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Policy Paper

V4 in Brussels – A reality check of the international perspective on Visegrad cooperation

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Abstract

Regional cooperation of the four Visegrad countries has been continuous for the past 25 years. Although the original goal of the V4 to coordinate their pursuit of NATO and EU membership has been successful, after the accession, it was a struggle to construct a common regional identity. The last Hungarian V4 presidency in 2017/2018 initiated a strong V4 voice in Europe. Some might argue that stronger the V4 emphasizes its interests within the EU, the deeper an already existing East-West divide will become. In Brussels, however, deepening such a divide is far from being popular among stakeholders representing the V4 Group (NGOs, think-tanks). This paper evaluates the agenda-setting approach and V4 promotion activities of these stakeholders, and recommends some compromises based on opinion-polls made by Brussels based experts.

Recommendations

- Facilitate the discussion among V4 and non-V4 stakeholders from energy industry to understand, as well as the depth and consequences of the alternatives to the EU's green policies."
- Organize conferences about the future of health industry in Europe and discuss the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the vaccination process in 2020
- Focus on the debates about digitization and its effects on V4 labour markets, which have crucial effects on regional competitiveness as well
- Highlight constructive activities like defence sector modernization, and willingness for creating more strategic autonomy in Europe

About V4 cooperation

Regional cooperation of the four Visegrad countries has been continuous for the past 25 years. Although the original goal of the V4 to coordinate their pursuit of NATO and EU membership has been successful, after the accession, it was a struggle to construct a common regional identity. After the first few years of hesitance, however, foreign policy coordination proved to be useful for these countries both in intra EU and external relations.

The governments' ambitions might differ from time to time towards Visegrad cooperation. However, there are several areas where strong and enduring political commitment can be identified. On the one hand, some elements of the V4 agenda are common with mainstream ideas like strengthening EU strategic autonomy, and increase cooperation in the field of security and defence.¹

On the other hand, there are issues like the New Green deal, more recently the Fit for 55 package, or migration, where V4 articulated a very different political agenda from most of Brussels' stakeholders. Some political messages, which are coming from the V4 region are not necessarily popular in Brussels, but have gained traction in some political parties all across Europe.

V4 agenda of the 2021/2022

Hungarian presidency

V4 presidency programs of the last four years revealed the importance of inter-ministerial negotiations on a large number of policy areas, which proved to be successful.² A relatively large amount of topics have been addressed on the macro level of political (future of Europe, post-Brexit era, EU migration policy or digitization/green transition) and the micro level of sectorial cooperation (regulations of agriculture, industry, services etc.).

There is a fear that new elements on the V4 agenda might have a blowback effect on deepening the cooperation. However, the V4 would rather amplify its lobbying power within the EU than create an

alternative to EU integration. Some topics are needed to be discussed regularly indeed, while other topics are not necessarily future-proof. Energy security, digitization and defence policy are certain fields where negotiations existed since the very beginning of Visegrad cooperation, and will remain important.

Energy security is one of the most important common issues in the Visegrad region comparing to other European territories, mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, the region does not have the same level of interconnectivity and energy infrastructure than Western European countries. Secondly, the V4 countries has limited opportunities to choose from energy providers, unlike Western European countries, who can rely on sources from Norway, Scotland, or even the US shipments from the ports of Portugal. The V4, however, will be dependent on Russian gas and oil products, even if the interconnectivity problems could be resolved. New pipelines and interconnectors make it possible to connect EU energy markets, thus create a better position in gas pricing negotiations with Russians. However, the actual gas products, V4 countries can buy from Germany or through Germany, will remain of Russian origin.

. Due to the gas crisis in 2009, more emphasis has been put on the requirement of diversification and connectivity. Previously, major concerns of EU energy policy have been the effectivity and the cost-benefit calculus of long-term gas supply contracts. The construction of interconnectors and the capacity increasing of Swinoujscie and Krk Liquefied Natural Gas (hereinafter: LNG) terminals all helped to make some fledgling steps to reduce dependency on Russian sources.

One of the most central results of the increasing interconnectivity was that markets can be supplied by short-term contracts, which can follow price changes rapidly instead of making long-term commitments towards one particular supplier like GAZPROM. Ukrainians could start buying natural gas from EU markets virtually, even if was from a Russian source at the end of the day. Nevertheless, Russia still remained the primary gas supplier of the

¹ Marek Madej (2019) Brief history of V4 defence cooperation until 2014, Biztpol Affairs, Vol. 6. No. 2. https://corvinusculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Biztpol-Affairs-Vol6_No2.pdf

² Péter Stepper (2017) Visegrad cooperation beyond the Polish and during the Hungarian V4 presidency, Foreign Policy Review, Volume 10. https://kki.hu/assets/upload/FPR_2017.pdf

region, since it was competitive and was able to successfully adjust to the changes of the European energy market. That being said, EU member states and Russia had more than 30 long-term contracts a couple of years ago. After 2018, almost every contract has been modified in order to comply with common EU standards. Although gas prices used to be oil-indexed, we could start to see a significant change of pricing as well, which was understood as a success of EU energy policy in 2018.³ Unfortunately, the consequences of the German *Energiewende* (the shutdown of nuclear power plants) have begun to show, and the de-carbonisation efforts of the European Commission temporarily increased the gas import demand. The increase demand would not be a problem, if major suppliers could increase the gas export, as it is to be expected in free market economies. However, Russian companies are not necessarily working this way. Some might accuse the Russian state to interfere and uses gas supply as a political weapon against Europe primarily to put pressure on Germans to complete the Nordstream 2 as soon as possible. Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a Europe-wide recession, also made its mark on the fuel prices, which skyrocketed in 2021.

However, the V4 commitment in the last few years to build interconnectors between Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Hungary, connecting them to the German energy infrastructure. North-south connectivity is also very important to connect Świnoujście and Krk terminals to Central European gas markets, which makes US LNG sources accessible. Furthermore, creating the reverse flow capabilities by these interconnectors not just helped our region to be a bit more resilient towards strategic shocks, but also made it possible for indirectly exporting gas to Ukraine if Moscow decides to cut off the supply.

Even if Budapest prefers Russian gas sources from the Western Balkan transit routes, while Warsaw prefers increasing the LNG important and protest against North Stream II, the V4 group could come up with compromises, respecting each other's sensitivities.

V4 unity

The aforementioned differences could not undermined the unity of the group, which has also been supported by some underlining geopolitical fundamentals. There was a constant fear within the V4 group that Central Europe will eventually be downgraded in the eyes of Washington DC, because of their reset with Russia in 2005, as well as of Brussels, due to the new voting mechanisms introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.⁴ The increased usage of Qualified Majority Voting and the decision-making process, which incorporated the European Parliament as a co-legislator, made it difficult to substantially influence European politics by small states.⁵ These centrifugal forces made the V4 core stronger, and they also started to look for new forms of coalition-building in V4+ format⁶. The fears of growing nationalism within the V4,⁷ causing problems in bilateral relations, has disappeared, and all the governments were cautious enough to resolve their bilateral issues as quickly and smoothly as possible.

Geopolitical realities bind the V4 together. First, there is no real alternative of European Union membership for these countries, thus the talks about Poxexit, Czexit, Huxit etc. cannot be taken seriously. However, the election of PiS (2015 and 2019) and Fidesz (2010, 2014 and 2018) created a political climate within which Orbán and Kaczyński frequently criticized European mainstream politics on the pretext of defending national sovereignty and conservative values. 'Slovakian⁸ and Czech⁹ Prime

³ Péter Stepper (2017) Consistently Inconsistent. The sinusoidal V4 Presidency struggles to find areas of cooperation which will unite the region's priorities Visegrad Insight <https://visegradinsight.eu/consistently-inconsistent/>

⁴ Janusz Bugajski (2017) The Visegrad saga: Achievements, shortcomings, contradictions, Foreign Policy Review, Volume 10. https://kki.hu/assets/upload/FPR_2017.pdf

⁵ Jakub Charvát (2019) The Visegrad Group Countries Representation in the European Parliament, Biztpol Affairs, Vol.

⁶ No. 2. https://corvinusculture.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Biztpol-Affairs-Vol6_No2.pdf

⁶ V4+ negotiations

⁷ Janusz Bugajski (2017) The Visegrad saga: Achievements, shortcomings, contradictions, Foreign Policy Review, Volume 10. https://kki.hu/assets/upload/FPR_2017.pdf

⁸ Robert Fico, Peter Pellegrini from SMER, and Igor Matovič, Eduard Heger from OĽaNO.

⁹ Bohuslav Sobotka from ČSSD, Andrej Babiš from ANO 2011 and most probably the next PM will be Petr Fiala from ODS after the win in 2021 elections.

Ministers were less confrontational within the European Union, but shared most of the core ideas of V4, such as rejection of uncontrolled migration/resettlement quotas, cohesion policy reforms, enlargement, and energy connectivity. Scholars, however, mistakenly presumed¹⁰ that the European politics of Poland and Hungary will lead to isolation and further economic decline of the region. Despite the increasing political pressure on these two governments, they could forge unexpected alliances across Europe with relatively important actors like Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Sebastian Kurz in Austria, or Janez Jansa in Slovenia. Both traditional conservative and right-wing anti-establishment parties have seen an unprecedented increase in popularity in the last few years. Whether these developments will be sustained is uncertain, especially witnessing the decline of AfD's popularity in Germany, or the recent decline of far-right parties in Denmark and Norway.

V4 in Brussels¹¹

The political rhetoric in Bratislava, Budapest, Prague, and Warsaw often emphasized V4 as the most successful vehicle representing the region's national and regional interests. In the meantime, V4 is sometimes depicted as a fierce group, which fights everyday battles in Brussels, within different levels of EU bureaucratic institutions. In reality, there are just as many other regional blocs with similar voting habits in the Council. On the other hand, there is also some divergence between the subgroup of Czechs and Slovaks comparing to Poles and Hungarians. Thus, we cannot argue that the V4 consistently seeks for widening the East-West divide. However, presenting the narrative of defending core European conservative values from 'Brussels' helps to mobilize voters for domestic political purposes.

In Brussels, however, deepening an East-West divide is far from being popular among stakeholders representing the V4. Therefore, certain stakeholders prefer a dual approach to communicate about V4 activities. It is hardly surprising. There are a

significant number of NGOs, who are granted financial and practical support from the International Visegrad Fund and from their own countries to promote the V4. On the other hand, most of these expert groups have their own identity, principles, mission statements and struggle to raise awareness to the topics important from their institutional perspective. To get the attention of the public, it is the easiest way to focus on popular topics, and always look to be constructive and not a pessimistic defeatist. Thus, the question arose: How could anyone keep its own institute relevant in Brussels if your activity covers Visegrad cooperation? We can argue that it is in the best interest of every stakeholder to find a proper balance between articulating constructive critics towards the V4 and emphasizing all the strength and importance of the regional cooperation. This characteristic makes them perfect subject of my research, which reveals how the organization in Brussels can or should use V4 as a vehicle for their own national or institutional goals.

V4 is overrepresented by certain state actors, because small states like to take advantage by referring to the V4 to present themselves stronger, especially in term of political issues which are important for them domestically (e.g., migration, cohesion funds, green transition, defence cooperation). The V4 is underrepresented in the NGO circles, because they do not need to take care of legitimacy and popularity among voters but can choose a single set of values and policies to support (e.g., green transition, refugees and human rights, digitization etc.). Sometimes the V4 is a good vehicle for this goal (e.g., green transition, digitization) and sometimes it is counter-productive (migration) for them. There will be a common minimum denominator in the agenda of V4 state and non-state actors, and they will be mutually interested in emphasizing those topics, which are constructive and can be framed into a wider European narrative (digitization, green transition, and defence policy cooperation).

I conducted semi-structured interviews both online and offline during my stay in Brussels. Data has been

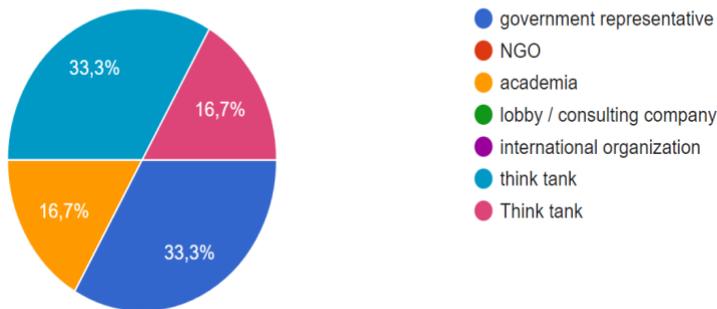
collected data for quantitative research revolving around the national perception on the recent V4 agenda articulated in the 2021/2022 Hungarian presidency program. The primary goal of the research was to understand how V4 is represented in Brussels. I am interested in the reasons beyond the agenda-setting and political communication of stakeholders, state actors and NGOs alike.

¹⁰ Wojciech Przybylski, V4 in EU, Visegrad Plus, Forum for Visegrad+ Studies, 15 December 2016, <http://visegradplus.org/v4-in-eu/>

¹¹ In the framework of the Fellowship Program organized and supported by the Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform, I had the opportunity to visit Brussels for a one-week long study trip. I

collected with the help of an online survey consisting of twenty-two different questions. The survey combined multiple choice answers, short texts and ranking tasks. All the respondents could preserve anonymity during the survey, but very basic personal data for identification and differentiation (age group, type of work, life experience in Brussels) has been collected from them. It seemed to be relevant to help the qualitative analysis afterwards.

The respondents came from various institutions as you can see below:

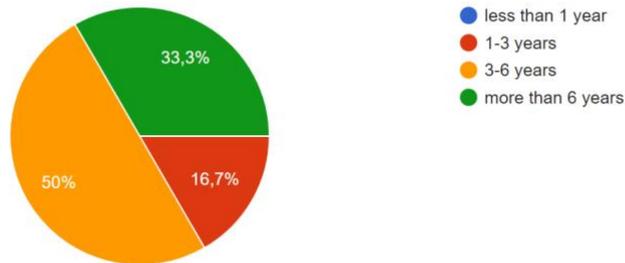


Based on the age differences we can say it was a rather mixed group of people, some of them with relatively good amount of experience in politics.

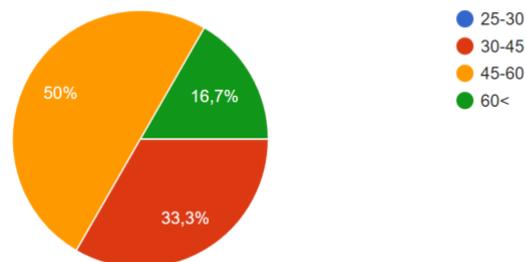
1. Please choose one affiliation, which describes your work the best.

Most of them were living in Brussels since a longer period, hence they had the chance to accumulate vast experience in the field of international relations. I am reasonably confident that to a certain extent, they also dealt with the case of regional groupings such as the Visegrad cooperation. Comparing to experts, who has not been living and working close to EU institutions, I would expect differing opinions. To confirm this presumption, more field work and opinion polls from non-Brussels based institutions would be necessary.

2. How long do you live in Brussels?



3. How old are you?



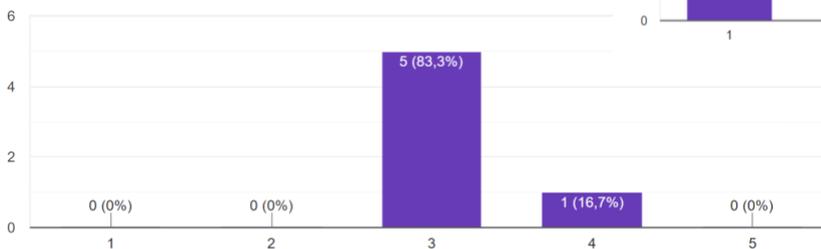
The first few questions have been focusing on the significance of regional cooperation formats in general, and V4 cooperation in particular. The second set of questions aimed to reveal the reasons of the (un)popularity of V4 in Brussels, and to collect suggestions for putting less confrontative elements on the V4 agenda in the future. The last two type of questions were dealing with the external relations of V4 countries and its assessment in Brussels, and the

chances of successful post-Covid crisis management in the region.

Most of the respondents highlighted during an informal face-to-face discussion that V4 cooperation is “not the first thing in the morning what you think of”, when you work in Brussels either for international institutions, government representations or NGOs. As you can see the V4 is not something totally unknown in Brussels, but definitely not the most important factor in the mind-set of the respondents.

4. How would you describe the level of interest towards the V4 in Brussels? 5 indicated the highest level of interest.

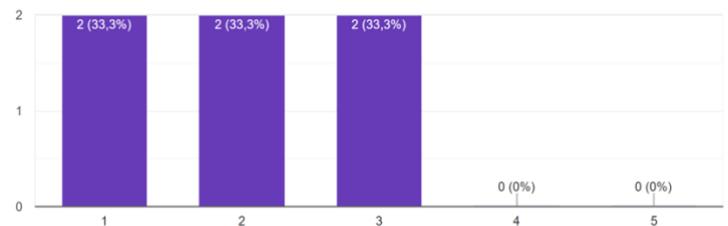
Most of the people have little problem with regionalization in general, as can be seen on the following graph.



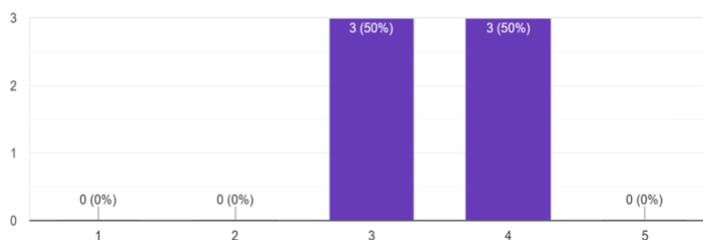
However, when you ask directly about the reputation of V4 as a regional cooperation, they rather describe it as something disruptive and not so positive.

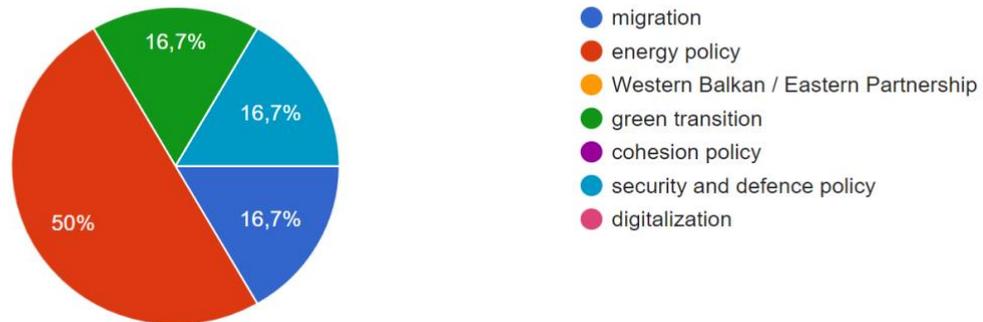
6. What is the general feeling about V4 specifically in Brussels?

However, the V4 became an important factor of negotiations about EU migration policy, which became a highly politicized issue since 2015. Unsurprisingly, the respondent in Brussels argue that they welcome anything on the agenda but migration. Energy policy coordination is definitely not unpopular in Brussels, as well as green transition and security and defence policy.



5. What is the general feeling about any type of regional cooperation formats within European Union (Baltic, Nordic, BENELUX etc.) in Brussels?





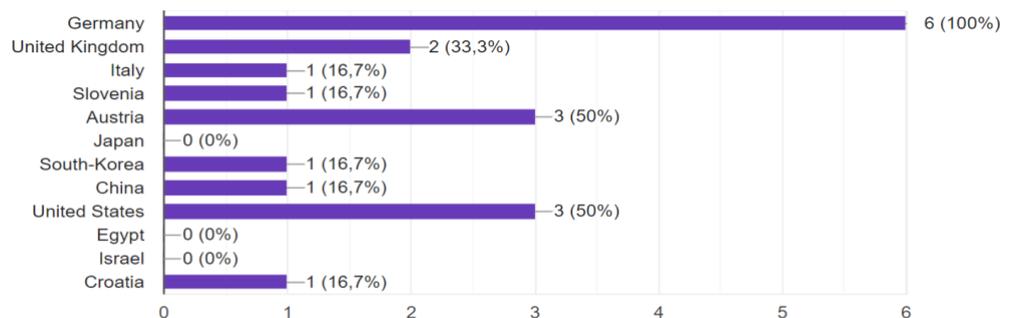
7. What are the most important policies what you would welcome on the V4 agenda?

The graph above also correlates with other responses for the questions ‘What topics have a positive connotation when people (politicians, NGO experts) mention V4?’ and ‘What kind of V4 policy fields do you find ‘easy to sell for’ / supported by non-V4 EU partners?’ The respondents mentioned defence policy, economic integration, and joint lobbying power in a positive manner and highlighted that digitalization, energy/green transition, defence policy and Western Balkans/Eastern Partnership are topics easier to sell for non-V4 EU member-states.

Visegrad Group constantly struggles to be a core platform for cooperation with other EU and non-EU countries, but is not so straightforward what others might think about this ambition, especially in Brussels. As you can see the graph below some of the V4+ negotiations are more than welcome, especially those, which are directed toward Central European partners (Slovenia, Austria, Croatia, Germany) or Western allies (United State of America).

8. Which partner countries are the most important ones to talk with in the V4+ format? (multiple answers possible)

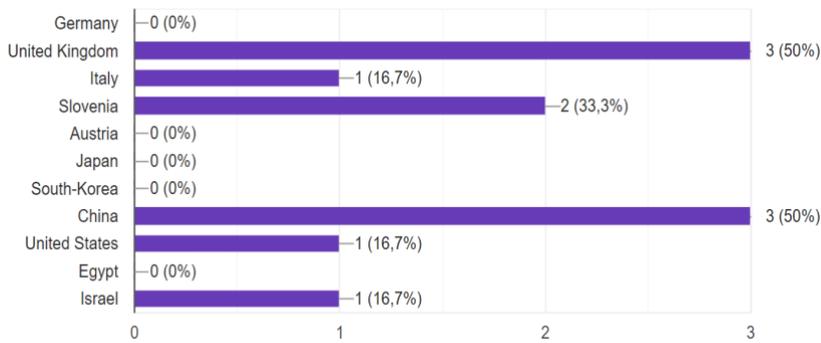
Other V4+ partners however are not so popular in Brussels, especially with countries who are described as critics of EU (like Britain), adversaries of Western values (like China) or having right-wing political leaders (like Matteo Salvini in Italy, or Janez Jansa in Slovenia).



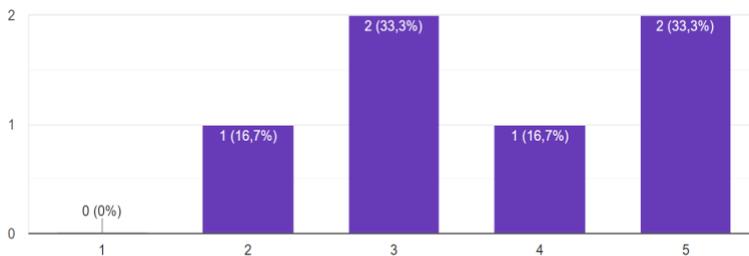
9. Which (potential) V4+ partners are unpopular in Brussels?

The ongoing Hungarian V4 Presidency created a bit shorter program compared to the previous one in 2017/2018, and some would argue the level of ambition towards V4 is a bit more realistic in 2021. Looking at the results, we can see that one third of the respondents considered the recent Hungarian presidency very ambitious, 16.7% as rather

ambitious, another one third said it is moderately ambitious.

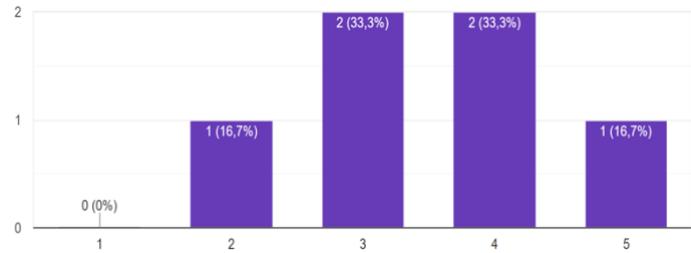


10. How would you describe the Hungarian level of ambition towards strengthening V4 comparing to previous HU presidency four years ago?



The most divisive question was revolving around COVID-19 and prospects of economic recovery. V4 countries negotiated the situation of temporary border closures since 2019-2020 and helped each other in a limited way. The V4 managed to accept each other's vaccines with some exceptions (see Poland's position on Sputnik) and tried to re-establish free boarder-crossings to boost tourism as soon as possible. Hungary offered some respiratory machines, and also vaccines in a limited extent to help Czech and Slovaks. The economic consequences of the pandemic, however, are severe indeed. Inflation and inter-sectoral labour market problems (especially in case of restaurants and tourism) will have long-lasting effects. Some of the respondents would say that the chance of this region to increase economy growth quickly are somewhat lower than in Western-Europe.

11. How do you see the chances of a succesful post-Covid economic recovery of V4 comparing to other European member-states?



Policy recommendations

Based on the evidence I found during my short study-trip and the qualitative research experiment afterwards, it is safe to say that perception about Visegrad cooperation differ in V4 capitals and in Brussels. Before making any policy recommendations it is worth realizing that the V4 is moderately important for the significant stakeholders, but it does not mean that the V4's voice is not to be heard in some specific issues important for major players.

There are three type of issues, which can be identified in agenda-setting activity of V4. The first set of problems are connected to some core values of East Central Europe. Even if the V4 position about migration policy, accession talks and cohesion policy debates can be seen as something unpopular, it will not change realistically any time soon. Negotiations about these affairs shall be limited to governmental level.

The second set of issues are connected to pro-European political messages coming from the V4 region. Strengthening European strategic autonomy and becoming security providers within the NATO structure shows constructive steps from V4 countries. Central Europe (because of several reasons) is ready for not just reaching the 2% criteria for military budgets, but also to exceed it in the next decade. Border protection measures are also activities, which are more and more respected by European member-states during JHA Council meetings.

Last but not least, we also can identify new issues like post-pandemic crisis management, digitalization, green transition, health policy harmonization, which we cannot categorize at first sight. It would make sense to prevent them to fall into the first category of highly politicized / securitized issues. Think-tanks from V4 in Brussels, like the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM, GLOBSEC, Antall József Knowledge, Brussels Office of PISM can do a lot in order to help this process.

Based on the analysis above, this paper suggest for the institutions representing V4 group / V4 countries in Brussels to

- Facilitate the discussion among V4 and non-V4 stakeholders from energy industry to understand, as well as the depth and consequences of the alternatives to the EU's green policies.”
- Organize conferences about the future of health industry in Europe and discuss the experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic and the vaccination process in 2020
- Focus on the debates about digitization and its effects on V4 labour markets, which have crucial effects on regional competitiveness as well
- Highlight constructive activities like defence sector modernization, and willingness for creating more strategic autonomy in Europe

Avoid discussing rule of law mechanism and migration policy reform, which can undermine political unity of the group and / or can generate unwanted attention from European partners, who would like to support other efforts on the V4 agenda

About the author

Péter Stepper has received his MA degree in International Relations at the Corvinus University of Budapest in 2021. From 2013 he has worked as the editorial head of Security Policy Review, then from 2014 and 2016 as a lecturer of ELTE TÁTK. He also worked as lecturer for the International Business School from 2016 to 2018. He defended his PhD thesis in 2018 at the Multidisciplinary Doctoral School of Covinus University about forced migration as a security challenges in the Visegrad region. From 2016 to 2021, he was a research fellow at the Antall József Knowledge Centre. From 2019 he is Adjunct Professor of the Department of International Security Studies at the National University of Public Service. From August 2021 he is a Program Manager and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade. His research area is the Visegrad cooperation, security policy, transatlantic relations and NATO.



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Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a **network for structured dialog** on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund.

For more information about Think Visegrad and its members visit www.thinkvisegrad.org.

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