

REPORT

The Visegrad Four and Germany: which shared priorities in the next Commission?

Wednesday 16th of October 2019

Fondation Universitaire, Rue d'Egmont, 11 - 1000 Brussels, Belgium

- **The panel discussion titled "The Visegrad Four and Germany: which shared priorities in the next Commission?" took place on Wednesday, 16th October 2019 at the Fondation Universitaire in Brussels. In the light of discussions about the incoming Commission, the event asked the question of whether we will see unity on certain issues between the countries of the Visegrad Four (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) and Germany.**

The introductory remarks of the event were delivered by **Martin Michelot** (Deputy director, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy). The panel featured **Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska** (Senior Research Fellow, Centre for European Reform), **Milan Nič** (Head of the Robert Bosch Center for Central and Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, German Council on Foreign Relations), **Roland Freudenstein** (Policy Director, Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies) and **Vladimír Bilčík** (Member of European Parliament - Slovakia). More than 40 people participated in the discussion.

Ms **Agata Gostyńska-Jakubowska** opened the discussion by raising awareness about the dividing lines between the East and West over issues, such as refugees and rule of law crisis. She stressed that the "West", which is disappointed by a lack of solidarity from the East has perceived the « East » as an obstacle for the further integration. The "East", on the other hand, has accused other member-states of telling Central Europeans on whom to allow to enter their territory. The divisions have played into the hands of populists. She also stressed that it is

wrong to put all Central European countries into the same basket because they have different interests on numerous issues (even on Multiannual Financial Framework their interests have started diverging). She offered some recommendations on how to overcome dividing lines. Among other things she suggested that it is high time to stop using the rhetoric of "New" and "Old" Member States as it has already been 15 years since the accession and it sounds patronizing.

Mr **Roland Freudenstein** stated that Visegrad Four countries have been underestimated from the German perspective. He explained the self-appointed role of Germany as a bridge between East and West, which was a very beneficial narrative for Germany itself since it puts Germany in a pivotal but not openly leading role, but he expressed skepticism at the viability of this technique in recent years. His contribution continued by emphasizing a connection between different types of solidarity. When Germany was calling for solidarity regarding the refugee crisis, some actors in Poland raised question regarding German solidarity on the *NordStream 2* project. He

continued by pointing out the non-united character of the Visegrad Four countries on various matters, especially on their attitude to a federal Europe or in their relationship towards Russia. Last but not least, Mr. Freudenstein raised a hypothetical question regarding what would happen if Germany were to elect a green chancellor, which is, if not probable, then at least possible within the next 6 years. This would further widen the existing cultural differences between Germany and Visegrad Four countries. Lastly, in his concluding remarks he pointed at the historical lesson of recent years that Europe cannot be led from an extreme position (which Germany adopted in the migration crisis) but only 'from the centre', and that we should always remind ourselves that we have already covered a lot of ground in bringing Western Europe, including Germany, and the V4 countries closer together since 1989 and 2004.

The next speaker, Mr **Milan Nič**, opened his speech by emphasizing the economic relationship between the Visegrad Four countries and Germany, and whether it has been - or can be - translated into political connections. He noted that the trade between Germany and Hungary is larger than with Russia, with Slovakia larger than with G7 member Canada and with Poland larger than with the United Kingdom. Also, an increasing amount of the R&D operations by German companies are located in the region. This raises questions about the future of automotive industry in the context of electric mobility agenda: where will new electric cars and batteries be developed and produced? And with the attractiveness of Visegrad Four countries partially based on the old technology and cheap labour, what does the future hold in a context of increasing economic catch-up? While the V4 countries are economically tied to Germany, the course may now be changing because of internal changes within German economy. For instance, if German manufacturing and energy sector shifts to low-carbon economy, how will it affect their subsidiaries and supply chains in Central and Eastern Europe? In particular, as whose governments and voters are not so enthusiastic about climate change issues. Mr Nič concluded that the Visegrad Four countries are not a unified bloc either in international politics, as their stance

on matters like Russia or China significantly differs, or on EU affairs, as shown in different opinions on the posted workers, prospects of Qualified Majority Voting in CFSP or national interests in the next MFF, as well as its linkage to rule of law issues.

The last speaker, Mr **Vladimír Bilčík**, opened his speech by talking about the shift that has taken place since the Visegrad Four countries entered the European Union. Before the accession, the debate in the region was focused merely on how to work with the European Union. Nowadays, we see a variety of discussions in the region. He continued by asking what needs to be done to increased the level and the intensity of Visegrad Four and Germany cooperation? According to him, trying to reach such an objective is rather unpredictable. It would be natural that the cooperation would tackle forward-looking issues such as climate and technological change. Like Mr. Nič, he also raised the issue around the future of the automotive industry. Mr. Bilčík then discussed the notion of the new "Geopolitical Commission" the meaning of which is so far relatively unclear, and called for a definition and ambition to be put forward in this regard. In this light, the question also remains whether Europe is going to be geopolitical actor in its neighborhood, especially regarding the increasing influence of Russia and Turkey in this area. He followed by opening more questions regarding how we are going to face digital transformation, whether Europe can still be a trend setter and whether there is any desire between the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to bring policies even closer together. He concluded by stating that the region should rather on the European picture rather than to focus on regional unity.

The Q&A session featured commentaries by various actors reflecting on the future priorities of the new Commission in relation to Visegrad Four countries and Germany. Some of the participants asked about whether the double standards, between the East and the West, are gone, and hypothesized about the impact of Germany electing the next Chancellor from the Green Party. Other participants also raised the controversy surrounding the Polish commissioner candidate and the weakened role of the ECR

group in the EP. Finally, the discussion mentioned the impact of Brexit on the region.

To sum up, it is difficult, at this moment, to find a natural common ground for Visegrad Four and Germany to cooperate, especially at the deeper political level and the future of Europe. Finding common ground will mainly depend on the internal developments of Germany and

especially regarding the choices that are made by its automobile industry. The political-economic nexus that has traditionally characterized the relationship may be troubled by political divergences of climate issues, and whether Germany will want to continue to play the role of a bridge, especially if political divisions in the V4 continue, and the region remains divided on key future of the EU and foreign policy issues.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union