

V4 between Germany and Russia

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the Visegrad Group – V4 - (begun as the V3) calls for measuring how this group of four Central European states has stood up over time, how it has changed and, mainly, where it is now heading and will be heading in the future – in terms of its relations with Germany and Russia. Germany has been traditionally competing with Russia for influence over the Central European countries. Therefore, the nature of governmental regimes in Berlin and Moscow and their relationships to the central European countries are essential.

In February 1991, three central European leaders came together in Visegrad, Hungary to set a course for mutual prosperity. Václav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia, President Lech Walesa of Poland and Hungarian prime minister József Antall agreed upon and signed a declaration of future cooperation on the path to European integration. At the time, hardly anyone expected that this group would "survive" a quarter-century and would eventually find itself at a crossroads: where is it heading and with what aim and goals?

The primary objective - the integration of the Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary and Poland into the European and Euro-Atlantic political and security structure - has been achieved. V4, as a regional grouping, served even then as a model for successful cooperation for some Eastern and Southern European countries on their way to integrating into Europe and Euro-Atlantic organizations. It has happened despite the fact that on most of the actual policies the V4 countries have usually not been able to agree.

On one hand we are from the same region and we share very similar historical experience. On the other hand our geographic size is distinct as well as the sizes of our populations. Our economies are different, our historical experience is not exactly the same, and we have different neighbors. It is therefore not surprising that we usually do not vote in Brussels as one block. Take for example the explosive issue of migration. We agree on conservative approach – and migration unites us much more than for example our views on energy or agricultural policy or on relations with Germany or Russia. At the same time we did not

perform as a block even during the migration quotas vote. Welcome to the reality of Visegrad cooperation.

The “new” agenda – economy, security,and migration

It is a fact that all V4 countries are very much dependent on German economy, Czech Republic the most. That dependency is not viewed negatively once German economy performs well – It leads to more investment from Germany, more exports to Germany, and more German tourists’ spending money in Central European hotels. The centrality of Germany has been an old fact. Old-new is a dissonance between Germany and V4 countries which has been recently deepened as a result of economic crises and of some unilateral decisions taken in Berlin for example in the case of migration or energy policies. The view on Russia has been much more fragmented and nuanced than would be seen from public statements of some leading politicians.

Events of a geopolitical nature had raised new agendas which the V4 countries have had to face. The Russian-Georgian war and the subsequent occupation of parts of Georgian territory in 2008 was a clear indication to Central Europe that Russia was returning to the international arena, and that the more or less seamless eastward expansion of European Union and NATO would no longer progress. (In that regard we should always keep in mind that it was Germany which has been consistently opposing deployment of NATO infrastructure on the territory of new member states and which has not been a supporter - to put it mildly - of NATO enlargement.) It has become once more clear that the problem of ever shifting border between Russia and Europe which has not been solved for the last centuries will not be solved in the foreseeable future.

The subsequent arrival of the economic and financial crisis further strengthened the role of Germany inside European Union. German dominance above the economic policies of the European Union in general and Eurozone in particular created some level of distrust among the V4 Leaders. The German response to save Euro under any costs logically resulted in ignoring views from Central European countries. V4 states were asked for solidarity but neither one of them felt any guild for Greek, Irish, Portuguese or Spanish troubles. All at the same time remembered painful reforms of the early 1990s and did not see the similar

resolve in dealing with structural problems among south European political elites and publics.

Similar distrust was created after unilateral German decision to close all nuclear power plants. It has been a German internal decision which has had enormous impact on the whole EU in general and on neighboring countries in particular. Subsidies have raised, prices of electric energy have collapsed. The market was ruined. Or the case of the Nord Stream I construction which has been finished and Nord Stream II which is now being discussed. Each V4 country will be affected to different degree but each will be affected. All key decisions have been taken in Berlin and all will have tremendous impact on us. What we lack in response is coordinated and realistic strategy. The real question is if such strategy from the side of V4 is possible at all since every country is in slightly different situation and each wishes slightly different results. For example regarding Nord Stream II - what is good for Czechs does not have to be good for Slovaks or Hungarians... Skepticism about the V4 ability to forcefully push its own agenda is probably correct assessment.

During the Ukrainian crisis and the invasion of "little, green men" on the territory of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, the endorsement and adoption of economic sanctions against Russia seemed to demonstrate the unity of the European Union. Discontent began bubbling beneath the surface in some V4 states and dissenting opinions were on the rise. The anti-sanction push came from the same businesses and political circles like in Germany or elsewhere in Europe. However, the sanctions debate has not been dominated by Germany and it did not have the same impact as above mentioned cases of Energiewende, Nord Stream I and II or European bail-out funds. Above all, the sanctions are rather a perfect example where unified position of V4 countries is not possible at all. We can expect respect to the EU position but very many contradictory voices from the V4 arena.

It is more than obvious that by far the greatest ditch between thinking in Berlin and V4 capitals has emerged as a result of continuing migration crisis. It has revealed the atmosphere of mutual dissatisfaction between Germany the Visegrad countries in all its nakedness. Germany became a magnet for migrants from countries of the Balkans, Greater Middle East, and Africa. At the same time Berlin started to call for a European solution and

solidarity from all member states. V4 countries felt betrayed by the fact that Germany (and Sweden) did not consult its migration policies with the others and at the same time wanted to share the burden by all. Although a considerable amount of the population in V4 countries left their homelands during the 20th century and found refuge in the West for both economic and political reasons, concerns about the incompatibility of Islam with European culture prevailed in public opinion and among Central European political elites. Only a tiny minority of Central Europeans believes that successful integration of so many migrants from such distinct cultures is possible. The misunderstanding among the countries of Central Europe and Germany became to be appropriately known as "a crisis of mutual expectations." Misunderstanding is deep.

Berlin or Moscow?

Hungary, led by Viktor Orban, became the black sheep in debates and statements by European leaders and the European Commission already several years ago. Even if criticism of Hungarian development regarding its illiberal direction may be regarded as legitimate, it has proven to be counterproductive and it has resulted in Hungarian shift towards Russia. Budapest therefore evidently drifted from Berlin and got closer towards Moscow. At the same time it must be noted that despite all the meetings between Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orban Budapest has not vetoed policy of sanctions or challenged anything inside NATO.

The advent to power of the conservative Law and Justice party of Jaroslaw Kacziński has not reversed the course of Poland vis-a-vis Russia – there it has become even more critical. The new factor is Polish divergence from European mainstream which naturally results in cold relations between Berlin and Warsaw. Poland in a way has recently drifted further from both: Berlin as well as Moscow (after Donald Tusks as Polish Prime Minister unsuccessful attempt to reset relation with Russia several years ago).

The Czech government remains very much in the European mainstream, tries not to distance Prague from Berlin and supports the status quo regarding Russian sanctions. Czech President Miloš Zeman at the same time does not waste any opportunity to criticize Brussels and Berlin and to praise Moscow. His messages are politically important but do not have any real impact into the actual policies vis-à-vis Berlin and only limited vis-à-vis Moscow. President's

views do not influence the pattern of Czech voting inside EU. In reality, Prague has not moved regarding Berlin and Moscow in the recent years.

The statements of Slovak government are compensated by President Andrej Kiska. The Slovak prime minister publically expresses views more similar to that of the Czech President but the Slovak government holds similar positions to the Czech one – it is not far from the mainstream Europe. The most likely scenario is that no real challenge to the Russian sanctions policies will come from V4 in the foreseeable future. Governments in Prague, Budapest and Bratislava will not oppose any weakening of the sanctions but they will not effectively push in this direction. There will be a lot of rhetoric and much less action. The real challenge will come from Western Europe and from Germany. Once Germany decides for a change, the change will happen.

A necessary choice?

In the words of the geopolitical strategist George Friedman, an increasingly nationalistic Europe may once again result into much closer German cooperation with Russia. Such scenario should be very seriously considered and challenged by all Central European leaders. Consequences of isolationist tendencies in the United States, continuing crisis of the European Union (highlighted by the departure of Great Britain), and reproachment of Germany and Russia would be disastrous for the whole of Central European region.

The European Union is an imperfect, bureaucratic juggernaut. The result of current lack of leadership in France, departure of Britain, economic problems in Italy and Spain as well as the weakness of Donald Tusk and poor performance of Jean Claude Juncker and Martin Schultz is the fact that Germany starts to play increasingly "hegemonic" role. Berlin is slowly becoming de facto capital of Europe. It is in the interest of all V4 countries that Germany does not sink into nationalism and isolationism.

Chancellor Angela Merkel is being criticized from Visegrad countries for mismanaged migration crisis and for promoting further political integration against the will of majority inside very many member states. Such criticism is understandable and correct. The problem for V4 is that no viable alternative to the European Union exists. And with all the problems,

eventual successor of Angela Merkel in Berlin could be much more worrying for the future of Central Europe.

The proclamations of some Central European politicians to build a bridge between East and West are shortsighted and foolish. Bridges will not stop Russian appetite and will not satisfy Germany. Berlin does not need any bridges since it can talk to Moscow directly. Let's face the reality; the V4 countries have no alternative outside the European Union. Trying to calm the situation in squabbling Europe and a clear stance on the restoration of the Russian (Soviet) Empire would be a major political challenge for V4 in the current climate and for the turbulent future. The realistic approach for V4 is to work with Germany and to try to influence Germany as much as possible. To ignore Germany or to try to balance Germany by Russia can only backfire. It is in our mutual interest to be intertwined with Germany within the European Union rather than to wake up with the 21st century version of Ribbentrop Molotov Pact.

The real choice for Central Europe is not between Berlin and Moscow. Let's face reality: Our destiny is much more Berlin. Let's just hope that it is a friendly, democratic and economically strong Berlin counter balanced by other EU and NATO member states.

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