**The Future of the Visegrad Group**

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The Visegrad Group (V4), a loose framework for political cooperation between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia, has received much attention from regional think tanks and academics since its inception in 1991. Numerous proposals have been put forward as to how tighter cooperation and coordination between the four countries could enhance their position in the European Union (EU), as well as the welfare of their citizens – indeed, the potential of the V4 has often been compared to the cooperation between the Nordic countries. Reality however has never quite lived up to these expectations; economic competition, political divisions and a lack of formal institutions impeded the V4 from achieving visible successes, at least on the high political level.

This report, written by a number of prominent political analysists, mainly from regional think tanks, and published as a collaboration between two progressive think tanks, aims to examines how sustainable the V4 cooperation is, and what potential it has to impact the EU. After a short foreword, the report’s first section begins with a descriptive analysis of the political situation in each of the four countries, as well as a discussion of their attitudes towards the EU and cooperation with each other. Four important common themes emerge from this section. First, the four countries have not really been able to use the V4 as a platform for putting forward constructive proposals, rather it served on an ad hoc basis to protect them from “alleged attacks by other member states and EU institutions” (p. 6). This was especially made clear during the 2015 refugee crisis, when the V4 closed ranks to oppose refugee quotas. Second, different politicians have attached different priorities to V4 cooperation, which has led to ebbs and flows in the cooperation. Among current key political leaders, Hungary’s Viktor Orbán sees the V4 as an important platform for resisting the initiatives of the “core” EU states, while Slovakia’s Robert Fico has expressed the desire for Slovakia to converge towards the EU core as opposed to the “Eurosceptic” East. Third, there are deep underlying differences between the V4 countries which often hinder cooperation. Almost all sections emphasize differences concerning approaches to Russia and energy policy, but the emerging V2+2 constellation is also frequently mentioned: Hungary and Poland have EU sceptic governments with strong authoritarian tendencies, while Slovakia and Czechia have remained more committed to democracy. Slovakia, as the only country among the four to have adopted the euro, seems perhaps the most deeply integrated with the EU. Fourth, while the lack of constructive visions and differences between the countries may have hindered high level political cooperation, the V4 has managed to achieve less visible, technical and policy level successes. The International Visegrad Fund, the only formal structure of the V4, has been successful in supporting pan-V4 civil, cultural, scientific and educational initiatives, and V4 coordination happens on a regular basis regarding specific EU policies.

The second section of the report includes two rather diverse chapters. The first one focuses on the EU visions of the V4, and provides five case studies (migration, environmental policy, Social Europe, democracy and EU “top jobs”) to illustrate policy level and political commonalities and differences. It is clear from these case studies that V4 cooperation is dictated by the moment: if a common interest is present, the V4 can be used as convenient platform for coordination. The chapter also argues that there seems to be a growing trend in cooperation between the four countries. The EU itself is increasingly recognizing the existence of the V4, although this is at times negative, and the V4 have more often than not been perceived as “trouble makers” who are only interested in safe guarding their benefits. The second chapter in this section provides three scenarios for the future of the V4, which is perhaps the most important contribution of this report. The first, rather unlikely scenario foresees the V4 becoming the “Benelux of the East”, a precondition for which would be for the four countries to engage with the EU in a much more positive and constructive way. The second scenario is more negative, with the V4 resisting the EU and frequently clashing with other member states, and ultimately posing an internal risk on the Community’s “unity and ability to act” (p. 41). This however would significantly erode trust and goodwill of EU member states towards the V4. The third scenario focuses on disintegration. While it is unlikely that the V4 will cease to function, internal divisions may render it into a “meaningless ceremony” (p. 41). Members may seek out other potential alliances instead and abandon cooperation with their neighbours.

The third section starts with four short messages, mainly from social democratic politicians focusing on the state of social democracy and “progressive ideas” in each of the V4. While the section is titled “Possible Progressive Alliances”, it is not really discussed how these relate to, or could potentially promote V4 cooperation. The final section reflects on the future of the V4 and the possible return of progressive ideas. The author, Andrea Pető, argues that memory and identity politics have become central in the region, and have led to the emergence of what she calls the “polypore state”, especially in Poland and Hungary. Polypore governance relies on state-sponsored, yet nominally independent structures which support the agendas of the government with the ultimate goal of changing the values of society. These structures dominate discourses on issues like migrants, gender, or sovereignty, making it difficult for progressive voices to enter, and those voicing them are often automatically labelled as traitors and enemies of the nation.

Two, slightly more critical remarks about the report are in order. First, despite its title, it mostly focuses on the past and the present of the Visegrad Cooperation. The three potential scenarios for the medium-term future presented in section two present some valuable insights, but they could have been developed in more detail. Second, there is much repetition in the report, and its structure could have been made more coherent as well. A stronger overarching narrative for the report, as well as more thorough editing would have helped significantly.

Despite these flaws, the report provides a detailed analysis of the drivers and obstacles of V4 cooperation, and how these may influence the cooperation’s future. Perhaps the key message from the report is that one should not have too high expectations concerning V4 cooperation, but this does not mean the successes of the group, even if less visible, should be discounted.

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