals. The Russians resent it because of the removal of the statue of Marshal Konyev and the change of the square in front of the Russian embassy to Boris Nyemtsov. But the Chinese are also attacking because of its close ties to Taiwan, as well as because it terminated Prague's twinning relationship with Beijing and instead contacted Taipei.

The capitals of the Visegrád are active heralds and actual promoters of the hoped-for changes. Following the election of Gergely Karácsony as Mayor of Budapest (October 2019), all four Visegrád capitals now have a progressive, modern leader representing diversity and openness, which the international press, with some simplification, has consistently called liberal. The "liberal" mayors soon found their brains and recognized the opportunities and synergies of Visegrád cooperation. On the initiative of Budapest, the Association of Free Cities was established in December 2019, which the international press aptly called "Little Visegrád" and Visegrád a liberal alternative.

It is a progressive, open city association founded by mayors Gergely Karácsony (Budapest), Matúš Vallo (Bratislava), Rafał Trzaskowski (Warsaw), and Zdeněk Hřib (Prague) on December 16, 2019 in Budapest. 'Little Visegrád' has three main objectives: on the one hand, mayors are committed to the fundamental values of liberal democracy, pluralism, openness and cultural diversity, and on the other, the Alliance represents an active European policy focused on sustainability in many areas (eg in the fields of sustainable urban planning, climate protection, social inclusion, equitable housing or digitalisation). The initiative has had a very significant international response, perhaps because of the fact that 35 European capitals and metropolitan areas have joined the four mayors in calling for cities to have direct access to the resources of the large-scale EU Green Deal project without the consent of their governments.

The cooperation of the four capitals could be a precursor to an alternative Visegrád Four model. It proves that the Visegrád framework for cooperation is not necessarily based on Eurosceptic, retrograde, illiberal foundations. In fact, the co-operation of V4 governments has moved far away from the values and original intentions of the founding fathers. The initiative to revive and redefine buried Central Europeanness came from the people of the spirit, who nurtured and nurtured the valuable intellectual legacy of the writers, artists and scientists representing the values of freedom, tolerance and diversity, from which the founding fathers drew inspiration to achieve the Visegrád cooperation.

The time has come to relaunch this cooperation, which has gone astray somewhere, given the original foundations. The conditions for restarting are maturing. If the leadership of not only the Visegrád capitals, but also all the countries becomes open, constructive, pro-European, then the correction of Visegrád must also take place.

There is a broad consensus that Visegrad Cooperation is a valuable platform to be preserved. In recent times, however, it has lost much of its stature and especially its authority. However, it is in the fundamental interest of all Member States to strengthen the advocacy capacity of the Visegrád Four and to increase its international stature. You can achieve this not through blackmail and threats, but through constructive, innovative, well-coordinated action. As the Association of Free Cities has already set an example with the European Union initiative.

Speaking to Prince Salina, much needs to change for Visegrád to mean again what it was at the time of its creation: an ambitious alliance of interdependent Central European nations with common traditions, values and interests, building and strengthening Europe. The encouraging changes that point in this direction have begun. Today there are far fewer and fewer obstacles to the realization of the Central European dream than in the eighties of the last century, when the people of the spirit originally allied to realize it. The dream then became a reality within a few years. Why not repeat this now?

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Viera Zuborova:

CENTRAL EUROPE THE FRAGILE LAND

When we speak about illiberalism in current media and political discourse the attention is immediately shifted towards Central Europe, and Hungary and Poland are presenting the cornerstones of this news for a regime that is gaining popularity among the Globe in different forms and varieties. But what do they have in common, if we speak about Hungary, Brazil or even the US? We have an inner feeling that we are in the middle of normalization of abnormality. The political culture is changing, the ethical and moral barriers and rules are violated, the political language is becoming aggressive and intolerant, and “the mob” is becoming the most powerful majority in its own countries. And the process is a Huntington snowballing effect that is changing the surrounding countries in the region. A new revolt of non-educated and non-political adults, and of course transformation losers is changing the narratives and culture all around us.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the current state of Central European countries, how do they cope with the fragility of democracy, and how they are becoming more and more polarized. This article is not attempting to be a modern-day prophet text, but it aspires to show the readers how hard it is to build a modern liberal democracy in a region that is deeply rooted in their old stereotypes, which is highly conspirational and has no ability to be tolerant.

Introduction

Central Europe should be defined as the region with most structural changes during their history. It was the region of Central Europe who marked the link between the Empires and the “others”, between civilized and “wildlings”. It was also Central Europe as the region in which nationalism was born, and it was also the region where the hate became the cornerstone of state policy and the symbols of World Wars in the 20th Century. The romantic and intellectual views on Central Europe have experienced again the period of renaissance after 1989 when this region became visible for its call to join again the Western civilization. But nowadays the Central Europe represented namely by the Visegrad countries (especially the elites in Hungary and Poland) is seen as the region that is slowly backlashing not only from concept of liberal democracy and European open society but also from the protection of basic human right and from the concept of otherness as the cornerstone of European identity and heritage.

In recent period various commentators, scholars, professionals, and former politicians tried to challenge and explain this transformation in the Central European region, and their assumptions were right within one or two countries, but not with the region as a whole. The generalization of what happens in Central Europe brought different concepts and approaches, and we did it again, we as social scientists vanished the

core of country specific case by case, as we did in the past to unified and understand in general what happens in our region. The one-sidedness and empirical vulnerabilities are visible in all approaches and thesis that tried to understand what happens in the Central European region and how it could affect the future of Europe, liberal democracy and the region as a whole.

In this introductory essay, my attempt is to draw on the contributions to the collection of examples, approaches and thesis dealing with the backlashing on democracy in the Central European region. My purpose is not to challenge the already existing approaches, because all of them are right within particular country cases, and they also prove the heterogeneity of case in Central European countries within their transition from the classical view on liberal democracy. My contribution to this area of interest is to fill in the gaps between various approaches and thesis from those authors that had a great impact onto the understanding of countries in the Central European region that are turning away from a system that promised them freedom and equality 30 years ago. I am aware that I won't be able to tell the whole story of Central Europe, what happened and why it happened. I recognize one-sidedness, incompleteness and empirical vulnerability of my essay, my intention is to show the academia and scholars community another perspective on how we should look on the region that is becoming recognizable again by the world, but not for their successful path of transition, but because of their willingness to abandon it.

My essay was influenced by memories of Zsuzsanna Szelényi (an early former Fidesz politicians), in the book "Csak a Narancs volt" ("There was only the orange" as reference to the party color of Fidesz) by György Petôcz. In the series of interviews with former Fidesz politicians, Szelényi described for me the difference between the understanding of the concept of (liberal) democracy of a Western politicians and politicians from our region, and it's the matter of their culture of socialization during the communist period. She notices that Orbán's generation was influenced by their socialization into the communist system, where learning was never the aim of independent and autonomous thinking. As she notices, with my intervention in their ideas. Once they move to Budapest, Warsaw, Prague, or Bratislava engage with a small island of democracy in their flats, dormitories or seduced by "cappuccino" they feel to be a part of something bigger. But as they became the part of something bigger, part of the political elite their willingness to develop and cultivate political culture vanished as the foam from the cappuccino. They started to be more satisfied with political culture based on power and force, rather than on compromises and debates, which leads to the emerging new authoritarian style of politics that we are seeing nowadays in various levels of intensity all around the Central European region, and beyond.

This for my clear characterization of current political elites in our countries positively forced me to think about various concept and variables that have an deep impact on

what happens in our countries, and why we need to study this region, its shift towards something in-between liberal democracy in Western conception and authoritarian rules in the East perception of China and Russia. And it positively forced me to add my contribution towards this structural changes that occurred decades ago in our region but was paralyzed by our intention to belong somewhere, and when we got there, we found out it wasn't our DNA. Various scholars tried to respond to these structural changes in the societal and political system in Central European countries.

Krastev and Holmes were looking at the new illiberalism in Central Europe as “return of the repressed” full of emotional and pre-ideological narratives rooted in rebellion of “foreign western culture” as superior to one's own. Dawson and Hanley (2016) assumed that the rise of illiberalism in Central Europe was influenced by the absence of value-based democratic politics and opportunism of liberal elites. Or the contra-revolution narrative of ultraconservative and right-wing forces against new colonizers, as European Union, NATO, US and other Western figures promoted corrupted liberalistic elites that promote same sex marriage by Elzbieta Korolczuk and Angieszka Graff (2018). All of these theses are right in their assumption that something happened in our region, something that we could define as structural changes in societal and political system towards a new concept of regime based on myths, stereotypes and differentiate it towards others. My article will not interfere with all mentioned above or challenge these scholars in their assumption and conclusion.

My intention will be to elaborate their thesis and proposed more variables that needed to be elaborate in the future, as:

1. authoritarian personality,
2. West – East divide,
3. Paranoid politics.

Authoritarian personality as the fundamental ingredients of illiberalism

Perception of people is what matters in the modern competitive political system, their attitudes, opinions and expectations towards their future matters, even their mode of socialization which drives their hands via parliamentary election, and has a great impact on who will be their political representative. Grounding fathers of this term such Karl Popper, Ayan Rand or Theodor Adorno conceptualized set of factors and link that defines an authoritarian behavior/ personality, and developed series of conceptual links between authoritarianism and determinism, authoritarianism and social / economic conservatism, and other relations that are measurable in the societies for decades. My assumption lies in the hypothesis, that Central European societies are mostly represented by authoritarian personalities whose nature was suppressed through official civic discourse that pushed

other themes and aims during the transformation and integration phases of these societies. But after we have been successfully added into the club of established and consolidated democracies with high standards of living, our attitudes and expectations started to be driven by our initial personalities that hibernated for decades.

To understand my thesis, we need to clarify what does the term authoritarian personality mean personally to me and what is the nature of it, in our region. May you excuse my superficial approach to the concept of authoritarian personality and my reluctance to not develop it deeper, my purpose is to force the leaders to notice that there are various approaches and concepts on how to study our fragile region. According to Adorno F-scale, an authoritarian personality has the tendency for resistance to risky and crated ideas and prefers black-white worldviews with a strong leadership defined through rectilinear ownership towards power. An authoritarian personality has a negative view on people in general, their tendency to not trust anybody is developing through their socialization in a world where people would do anything for their desires. They tend to be blind within the complex world of relations and interactions, and they prefer simple answers and debates, and therefore they are willing to accept bling allegiance to conventional beliefs about right and wrong.

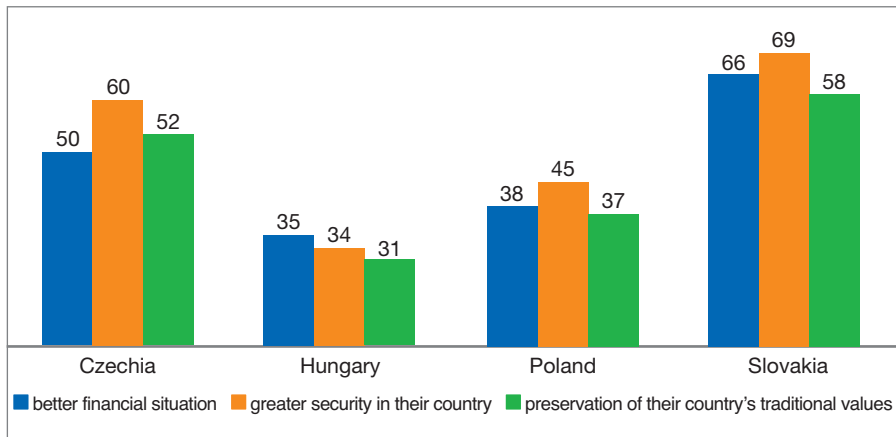


Figure 1: Those who would trade some of their rights and freedoms
Source: Globsec, 2020

If we just take into account few characteristics of Central European societies that are measurable, as their tendency to believe in conspiracy theory, their distrust towards institution, and their willingness to give up part of their rights and freedoms at the expense

of greater social security and safety, we could have a larger picture on what happens in our societies, and region. The latest results are proving that something is changing in the societies, and even scholars and professionals tend to be blind in such circumstances, because of their notorious view on Poland and Hungary. Their blindness and their obvious reluctance to focus more on other countries as well (such Slovakia or Czechia) may be understandable (geopolitically uninteresting countries) but limits them to have a greater and clearer picture on the Central European region as a whole.

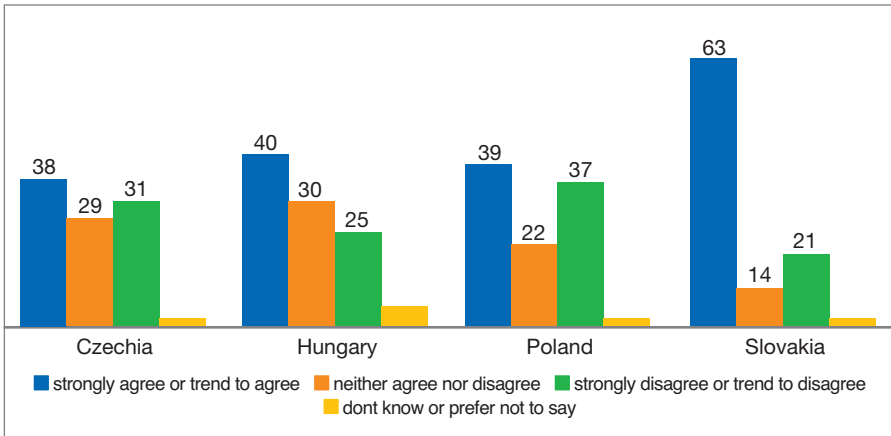


Figure 2: Views on statement “The only people who benefit from human rights in my country are those who do not deserve them such as criminals and terrorists” (%)

Source: FRA, 2020

And finally, authoritarian personalities have a tendency to display their feelings of fear, rage, and inadequacy into a whipping boy community (Jews, Roma, liberals, EU, progressives, media, businessmen, oligarchs, and etc.) (Adorno, 1950). Despite the criticism of Adorno F-scale to be ideological biased and focusing mainly on fascism, his scale may have forced scholars to redefine the variables that could measure authoritarian characteristics in new century (the level of contextual thinking, conspiracy thinking, the level of tolerance/ intolerance, the level of distrust/ trust towards various institutions, leaders, and people in general, and etc.).

According to the latest Globsec Survey (2020) 38% of Slovaks would prefer a strong and decisive leader who does not have to bother with parliament or election in general, with comparison to 12% of Hungarians, 26% of Poles or 24% of Czechs. And the Globsec data went even more in favor with the concept of authoritative personality, when 85% Slovaks agreed with the statement that oligarchs or financial groups have strong control

over the government in their country, in comparison with 39% of Hungarians, 56% of Poles or 64% of Czechs. As one variable of authoritarian personality “blindness towards complex world of relations” in average more than 35% of V4 individuals believe that oligarchic influence impacts independency of the media. Also other tendencies of authoritarian personality are visible as to blame others for their own reluctance to perceive complexity of various concepts such liberalism, human rights, namely Slovakia among all other V4 countries have the strongest belief in particular cases (compare Table NO2).

Clash of civilization in the Central Europe

When Samuels Huntington published his book “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order” nobody expected that this phenomenon could have various forms of clashes within one civilization, and even inside one entity as European Union. I know that these divisions could be seen as a marketing tool to explain the main differences between these countries and Western Europe, and some scholars could criticize me, that I did not add other former Soviet satellites into this categorization. My intention is to compare so-called Visegrad countries within their internal borders, and explain why we need to look at them from different perspectives, without need to shift again to the comparison of those two that are the most visible and most aggressive towards EU regulation and conception of human rights.

My question here is, why is Central Europe becoming again the playing ground of different, in a way opposite world view on power and politics, and the new division of West – East divide. Of course, and because of geopolitics, but also because of their strategic position and their membership in the European Union.

An article published in 2018 reminded me of this question about west-east division, that needed to be elaborate again. Elzbieta Korolczuk and Angieszka Graff in their article with the title Gender as “Ebola from Brussels”: The Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism” (2018) set their thesis on the assumption that this new anti-colonial discourse was spreading via Western intellectuals and scholars into our countries through ultraconservative tendencies to protect our families, traditions and ideas from neoliberals, corrupted liberal elites and sex-neutral ideologies that are celebrating same sex married and LQBT rights. They may be right in the narratives that in our countries, especially in Poland and Slovakia, ultraconservatives are slowly changing the shape of our societies. Czechia is a different story. I agree with these scholars, and their further criticism of new Krastev – Holmes concept of imitation of West, in a sense that their do not taking into account the transnational tendencies and external actors that incorporated ultraconservative narratives into our countries, but I slightly disagree with their thesis that these anti-colonial statements are hard to be promoted in our lands because of a positive image of European Union and trust towards them. I believe it has nothing to do with it primary, and we must take into

account other variables and divisions that are present in our region, as the classical West – East division that is active for decades in our country with various variations and forms.

Country	Year	Part of the West	Somewhere in-between	Part of the East
Czechia	2019	37%	55%	3%
	2018	38%	55%	3%
	2017	33%	41%	5%
	2016	30%	48%	4%
Hungary	2019	45%	47%	4%
	2018	45%	47%	3%
	2017	39%	53%	5%
	2016	32%	48%	6%
Poland	2019	42%	48%	1%
	2018	42%	31%	5%
	2017	45%	35%	3%
	2016	-	-	-
Slovakia	2019	21%	46%	10%
	2018	21%	56%	13%
	2017	21%	42%	9%
	2016	23%	52%	12%

Table 1: West – East division in Visegrad countries 2016 – 2019

Source: Globsec, 2019, 2018, 2016

I am not refusing the conceptualization and thesis of these scholars, but I would like to elaborate them further in a broader Central European concept. Transnationalism is crucial in this case, and I agree with the authors that this should be observed more in depth in other Central European countries, such as Slovakia and Czechia. I also agree that these countries are building up a new block with those from illiberal camps all around the world, because there are in opposite with those values that in their perception are overrepresented in the West (same sex married rights, corrupted liberal elites, promotions

of LGBT rights, and neoliberal forms of government). The problem is that these countries in their inner logic disagree also with other illiberal camps all around the world, and they are building their own legacy in between the mythical clash of civilizations. According to the regular Globsec surveys monitoring the perception of belonging to CE societies the trend is obvious. Central Europeans are willing to believe that their place is somewhere in the middle in between West and East.

Paranoid politics

Anger, frustration, distrust, and insecurity nowadays pervade modern politics and conspiracy theories are floating around the global world. In the previous century Russian elites labelled Jews as the roots of all evil in Europe and they were not the pioneers of such conspiracy thinking (Klier & Lambroza, 1992). Conspiracy theories are as old as politics itself, though their importance in the 21st century increased even more. The Internet, social media, and post-modern view on freedom of expression gave them space to be visible. And the legitimacy came with various democratically elected politicians worldwide who promoted their world views. Paranoid politics is no longer a negative privilege of US politics, Central European countries are catching up in a fast track. Paranoid style of communication leads to victimization of visible or invisible political opponents of the current governmental elites.

When Viktor Orban in Hungary used George Soros in his political campaign, nobody thought that the same person will be abused by Robert Fico as the main weapon for his remaining in office as the prime minister in Slovakia after the murder of journalist Jan Kuciak and his fiancé (Mrvová & Turček, 2018). Conspiracy theories are back and with the help of global networks and social media are stronger than ever. And they are stronger also because of the fact that they are promoted by democratically elected political leaders in liberal societies across the globe. This strange shift towards extremes was described in the nineties in US politics as fusion of paranoia.

Paranoid style of communication leads to the victimization of visible or invisible political opponents of the current governmental elite, and also as Hofstadter observed “the paranoid style can be seen as an imitation of the enemy” (Hofstadter, 1966, 32 in Bratic 2008, 36). Central Europe is full of invisible political opponents who stood behind the formal and legal political elites and for the most part was kept in check. We don’t need to go so far into the past for an example - Viktor Orban in Hungary and Robert Fico in the Slovak Republic with their anti-Soros campaign rhetoric are the perfect examples. Both leaders were able to form one-party governments in the past, and also both are extremely sensitive towards questions about otherness, about paranoid foreign influence and about their dominant position in the system. Furthermore, they are thinking that they are in danger, and their

position is at risk. They are looking for special signs that prove their assumptions and perceptions without any further / other evidence. These common patterns are familiar not only with the term fusion of paranoia, but further with the term Paranoid Government Disorder (PGD).

As Péter Sarosi (2017) observed, these governments are creating an image of an enemy premised on the perception of individuals, minority groups, or other institutions based on their inner paranoid illusion. According to Sarosi PGD is widespread all around the world, and we can define a government as PGD if we find at least three characteristics:

- excessive government control and surveillance,
- tendency to restrict individual rights and freedoms and passing laws restricting the freedom of NGOs to raise funds abroad,
- tendency to perceive disagreement as treason,
- recurrent suspicions, without justification, regarding the patriotism of vulnerable minorities and/or civil society groups,
- tendency to experience excessive importance of the (nation) state, manifest in a persistent nation- and state-referential attitude,
- tendency to appeal to the frustrated middle class to exploit their fears and anxieties,
- reoccupation with unsubstantiated conspiracy theories about the internal and external enemy (Sarosi, 2017).

According to these characteristics, all Central European governments suffer from an early stage diagnosis of PGD. At first glance, the Czech Republic seems to be safe from the diagnosis for now, but Miloš Zeman's political rhetoric is opening up the doors for legitimizing populism, conspiracy and paranoia in Czech politics. The remaining Central European countries offer a different picture. Even though the theory says that countries with weak civil society, unstable democratic institutions and high level of corruption are at risk for PGD; Slovakia, Hungary and Poland are exceptions of the theory (see Table No1). The main difference in these countries is their past and previous governments, and extreme political subjects in the parliament, as well as in part clericalism rooted in the society and political authorities. Populist rhetoric spiced with conspiracy thinking makes for a deadly cocktail that is waking up the old demons of the past in the societies.

These current processes visible in the Central European region are also defined as a revised wave of democratic regimes or illiberal transformation of democratic regimes, towards more openly hybrid or post-authoritarian regimes. Overall, scholars agreed with the notion that Central European countries are heading towards Zakaria's illiberal democracy of the 21st century. On one hand, global challenges in the form of economic and migration crisis, crisis of traditional political parties, and erosion of the legitimacy of democratic regimes have impacted these transformations, on the other hand, they have brought to the forefront ongoing changes in the behavior of political authorities and society at large. This in turn leads to their willingness to accept procedures, processes and structural changes that are not democratic, but are able to secure their stability and security (Žúborová, 2017).

Transformation of Central European countries towards illiberal political regime could be divided into two main stages:

- changes visible at the structural level of each regime defined through the centralization of state structure (constitutional court and public administration are monopolized, and centralized, and political "lordship" of media is introduced),
- changes of (political) behavior of political authorities and citizens (anomic behavior, positive perception of authoritarian personalities, positive perception of heterogeneous and isolationist societies).

Fusion of paranoia is not primarily manifested through the left and right binary. In Central European countries it rather manifests itself through conspiracy panic over enemies of the state and society who are driving the citizens and the third sector towards state coup and is funded with the help of mysterious dark forces from abroad. And all of the reactions realized by the governments are driven by the symptoms of paranoid government disorder.

Final remarks

Central European countries are again in the light of reflectors and displayed as a region that is backlashing from liberal democracy as a concept that was for them displayed as a holy grail after 1989. I believe that various approaches and concept that were published in the last decades as the reaction on what are happening in our region are reacting in a proper way on what is going on. All of them precisely described narratives and variables that had a deep impact on the current state of Central European region, and they already overcome various critiques that addressed them single seediness, absence of variety of practical example and one dimensionality in their conclusions. But all of them are right in one perspective, this region should be taken into account when we will speak about structural and societal changes of the regimes worldwide, because it showed the potential alternatives in which way other states could be heading if they will report identical characteristic and syndromes that countries in Central European region.

My essay should not be seen as a critical text on existing thesis and concepts that are trying to understand our region, its should be observed as an elaborative text that extends the range of variables, narratives and social phenomenon that should be taken into account if we would like to understand our countries. I believe that everything is rooted in the Central European personality that is rooted in the historical memory of this region, and characteristic that are specific of a region that is standing, as they official started to claim "somewhere in between the West and East".

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