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Visegrad Countries in the EU: Visions and Priorities

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Viera Knutelská
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Accession negotiations, with its ‘fregata approach’, made each of the Visegrad countries fight its own battles, and in a sense, compete against each other. First expectations of their position upon entering were that they will be forming ad hoc coalitions with all and any EU members on the bases of individual issues. However, later they learned that perpetual cooperation might indeed be helpful. Visegrad ambassadors to the EU and Visegrad leaders started meeting regularly, and although the cooperation is sometimes hampered by changes in governments etc., at some level, it always continues. Therefore, it is especially worthwhile to examine their common positions – as well as differences - on the current key issues.

External Relations

All Visegrad countries focus mostly on relations with the close neighborhood, which in EU terms, translates into their general support of Eastern Partnership. This includes creation of specific V4 measures, such as the Visegrad Eastern Partnership aimed at supporting democratization, transformation and civil society in the countries of Eastern Partnership. Of course, there are differences in approach and level of importance attached to individual issues.

Many aspects of Eastern Partnership are more important for Poland than for the other V4 countries since Poland sees itself as an EU representative for competing for influence in its neighboring countries with Russia. In this aspect, it strongly differed from Slovakia during the left-wing government of Robert Fico who had very good relations with Russia. Poland also strongly supports closer ties of Ukraine with the EU, including future possible membership. Recently, it has also substantially increased its (verbal) support of democratization efforts in the post-Soviet space, but also in Middle East in relation to the so-called Arab spring. On the other hand, the Czech Republic, the only Visegrad country without borders with Eastern Partnership countries, placed less emphasis on these issues, and its activities are more closely related to general promotion of democracy, than to any specific priorities towards the countries of the region. Hungary’s priorities in its external relations are strongly driven by its relations to Hungarian minorities in neighboring countries; in the context of Eastern partnership, this means especially Ukraine.

Energy security is also a topic closely related to the Eastern partnership. While the issue is important for all the Visegrad countries, who advocate mutual EU help in energy crisis, it is somewhat less prominent for the Czech Republic (which is exceptional by having been linked to supplies of Norwegian gas since 1990s, which ‘saved’ it in the crisis provoked by the Russian cut-off of gas supplies).

Although there is clear common ground in the external relations, acute bilateral problems and perceptions create also create differences among the Visegrad countries. For example, Hungary has recently voiced possible opposition to Serbia’s future membership because of



the Restitutions Act while others, especially Poland and Slovakia, are considered supporters of Serbia's closer ties with the EU.

At the same time, each Visegrad country nurtures its own favorite topics in international relations, which are then voiced in EU discussions. For example, Slovakia views itself as an expert on Western Balkans, and has ambitions to be perceived as such by its European colleagues; on the other hand, it often finds itself in minority position, as in the case of Kosovo statehood. Czech Republic and Poland speak up more often about the promotion of democracy, although even in this area, each has its own 'favorite' regions, e.g. Cuba in the Czech case.

The differences among Visegrad countries are also reflected in their attitudes towards future EU enlargement, where the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia have more long-term interests in the 'southern' neighbors, while Poland sees its priorities in the east.

The Euro

Czech Republic, and, recently, Hungary, articulate more skepticism about the future of eurozone, their own adoption of the euro, and their participation in euro-related mechanisms (for example, both these countries, sole among the new member states, do not participate in the so called Euro Plus Pact). Slovakia, as the only member of the eurozone, has recently experienced strong debates over the aid-package to Greece, when the right-wing government expressed doubts about honoring the deal made by the previous government just before the election in 2010, and when the disputes about the increases in the euro-rescue-bailout funds led to the fall of government this month.

Among the three non-euro Visegrad countries, Poland is at the moment the only one that clearly says it intends to join the euro in the future. However, in both Poland and Hungary, the camps of supporters and opponents of the adoption of the EU currency among the public are almost equal (over 40% for both groups in both countries). The Czech public is the most euro-skeptic in the EU, with 67% thinking that it will have negative consequences for the country (Special Eurobarometer 2011). With the eurozone crisis, the number of those who think it will have negative impacts has of course increased. According to the spring 2011 Eurobarometer, 82% of Slovaks support the economic and monetary union and the euro, compared to 61% of Hungarians, 38% of Polish and only 28% of Czechs.

Financial Framework

Three smaller Visegrad countries have similar visions in the area of financial framework, and advocate especially strong cohesion policy. On the other hand, Poland, as the biggest receiver of regional aid, also advocates larger budget, seeing the increased spending as the way to overcome the current financial crisis. This differs greatly especially from the Czech Republic, whose views on economic governance and future EU budget align perhaps more closely with the United Kingdom than with Poland (and maybe even any other Visegrad



country). For obvious reasons, Poland is also the only one among the four who is clearly not in favor for any substantial reform of or decrease in agriculture funding.

The Future of Visegrad in the EU: Is There a Common Outlook?

All the issues mentioned above touch upon bigger questions of the future vision of the European Union. Today, when the issue of amending the Treaty and of further strengthening the European integration is once again on table, we have an excellent opportunity to discuss the visions of the V4 countries regarding the European future. What broader visions can we infer from known positions of Visegrad countries on individual issues? How much do they have in common, and how much do they differ? How stable and reliable can these long-term priorities be? And how much do occasional bilateral disputes (such as Slovak-Hungarian troubles over the Hungarian citizenship act) or government changes influence them?

It is also worth asking how well the Visegrad countries have integrated themselves into the EU decision-making processes and how strongly they advocate their opinions. None of the new Member States, Visegrad countries included, finds itself often in the position of being the only (or the last) EU member opposing the consensus reached by the others (unlike Sweden or Denmark). But there are still differences in their other attributes; especially Poland as the only 'big' country can approach the negotiations differently.

The brief overview of topics introduced above also shows that all of the Visegrad countries nurture issues on which they place greater importance, and in which they would probably like to be perceived as experts by other Members. Future will show how successfully and to what extent they are able to play such roles. At the moment, given the current Polish, preceding Hungarian and recent Czech presidencies, we have an excellent opportunity of studying how able the V4 countries are in promoting such issues during their period at the EU's steering wheel.