

POLICY BRIEF

Czechia between V4 and the EU: the impact of migration on Visegrad cohesion

Vladislav Strnad

- **The paper analyses the impact of migration on the regional Visegrad cooperation, which is one of the instruments of Czech foreign policy. Visegrad's joint position towards migration has a dual impact on the cohesion of the Visegrad Group, moreover, it directly influences the European policy of Czechia and its position in the EU.**
- **In the context of searching for a link between regional and European policy dimension, it is in the Czech interest to push this regional cooperation towards stronger ideological unity, and active policy that would be beneficial to the EU.**

Introduction

The Visegrad Group (V4) has responded to the migration crisis by an unexpectedly unified and consistent position¹, which was symptomatic of its identity shift. The long-term confrontation with the European Migration and Asylum Policy, the political changes in Poland and Hungary, the illiberal rhetoric of Visegrad politicians as well as the conflict with the European Commission have significantly

influenced the position of V4 and the Czech Republic in Europe. Visegrad has been continuously labelled as a toxic group² of illiberal nationalists, xenophobes and

¹ Govt CZ, "Joint Statement of the Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group Countries" (Visegrad Group, 2015), <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-150904>; MoI CZ, "Joint Declaration of Ministers of the Interior" (Visegrad Group, 2016); MoI PL, "Joint Statement of V4 Interior Ministers on the Establishment of the Migration Crisis Response Mechanism" (Visegrad Group, 2016), <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2016/joint-statement-of-v4>; Govt CZ, "Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Countries"

(Visegrad Group, 2015), <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the-151204>.

² Michael Rozsypal, "Visegrádská Čtyřka Je Vnímána Jako Toxická Značka. Nedokáže Přijít s Ničím Pozitivním, Říká Prouza," *Český Rozhlas*, 2018, https://www.irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/interview-plus-tomas-prouza-visegradaska-ctyrka-migrace-kritika_1807021955_pla.

Eurosceptics³ who ignore rules and norms, do not respect the rule of law and liberal-democratic values.⁴

For the Czech Republic, this “quasi-institutional”⁵ consultation and coordination platform is a tool for promoting national interests, especially at the European level.⁶ Today, however, the V4 is not presented in the Czech discourse as an exclusive form of regional cooperation, but as one of many that will be used in the case of “a clear added value.”⁷ Some argue that this cooperation format outlived its usefulness and is complicating Czech foreign policy. In addition, speculations about the Group’s division into V2+2⁸/V3+1⁹ are accompanied by ideas as to whether the Czech Republic should reorient to another format of cooperation.

This paper analyses the Visegrad cooperation in the context of the European migration crisis primarily through the perception of Visegrad respondents who are either directly or indirectly involved in the policy-making process at the EU level. The analysis was operationalized through the research framework of the conditions of coalitional cooperation.¹⁰ This approach serves as an audit of V4’s functioning and its future perspectives for internal

cooperation. Relevant data, on which this paper builds, was drawn from 12 semi-structured interviews primarily with respondents from the Visegrad and partner countries in Brussels, supplemented by informal interviews with policy experts. The recordings of semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised.

Conditions of cooperation

To analyse the V4 cooperation in the context of the migration crisis, I utilized the analytical framework that focuses on the Visegrad’s co-operation mechanism. The original version of this framework, which combined rationalist and constructivist views on international cooperation, was created by Drulák.¹¹ By fulfilling the conditions of cooperation¹² and in the case of a favourable political environment, the regional cooperation could work and have prospects for the future. According to Drulák’s 2002 analysis, the prospects of Visegrad cooperation are rather unfavourable.¹³

³ Věra Stojarová, “Populist, Radical and Extremist Political Parties in Visegrad Countries Vis à Vis the Migration Crisis,” *De Gruyter 1* (2018): 42; Elżbieta M Goździak and Péter Márton, “Where the Wild Things Are: Fear of Islam and the Anti-Refugee Rhetoric in Hungary and in Poland,” *Central and Eastern European Migration Review Received*; no. October 2017 (2018): 5–6, 8; Andrew Geddes and Peter Scholten, *The Politics of Migration & Immigration in Europe* (SAGE, 2016), 199.

⁴ The Economist, “Big, Bad Visegrad,” *The Economist*, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2016/01/28/big-bad-visegrad>; Anna Visvizi, “Perpetual Crises, the Return of Geopolitics and the Emergence of New Normalcy in Central Europe,” in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (Routledge, 2018), 44; Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2018: Confronting Illiberalism,” *Freedom House*, 2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2018>.

⁵ The Visegrad Group operates in a specific institutional framework that functions on regional and higher integrational level and shows signs of institutional stability. See Martin Dangerfield, “Challenges for Further Development and Enlargement,” *Poznan University Economics Review* 14, no. 4 (2014): 71–90.

⁶ Milan Nič, “The Visegrád Group in the EU: 2016 as a Turning-point?,” *European View* 15 (2016): 284; Łukasz A. Janulewicz et al., “From ‘Visegrad Four’ to ‘Varna Four’: The Rise and Role of Regional Cooperation in Central and South Eastern

Europe” (Center for European Neighborhood Studies, 2018), 22; cf. Zsuzsanna Csornai, “The Changing Balance of Power in the EU after the British Referendum – V4 Capacities and Opportunities” (Think Visegrad, 2017), 5.

⁷ Tomáš Petříček, “Nástupní Projev Ministra Zahraničních Věcí Tomáše Petříčka” (MFA Czechia, 2018), https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/cz/o_ministerstvu/archivy/clanky_a_projevy_ministru/clanky_a_projevy_ministra_petricka_2018/x2018_10_18_nastupni_projev_ministra_zahranicnich.html.

⁸ Hungary and Poland on the one side, Czechia and Slovakia on the other.

⁹ Slovakia being the ‘1’ in this scenario.

¹⁰ Michal Kořan, “The Visegrad Group on the Threshold of Its Third Decade: A Central European Hub?,” in *Regional and International Relations of Central Europe*, ed. Zlatko Šabič and Petr Drulák (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 201–18.

¹¹ Petr Drulák, “When Does Regional Cooperation Make Sense?,” in *Visegrad Countries in an Enlargement Trans-Atlantic Community*, ed. Marek Šťastný (Inštitút pre verejnú otázku, 2002), 47–66.

¹² (1) a degree of interdependence; (2) sharing of a common threat; (3) likeness in political, societal, historical, and cultural terms; (4) eagerness for self-binding; (5) institutionalization of coalitional relations (6) development of a shared identity

¹³ Drulák, “When Does Regional Cooperation Make Sense?,” 61–63.

Drulák's framework was further developed by Kořan¹⁴, who identified the gradual socialization of the political and bureaucratic elites within the V4 as the centripetal mechanism of the Visegrad cooperation. The V4 countries are entangled in a dense network of interactions, and positively interpret cooperation in the normative context. Kořan highlighted the creation and fostering of "Visegrad quasi-identity" which is "embedded deeply in the mindsets of politicians, diplomats, and other officials that have something to do with foreign policy."¹⁵ Given the explorative character of the study, Kořan's conditions¹⁶ served as latent themes which drove the creation of interview topic guides and the direction of overall research inquiry.

V4 as a double-edged sword

The vast majority of respondents underlined double-edged aspects of the common Visegrad migration policy. In the context of the migration crisis, the "perception of Visegrad, especially in Brussels, has become so complicated that it is not always possible to consider V4 membership as an advantage." On the one side, the united stance towards migration has led to "visibility"¹⁷ and greater cohesion¹⁸ of the Group. In addition, according to some respondents, Visegrad has created an image through its uncompromising position. In general, respondents agree that "cooperation among the V4 countries was not that strong as it is right now". On the other side, they admit that the Group is not being positively perceived by the other Member States.

As a result, according to the respondents, the presentation of Visegrad positions in Brussels is very limited and not particularly welcomed at the moment. This

representation of "other attitudes" placed the Group in "an extreme position and consequently pushed it to the edge of the discourse and the European whole as such." At the Brussels level, Visegrad is perceived as "a non-constructive partner on many themes." Therefore, "the V4 label is not always profitable." This situation is further fostered by the "insufficient diplomatic language of Poland and Hungary," whose vocabulary is "less acceptable in Brussels." For this reason, according to Czech and Slovak respondents, it is crucial to point out that "the V4 is not a platform in which everyone agrees." Czechia and Slovakia "are recognized as parts of a unified group, hence they are perceived more negatively than it is desired." It is "necessary to confirm these nuances within the Group to our partners," argued one Czech respondent.

The above-mentioned narrative of strengthening the V4's cohesion as well as consolidation of the joint V4 position in European politics is promoted predominantly in the domestic Visegrad environment. This contrasted experience is shared among Brussels respondents who highlight the negative consequences and complicated communication with their European partners. Interestingly, repeatedly mentioned "nuances" within the Group or "ideological disunity" do not precisely reflect the current behaviour of the Visegrad politicians. In addition to rejection of attempts to introduce mandatory quotas, V4 officials do not exhibit the willpower to voluntarily redistribute migrants, they reject the proposed European Commission procedure to strengthen joint border protection¹⁹ or, for example, they demonstratively boycotted the EU's mini-summit on

¹⁴ Kořan, "The Visegrad Group on the Threshold of Its Third Decade: A Central European Hub?"

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.

¹⁶ (1) political determination and support; (2) flexibility and the „Art of disagreeing“; (3) Institutionalization, inner cooperation, socialization; (4) the substance of cooperation and strategic goals; (5) focusing, prioritizing, and extending; (6) self-confidence with broader responsibility.

¹⁷ See Visvizi, "Perpetual Crises, the Return of Geopolitics and the Emergence of New Normalcy in Central Europe," 45; Nézópont

Intézet, "Central European Perspectives - Opinion Pool in 11 Central European Countries" (Nézópont Intézet, 2018).

¹⁸ See Tomáš Strážay, "Internal and External Aspects of the Visegrad 4 Cooperation," in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (Routledge, 2018), 165–76; Dagi Dogachan, "EU's Refugee Crisis: From Supra-Nationalism to Nationalism," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 3, no. 3 (2018): 10–11.

¹⁹ "Poland, Czech Republic against EU Border Guard Plan," *Euractiv.Com*, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/poland-czech-republic-against-eu-border-guard-plan/>.

migration.²⁰ In addition, individual Visegrad political representations seem to be opposed to several documents which support liberal-democratic perspectives of the EU – such as the UN Global Compact for migration,²¹ the Marrakech Political Declaration, or the Istanbul Convention.

Empty cooperation with artificial position?

Visegrad respondents were, to some extent, critical towards the coordination of V4 policy at the Brussels level. Some even called Visegrad coordination in migration policy an “artificial alliance,” as “it is difficult to find intersections other than simple phrases.” Although the V4 agrees on a general stance towards migration policy, it is observable that within the Group there is “a range of views on migration as such.” It seems that there is a consensus at the highest political level which does not spill over to a technical, concrete, level. This is accompanied by a frequent disparity between perceptions of issues by political leaders and by policy experts in the individual V4 countries. At the political level, the Group looks like a “perfectly homogeneous group, but in details, not necessarily.”

According to respondents, Czechia and Slovakia are trying to use the Visegrad brand in Brussels as little as possible. Hungary maintains an opposite approach, which attempts to use the Visegrad label as much as possible because it “shows that they are not alone.” Practically, it “legitimizes their stance,” argued one Polish respondent. In addition, Czech and Slovak respondents highlighted the efforts of their countries “to not slip into the more extreme narrative that is observable in Hungary,” but to approach the situation “rationally and not ideologically.” Yet, all respondents admit the strong politicization of the migration

issue and underline that the adoption of allocation quotas “would be political suicide” at the domestic political level.

The proactive Visegrad ambitions to promote its stance towards migration issues are conditioned by a systematic coordination of policies within the Group. It seems that information meetings of Visegrad representatives are a necessary but insufficient condition for a common Visegrad migration policy at the European level. Especially since the migration agenda goes beyond the policy level, and as a result, the ideological direction of the political leadership of the Visegrad states has a great impact on this cooperation. Regardless, media tend “to place the V4 members under one label, yet, the situation is completely different.” After all, Visegrad unity in the context of migration “seems to be somewhat ostensible,” argued one Czech respondent.

“Art of Disagreeing” and Illiberalism

Respondents highlighted the pragmatic level of the Visegrad Group. The cooperation should “be used when it is appropriate and strengthens the position of individual states,” stated one Czech respondent. The Visegrad cooperation takes place in multiple areas, thus “disagreement in one does not mean the end of cooperation”, since “there have always been differences of perspectives.” Regardless of this so-called “art of disagreeing”, the respondents stressed the problematic nature of Hungarian “very strict and strong”, even “extreme”, narrative. Hungary is actively presenting and promoting this narrative, albeit the rest of the V4 members do not fully accept it. One Slovak respondent mentioned that “we could not support them from a technical point of view, or we simply disagreed with their argumentation.” Hungary “tried to stick their narrative to the Group as a

²⁰ MTI, “Európának Képesnek Kell Lennie Megvédeni Sajat Határait,” *Kormany.Hu*, 2018, <http://www.kormany.hu/hu/a-miniszterelnok/hirek/europanak-kepesnek-kell-lennie-megvedeni-sajat-hatarait>.

²¹ Govt CZ, “Tisková Konference Po Jednání Vlády, 14. Listopadu 2018,” *Vlada.Cz*, 2018, <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/media-centrum/tiskove-konference/tiskova-konference-po-jednani-vlady-14-listopadu-2018-169851/>; MTI, “The UN Global Compact for Migration Is Endangering the Security of the Hungarian People,” *Kormany.Hu*, 2018, [http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-](http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-un-global-compact-for-migration-is-endangering-the-security-of-the-hungarian-people)

[foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-un-global-compact-for-migration-is-endangering-the-security-of-the-hungarian-people](http://www.kormany.hu/en/ministry-of-foreign-affairs-and-trade/news/the-un-global-compact-for-migration-is-endangering-the-security-of-the-hungarian-people); The Associated Press, “Poland Latest Country to Withdraw From Global Migration Pact,” *The New York Times*, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2018/11/20/world/europe/ap-eu-poland-un-migration.html>; Georgi Gotev, “Slovakia Becomes 8th EU Country to Oppose Global Migration Pact,” *Euractiv.Com*, 2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/slovakia-becomes-8th-eu-country-opposing-the-global-migration-pact/>.

whole,” which led to situations where the rest of the Group “attempted to delimit themselves towards certain Hungarian initiatives,” argued one Czech respondent.

The Hungarian “extreme” position is linked to the topic of illiberal democracy. “So far we have been ignoring it. In the future, it is difficult to say,” noted one Czech respondent. Czech and Slovak respondents do not think that it would be possible to “take Orban’s position as a model and replicate it at home.” They highlight the differences in political and cultural systems. Nevertheless, they admit that “there are new political trends” which “depend on the current political representation.” In addition, Slovak respondents expressed their concern over the possible illiberal trajectory of the Czech Republic, on which they rely as a “political-counterbalancing” element since a “3+1 situation would be impossible to endure.” All things considered, “anything can hypothetically happen” and that is why the illiberal political trajectory is “one of the big question marks nowadays,” stated one Hungarian respondent.

The “Art of Disagreement” can be perceived as an expression of flexibility or as an attempt to depoliticize and pragmatize the Visegrad cooperation. A cooperation “only in the case of an agreement” reduces internal coalition tensions and, in the short term, seemingly reinforces the Group’s cohesion. However, in the long run, this trend would be more appropriate for a regional, sectoral or ad-hoc cooperation. If this was the case, it would be possible to agree with one of the Czech respondents, who defined the V4 as a regional co-operation, “that should coordinate ... not exactly political aspects, but rather interests and general goals.” Traditional non-interference in domestic politics of Visegrad partners does not lead to the Group’s convergence. It reduces the ability to create and promote common positions in the EU, and as a result is incompatible with the role of V4 as a European player.

Socialization and institutionalization

Intensive cooperation takes place at the level of Permanent Visegrad Representations. According to respondents, these meetings are both well-functioning and useful especially regarding the V4’s communication with external partners. At the same time, they emphasized that

this cooperation serves as a “friendly exchange of views and discussion” rather than “coordination of positions.” These are “not routine meetings, they deal only with topics that deserve it.” There is also a cooperation at the “headquarters level”, where the “general V4 perspective is sought after,” “at least in some specific areas – e.g. regarding the conclusions of the European Council.”

In addition to regular working lunches of the V4 ambassadors with prominent external guests from the European institutions or partner countries, interviewees highlighted the intensity of this cooperation at lower levels of the structure. Respondents emphasized the role of administration, which is “a relevant player” and performs the key role in the creation and execution of concrete political positions. Political representation “produces general attitudes and phrases” regarding the migration policy, such as “the simple focus on rejection of redistribution.” Yet, the “migration policy encompasses much more.” The overall policy and issue of migration “is a much more complex interconnected system whose functioning depends on a functional and continuously involved administration,” which would not be possible without this socialization.

The Visegrad cooperation is not institutionalized, which respondents consider being an advantage. “I do not see a direct need for some institutionalization”, argued one Polish respondent. “Current communication takes place at various levels that are always interconnected. It is a very operational and sufficient cooperation,” mentioned one Czech respondent. Nevertheless, respondents admit that, in some cases, greater institutionalization would smoothen the co-operation. Yet, Hungary has repeatedly tried to establish the V4 Secretariat, which was “an attempt to institutionalize this regional co-operation.” However, other Visegrad partners did not “express any significant interests towards Hungarian efforts to formalize the Group.”

The Visegrad migration policy is implemented through a dense network of contacts between several national ministries and their representations in Brussels. The coalition cooperation is specific due to its flexibility, willingness, and “exclusivity” of partners, which is considered beneficial by the Visegrad respondents. This ‘insufficient’ institutionalization also results in a weak

enforcement of agreements, a lack of a common strategy, a prevalence of national interests, and an instability of joint positions. This “quasi-institutionalization”²² of Visegrad cooperation is compensated by socialization, which serves as a unifying element. The interviews show that Visegrad socialization is under a pressure by socialization stemming from the Brussels environment.

Slavkov triangle and the search for allies

Respondents from the countries of the Slavkov Triangle (S3) see the format as a “complementary” grouping. Slovak respondents refer to their participation in S3 as “a third-wheel” and label the format as “the facilitator of cooperation between Austria and the Czech Republic.” The responses regarding the future prospects of S3 are divergent. Some respondents do not see “any strong topics that would be effective and develop this format.” Others highlight that “there are some areas where positions of S3 countries are much closer than with Hungary and Poland.”

According to some respondents, this format provides S3 countries and their partners “a guarantee that during the cooperation with this format they will avoid the toxic Visegrad label.” In the future, S3 might become a “more acceptable format of cooperation” that would allow an “easier search for wider coalitions”, admits Czech respondent. Especially in the search for external partners in the field of migration, there are some potential prejudices. Perhaps it is more complicated to find partners, because “they want to avoid the toxic label,” noted another Czech respondent.

For the Visegrad countries, the Group is still the most significant regional format of cooperation. Therefore, as a platform to promote Visegrad stance towards migration, the Group actively uses its V4+ format. The Slavkov triangle, as a new form of Central European cooperation has, according to S3 respondents, become a useful “diversification of potential allies within the EU frameworks,” but not an alternative to the V4. In the context of the European migration crisis, it has been shown that S3 or S3+ can both

complement Visegrad cooperation, and be used as a tool to weaken the Visegrad Group.

Visegrad’s Self-confidence

The coordination and defence of Visegrad’s confrontational positions and search for coalition partners is not an easy task for the Visegrad representations in Brussels. The European discourse on migration has reached a strong polarization based on emotions, which is reinforced by enduring stereotypical constructions - the East being backward and the West behaving superiorly – as noted by one Austrian respondent. These negative emotions are transmitted to European society and, as a result, have increased the legitimacy of the Visegrad anti-immigration policy. Although this Visegrad stance towards migration is seemingly unified, the general consensus among the Visegrad members is not transferred to the whole asylum package.

Some respondents evaluate the EU’s reaction towards the Visegrad position as “unnecessarily hasty and too harsh.” Yet, all respondents do agree that Visegrad countries have failed to communicate their positions. “The Visegrad Group is very weak in communicating their positions, to be acceptable for states coming from other ideologies and values. This has always been our weak side,” noted one Slovak respondent. Nevertheless, according to the majority of respondents, some sort of unofficial reflection takes place in Brussels. There are “voices from different sides that the mandatory quotas were a mistake.” In “private conversations [partner countries] admit that we were and are actually right about those things,” stated one Czech respondent. “What was previously solely the V4’s opinion is becoming the mainstream opinion.” Generally, “there is much more understanding of Visegrad’s position,” added one Hungarian respondent. Thus, “now we have we have in front of us a text that would be unacceptable in 2015. It would have been labelled as a crazy Visegrád perspective,” confirmed another Czech respondent.

²² Dangerfield, “Challenges for Further Development and Enlargement.”

Until 2015, the political world of Brussels had not paid much attention to the V4.²³ From the V4's perspective, "the broadly shared interests of Visegrad countries in the context of the refugee crisis have undoubtedly strengthened the cohesion of the Group."²⁴ Although this may be true, "increasing relevance and perception" of the V4's brand on the European scene²⁵ is questionable as Visegrad is perceived in the EU as a defensive, non-constructive grouping lacking solidarity.

Conclusion

The securitization of migration²⁶ and the "broadly shared interests of the Visegrad countries in the context of the refugee agenda"²⁷ have led to the creation of the joint Visegrad stance towards migration. This corresponds to the ambitions of the Visegrad countries to increase their cooperation from the regional to the higher European level. Potentially, it can provide the Group with an opportunity to evolve from "policy taker" to "policy shaper" and even "maker" of the EU's governance agenda.²⁸ Simultaneously, the V4's stance towards migration and open multicultural society highlighted the differences between the post-communist East and the democratic West.

Despite Czechia's hesitation to openly join the illiberal revolution of Hungary and Poland, Slovakia's wish to be in the core of the EU, all the Visegrad countries are oscillating between the European liberal-democratic and regional national-conservative narrative. Visegrad's conflict with the European Commission, its reservations towards the

European migration and asylum policy, the call for an effective protection of the European borders or "the preservation of identity" are being associated with "opposition to the features of liberal democracy."²⁹ Western partners are concerned about the Group's lack of solidarity and shared values of the European project, in effect the Visegrad 'brand' has received a negative connotation. The European migration crisis has shown that Visegrad's *raison d'être* in the context of European integration is still an open question.

In the domestic political environment, Visegrad policymakers emphasize the meaningfulness of this regional project and highlight the strengthening of its positions. Generally, political representations of the Visegrad countries consider the format as an important foreign policy instrument, which provides its members with a sense of belonging, strength, and self-confidence. In like manner, one Austrian respondent described the V4 as a Group with "very clear political preferences" whose voice is being heard in the EU. For the Visegrad countries, which place emphasis on national identity and sovereignty, the V4 provides a way how to maintain autonomy in decision making, while being an actor on the European political scene. It is a question of whether this quasi-institutionalized format that tolerates ideological diversity of its members, and, according to respondents, does not have nor seek to build a regional identity can be a unified and relevant European player in the *longue durée*.

²³ TASR, "Brusel Vyšehradskú Štvorku Do Roku 2015 Viac Menej Neregistroval. A Potom Sa to Zmenilo," *Parlamentné Listy*, 2018, <https://www.parlamentnelisty.sk/arena/monitor/Brusel-Vysehradsku-stvorku-do-roku-2015-viac-menej-neregistroval-A-potom-sa-to-zmenilo-302223>.

²⁴ "Informace o Průběhu Předsednictví České Republiky ve Visegrádské Skupině v letech 2015-2016" (MFA Czechia, 2016).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See Attila Ágh, "The Dual Crisis and 'regionalization' in the Visegrad States," in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (Routledge, 2018), 185; Aliaksei Kazharski and Clarissa do Nascimento Tabosa, "New Patterns of Securitization in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Theorizing Security in the Eastern European Neighbourhood: Issues and Approaches*, 2018, 69.

²⁷ "Informace o Průběhu Předsednictví České Republiky ve Visegrádské Skupině v letech 2015-2016."

²⁸ For the changing importance of V4 within the EU, see Geddes and Scholten, *The Politics of Migration & Immigration in Europe*, 200; Aliaksei Kazharski, "The End of 'Central Europe'? The Rise of the Radical Right and the Contestation of Identities in Slovakia and the Visegrad Four," *Geopolitics*, 2017, 1–27; Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi, "The EU under Crisis Conditions: Central and Eastern European Perspectives," in *Central and Eastern Europe in the EU: Challenges and Perspectives Under Crisis Conditions*, ed. Christian Schweiger and Anna Visvizi (Routledge, 2018), 1.

²⁹ "Donald Tusk: Wtedy Nie Jesteś Chrześcijańskim Demokratą," *Onet.PL*, 2018, <https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/donald-tusk-atakuje-tych-ktorzy-jego-zdaniem-falzywie-mienia-sie-chrzescijanskimi/v2q1rmy>.

As the interviews show, the migration crisis has increased the frequency of formal meetings in the V4 or V4+ format, nonetheless, within the framework of the European structures, it did not have a strengthening effect on Visegrad socialization. Noteworthy are illiberal preferences of Hungary and Poland which are perceived by the majority of respondents as negative and potentially problematic – even destructive – for the future cohesion of the Group. Arguably, these differences cause ‘overheating’ of the Visegrad cooperation as well as threaten the stability of the Group and its main international role – the integration of the Visegrad states into the European environment.

For more than 27 years, the Visegrad Group remains one of the core instruments of Czech foreign policy. The extraordinary relations of four geographically, historically and culturally proximate countries, with a comparable level of development, is added value by itself. The potential of the Visegrad format for realization of Czech European interests is conditional upon the ability of the individual members to be pro-European and constructive. In recent years, the Group has adopted the role of an opponent of

European politics, which is irrational in the context of the Group’s interests. The blocking of the EU’s liberal migration and asylum policy overshadowed the pro-European V4 agenda and boosted the discourse on the two-speed Europe. Additionally, the Visegrad’s migration policy has emphasized the uncertainty about the usefulness of the regional format for Czech foreign policy.

Despite all the constraints, the Czech Republic cannot ignore its share of responsibility for the V4’s image. The long-standing tradition of communication and trust should be used to change the overall direction of the Visegrad Group. It is in the Czech interest to actively shape this format in the search for a viable link between the regional and European policy dimension. The V4 will be a relevant European player only if the Visegrad countries agree on a common approach towards an active foreign policy that benefits the European integration. The efforts of the Czech Republic to preserve the integrity of the region and to shift the Visegrad perspective would undoubtedly demonstrate a contribution to the European unity.



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Vlastislav Strnad

Vladislav Strnad is a PhD student in the Department of International Relations & European Studies at Metropolitan University Prague. He specializes in security topics of Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, the Visegrad countries and their security/defence dimension of cooperation. In addition, he is interested in interdisciplinary research, new approaches to foreign policy analysis, and methodologies in IR research. Since September 2018 he is a Junior Researcher at the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies — University of Warsaw.