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## REPORT

# 30 Years of Visegrad: Role of the V4 countries in shaping the future of the EU



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On Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> November, Think Visegrad platform represented by the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy organized a full-day event that brought together researchers from the V4 countries and various experts based in Brussels. Under the conference titled “*30 Years of Visegrad: Role of the V4 countries in shaping the future of the EU*”, which was divided into morning and afternoon sessions, each core organization of Think Visegrad platform was represented by one of their leading experts. Morning closed session with representatives of the European Commission focused on the Conference on the Future of Europe and served as a platform for an open discussion among the representatives of think tanks and the European Commission about main concerns connected to the initiative. The public part of the conference consisted of two panel discussions where panellists focused on the regional aspects of COFOE and 30 years of cooperation of the V4 countries.

## Closed roundtable discussion

A closed morning discussion was commenced by introductory remarks by the moderator, Žiga Faktor, the Head of Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. The introductory remarks were followed by the presentations of think-tankers from Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia on their insights on how the Conference on the Future of Europe is perceived in their countries. The presentations of think-tankers were ensued by the Commission representatives' statements and an open discussion among the participants of the roundtable.

In the Czech Republic, civil society organizations are the frontrunners in activities and events organized under the umbrella of the Conference on the Future of Europe. From the very beginning, the state has been relatively slow in coming up with initiatives, and because of its lack of engagement, the state has been overshadowed by civil society and its activities. This is quite disappointing as the Czech public expected the national government to lead the way when it comes to the activities of the Conference organized in the Czech Republic. Even though already heavily engaged, the civil society would often like to further increase its engagement and provide more opportunities for the public, however, it frequently lacks the financial means to do so. On a positive note, considering the results of the latest Czech parliamentary elections, there is a positive outlook on the future engagement of the state in the Conference. There is a slight nervousity among the Czechs arising from the lack of clarity about the implications of the Conference's outcomes and how they will impact the Czech Presidency to the Council of the EU.

In Hungary, it is primarily the national government and the national political parties who took ownership of the implications of the Conference's outcomes. It was also an opportunity for the national government to emphasize the importance of the distinction between the state and the European level of decision-making, which should not be overcome in the current government's opinion. The engagement of the civil

society and the public in the Conference in Hungary is minimal. There seems to be some progress in raising awareness about the Conference as an opportunity for the citizens to shape the future of Europe, but generally, the citizens still tend to have only a very vague idea about the Conference. To summarize, in Hungary, the activities are generated primarily by the government with the position of the civil society being rather weak and the engagement of the public quite small. This could, however, change after the upcoming parliamentary elections as the role of the current government might be weakened.

When the idea of the Conference on the Future of Europe was discussed in Poland, the leading party was rather skeptical as they viewed the Conference primarily as means to further EU federalization. Up to this day, the expectations of the outcomes of the Conference remain rather limited in Poland. The organization of activities related to the Conference is primarily in the hands of the government, with the activities of the parliament being considered a bit underwhelming. The level to which the Polish civil society is engaged in the Conference lies somewhere between the Czech Republic and Hungary, meaning that there is some civil society engagement, but it is mostly driven by the "usual suspects" such as the European Commission Representation in Poland. As in other Visegrad countries, the media attention given to the Conference in Poland is very limited. It is other EU-related topics such as the crisis at the Belarus-Poland border or the approval of Poland's recovery fund plan that currently receive most of the media attention. Topic-wise, the discussions on the future of Europe are quite geopolitically oriented and focus on topics such as the future direction of EU industrial policy, EU foreign policy, and engagement of non-Euro countries in EU monetary policies.

In Slovakia, the events organized under the umbrella of the Conference on the Future of Europe fall into three categories: a roadshow around Slovak regions, a youth activity, and National Convention meetings organized in the form of expert roundtables on topics ranging from disinformation to populism. The events are mostly government-driven, primarily supported

by the President, the Prime Minister, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, however, there is some civil society engagement as well. The issue with the heavy engagement of the top political leaders in the events is that due to a significant mistrust in the government among the public in Slovakia, it could have discouraged people from participating. Moreover, the events were quite passive and did not offer enough space for active engagement. At the moment, there seems to be a lack of open communication from the side of organizers – mostly the government and its ministries – about the outcomes of the events, with only the outcomes of the National Convents communicated so far. The Conference is still believed to have the potential to increase the overall interest of the Slovak citizens in EU matters and potentially even increase the participation in European elections among Slovaks. Lastly, it was mentioned that the results of the Conference are planned to be incorporated in future national policy strategies.

The country-specific presentations were followed by statements of the members of the Cabinets of the Commission's Vice-Presidents together with an open discussion among the participants of the roundtable. Firstly, attention was given to the current state of the Conference of the Future of Europe. So far, the topic of climate change has attracted the most attention from all topics covered by the Conference. Importantly, it was also marked that from the very beginning, the European Commission wanted to give freedom to the Member States with regard to the instruments they choose to reach out to the citizens with the aim of encouraging them to participate in the Conference as there is no 'one size fits all solution to citizens' engagement in all EU countries.

Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the European Commission is aware of the lack of media attention paid to the Conference that think-tankers from all Visegrad countries mentioned in their presentations. Moreover, the Conference debates have been very positive and constructive, which makes it less interesting for the media to sell. So far, the European Commission is quite content with the results of the panels, and they are positive about the outcomes of the Conference. There is still a lot of uncertainty regarding what the specific outcomes will be,

however, it was mentioned that is primarily due to the Conference being a tool to allow EU citizens to discuss whatever they deem important and come up with solutions that they deem most suitable. Therefore, the outcomes of the Conference will heavily rely on the citizens' input. It was, however, noted that for the outcomes of the Conference to be successfully implemented, it is highly likely that they will have to be supported by the other EU Institutions. When it comes to the communication of the outcomes of the Conference, the European Commission believes that it shares the responsibility with the individual Member States.

Lastly, taking into consideration the concerns of governments regarding the time pressure to report the outcomes of the events this early, it was noted that the end of the Conference and the deadlines for reporting the outcomes cannot be postponed. This is mainly to make sure that there is enough time to discuss and potentially implement the results of the Conference under the current Commission. If the end of the Conference was postponed, the window of opportunity for any significant changes, for example to the Spitzenkandidaten process, would be halted. The roundtable discussion was concluded by the moderator, who thanked the European Commission representatives and the think-tankers for their active participation.

## Public panel discussions

The public part of the conference "*30 Years of Visegrad: Role of the V4 countries in shaping the future of the EU*" took place at the premises of the Permanent Representation of Czechia to the EU. The opening words were delivered by **H.E. Edita Hrdá**, the Ambassador of Czechia to the EU; **H.E. Tibor Stelbaczky**, the Ambassador of Hungary to the EU; and **Petr Mareš**, Director of International Visegrad Fund.

During the first panel, speakers discussed the perspectives of the Visegrad countries on the Conference of the Future of Europe. The debate was moderated by **Aneta Zachová**, editor-in-chief at EurActive.cz. The first panellist, **H.E. Petra Vargová**, the Ambassador of Slovakia, assessed the perspective of Slovakia on the Conference of the

Future of Europe. She stressed that Slovakia would not manage the COVID-19 crisis on its own. Slovakia has benefited from the recovery package, crisis management and has also looked beyond it. She emphasized that the Conference on the Future of Europe is a place where citizens can speak out loud and can be given a choice. According to her opinion, Slovakia is facing two challenges, internal – how to enhance the resilience and disinformation, and external – global superpower fight, new norms in geopolitics, enlargement, finding allies. The Conference on the Future of Europe should therefore provide guidance on how to approach these challenges.

The Head of Cabinet of Vice-president Dubravka Šuica, **Colin Scicluna**, drew attention to the need for platforms and discussions which will produce a list of recommendations. He confirmed that the Visegrad countries are very active in this field, and citizens are participating very often in discussions organized under the Conference. However, he also highlighted the need of supporting the incorporation of citizens into the political debates. He outlined that there are common challenges across the EU (climate change, democracy, etc.), and we need to cooperate and shape the policies together.

The Ambassador of Czechia, **H.E. Edita Hrdá**, emphasized that Czech citizens should have the chance to express and include themselves in the debate to see what people really want and what they expect from the EU. She stated that people in the Czech Republic are active, they are participating in regional debates organized by the government or NGOs, and are trying to form new policies. According to the Ambassador, Czechia is however still lacking a more in-depth understanding of the EU and this needs to improve. With regards to the upcoming Czech presidency, handling climate change, supporting innovation and opportunities for Czechs should be the priority. Secondly, she stated that the most discussed issues in Czechia were related to the values of freedom and democracy and included the green initiatives, better communication, the benefits of the euro, or better visibility for different regions.

The Ambassador of Hungary, **H.E. Tibor Stebaczky**, reviewed the perspective of Hungary on the Conference of the Future of Europe. According to Mr. Stebaczky, the Hungarian government is trying to reach as many people as possible through many different events. Plenty of topics are being discussed, but EU-related topics are generally not common. He drew attention to the need of becoming more competitive globally and also to the issues of demography, digital and green challenges that not only Hungary is facing. He claimed that Hungary believes in the diversity of the Union, and wants to avoid having one single answer to all questions. Instead, the Ambassador sees potential in having discussions about different solutions and giving various answers to various questions.

In general, speakers agreed on the importance of their citizens being heard, listened to, and given a choice. However, there are still many areas that complicate the process.

The second part of the event started with the panel discussion titled *'30 years of Visegrad: How did regional cooperation shape the countries of V4?'*. This panel was moderated by Ms. **Zuzana Stuchlíková**, Associate Fellow at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy. After introducing the speakers, Ms. Stuchlíková asked them to start with their introductory remarks while answering: what is the future of Visegrad, do we still need it and what are the benefits of this cooperation?

The first panellist, Mr. **Petr Mareš**, Director of International Visegrad Fund, stated that 'we will always have Visegrad' and suggested asking 'what will we use Visegrad for' instead. Although the V4 countries improved significantly in many aspects, Mr. Mareš highlighted that these countries are still behind their western neighbours in the areas of education and research development. Moreover, V4 universities are currently not present in the global charts and Mr. Mareš emphasised the need of improving this situation. Interestingly, according to Mr. Mareš, the same problem does not apply to the research organisations of the V4 as there are examples of V4 research organisations that can compete globally. However, these institutions are not recognised and that is something that Visegrad

group could be used for to as the fields of education and research will be decisive for our future.

The second speaker, **Alica Kizeková**, Senior Researcher at the Institute of International Relations Prague, started by remembering the history of the V4, namely a peaceful split of Czechoslovakia and the success of reaching the goals set up by the V4 group at the beginning of its cooperation. In Ms. Kizeková's opinion, V4 needs further economic reforms and this should be one of the areas V4 could cooperate on. She also highlighted that currently, there is a lack of communication between the V4 countries. At the EU level, V4 has the reputation of 'trouble-makers' and domestically, the division 'Brussels and us' is also strong. As the solution, she points out the necessity of improved communication between the members and bringing the EU back into the domestic discourse.

The next speaker, **Daniel Bártha**, Director of International Relations at the Equilibrium Institute, talked about the Hungarian point of view. Regarding Hungarian foreign policy, the V4 membership is considered a priority and this is also supported by the public, as 83% of Hungarians believe that the V4 is important and believe that this cooperation is 'an important instrument' to negotiate issues at the EU level. From Mr. Bártha' perspective, there are no costs of being in the V4, but there are 'huge profits'. He also highlighted past successes of the V4, such as improvements in energy security. However, the way forward for this group is to set new items on the V4's common agenda. According to Mr. Bártha, the examples of issues that V4 should focus on are improvements in the transport infrastructure, defence cooperation as well as green transformation, in which the V4 already had a win by including nuclear in the green energy.

**Melchior Szczepanik**, Analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs, explained that although the past achievements of the V4 are undeniable, the images of recent years are more pessimistic, as there is a lack of unity between the members. The results from the surveys in Poland also show more pessimistic results as the majority of Polish (& Czechs) do not see the V4 as influential in the EU. According to Mr. Szczepanik, the V4 currently

experiences 'a rough patch' and 'self-confidence crisis'. However, future cooperation is possible as long as the members are able to find a common agenda to advance their interests. Mr. Szczepanik suggested looking for opportunities to influence the green agenda and to help countries that come from a more difficult position as examples of such agendas. He added that Poland needs support to talk to the biggest members of the EU and V4 is 'a key asset' in this regard.

The last panellist to take a turn in the discussion was **Roland Freudenstein**, Vice President and the Head of Brussels Office at the GLOBSEC Policy Institute. In his speech, Mr. Freudenstein presented different perspectives on what V4 should and should not be. According to Mr. Freudenstein, the V4 should not focus on being a geopolitical project that counters bigger countries in the EU. It should also not be an ideological project, as it can 'lead to a disaster'. In regards to what the V4 should be, Mr. Freudenstein emphasised the need of remembering its historical events, such as the Velvet Revolution, and the democratic traits the countries chose, including independence, education and the rule of law. He added that the V4 countries should strengthen these values and be serious about the rule of law within their borders, in order to support it outside of the EU as well. He finished his speech with a prediction about the future of the Visegrad by stating that the V4 'will survive' and the 'attempts to hijack it to an ideological project will fail', but this attempt can have negative consequences for its citizens and governments.

Answering questions from the audience delivered other interesting points from the speakers. For instance, replying to a question on what is the most problematic dynamics within V4, Mr. **Mareš** emphasised that although Hungary can be seen as problematic, the faults are not only on one side but rather in general lack of communication. From Mr. **Bártha'** perspective, the issues that are at the V4 agendas also need to be supported by their governments and the V4 should focus more on being technical cooperation. Finally, Ms. **Kizeková** identified the negativity of the leaders to be problematic and suggested that the way forward could be through improving communication at the



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NGOs level as it offers a collaborative space in which the countries are able to find a common space in a constructive way. She added that the cooperative platform of 8 think-tanks Think Visegrad, could give attention to this communication and make it more visible.

At the end of the conference, closing remarks were delivered by **Zdeněk Beránek**, Director of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, who thanked all the participants, attendees, hosts and organisers. From his perspective, the V4 is not well understood in Brussels, but the members have the potential to actively and positively shape the future of the EU. Moreover, as the region went through incredible changes, it can also serve as an inspiration for others, events outside of the EU.



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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](http://www.thinkvisegrad.org).

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