KKI 4:1

Actualities and Perspectives of the V4–Germany Relations

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade
In the 4:1 series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, four researchers give a short answer to the same questions concerning international politics and economics. Our aim is to launch the scientific debates in Hungary and promote dialogue among experts. In this issue, our topic is: “Actualities and Perspectives of the V4–Germany Relations”.

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Due to a variety of reasons, inter alia political and economic factors uncertainty is rising with regard to the further developments in Europe. The constructive cooperation of the Visegrád Group (V4) and Germany can – to some extent – limit the impact of the negative circumstances at the bilateral, regional, and European level. The decisive factor for joint efforts is economic interdependence. Central Europe as a stable and dynamic region is more important for the German economy than most German people think. The successful economic cooperation has got not only enormous stabilising value for mutual relations but also could serve as the basis for joint input to the economic agenda of the Union aiming at growth, employment and competitiveness. What is more, the close economic ties between the V4 and Germany are accompanied by significant convergence, which is the preferred economic model of the EU. With the UK leaving the EU, this economic affinity could become more important for the Union.

Moreover, the cooperation between Germany and the V4 could serve as a solid basis to protect the EU from further disintegration. All these countries agree that the negative tendencies which undermine the Community’s achievements must be stopped. It is noteworthy, that none of the Central European countries can be seen as a cause of any of the main crises the EU is confronting right now. Furthermore, the common stance of the V4 and Germany is the interest in preserving the EU’s broad design and in profiting from its scale. However, the outcome of the intensifying debate on differentiated integration could be ambivalent. Any development that will de facto undo the Eastern enlargement will not be good either for the V4 or for Germany. As long as the three of the Visegrád countries remain outside the Eurozone they will tend to connect the deeper integration around the common currency with the risk of their own marginalisation. Additionally, the predicted consequence of the future Brexit could be that the Eurozone will replace the single market as the EU’s centre of gravity.

With 2017 being an election year in Germany, domestic policy dynamics gains particular importance. Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands, CDU) is challenged from both left (by the Social Democratic Party of Germany [Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD], boosted by the appointment of Martin Schulz as candidate for chancellor) and right (by the Alternative for Germany [Alternative für
For quite some time, Germany has been witnessing the emergence of a “new Visegrád”. This new Visegrád is not the dormant grouping anymore which from time to time tried to push through issues on the European level, but otherwise focused on useful but unspectacular forms of regional collaboration like transport interconnections or trans-border cooperation. Accordingly, for years Germany considered “Visegrád” a group of countries which were once the front-runners of system transformation and the core of a successful EU enlargement, then showed growing economic interdependence and political closeness with their Western neighbour. Irrespective of the conflicts over the US’ engagement in Iraq or around EU reforms – with fierce Polish resistance against the “double majority” – Germany saw Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary as like-minded partners with overlapping interests in the European integration and the transatlantic security. This perception has been superseded by the appearance of a different Visegrád which is both more insistent and more self-assured than in the past.

First, the so-called European migration and refugee crisis of 2015 and 2016 showed a Visegrád group which is able to speak with one voice in a highly relevant policy area. Rejecting the concept of the permanent redistribution quota of asylum seekers, Visegrád said no to an idea promoted by Germany. Second, some Visegrád governments, especially the centre-right majority in Hungary, the national conservative government in Poland (since 2015), and – to some extent – the left-leaning governments in Slovakia have stressed the defence of national interests and sovereignty. Third, a debate about German hegemony and hence discussions...
about the way how to deal with Germany have emanated in all Visegrád countries – albeit with quite different assessments. Some countries have emphasised the need to hedge German dominance, others have favoured to deepen contacts to have better access to Berlin. And fourth, at least in Poland and Hungary, governments have signalled their preference for a deep reconstruction of the EU in order to build a more decentralised Union of motherlands.

Whereas, from a German perspective, this impression of a new, rather restive Visegrád caused some consternation, the big internal blows and external challenges to the EU – from Brexit, over Russia and Syria to Donald Trump’s election victory – modified the view on Visegrád. This is again due to a couple of determinants. The broader thrust of the EU attempts to stabilize and re-dynamize the “European project” has been to underline issues that unite rather than those which divide. In the context of the post-Brexit vote debates Germany has been supportive of the EU-27 cohesion (and reluctant of forming “core Europe”), of improving European (internal and external) security, and of strengthening the single market. All of these priorities are shared by the Visegrád countries.

Regarding to other important issues, the heterogeneity of Visegrád has come to the fore. This concerns questions like the Nord Stream 2 project (Poland opposes it heavily; Slovakia is against it, but might be accommodated; the Czech Republic is already part of the Nord Stream 1 system; Hungary has declared potential interest in deliveries from the new pipeline) or Eastern policies and relations with Russia. Given the diversity on these questions, there will not be an antagonism between Germany and Visegrád but rather difference between Germany and some Visegrád countries on the one hand and other Visegrád states on the other hand. Furthermore, for the time being, the “quota issue” in migration is off the table in the EU and it is rather a search for compatibility between Germany’s call for burden-sharing and Visegrád offers of “flexible” or “effective” solidarity, which characterises the discussions between both sides.

Finally, efforts from the region to balance off Germany have lessened. Whilst Prague and Bratislava have never been excited by this idea, even Warsaw’s conservatives from the governing Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, PiS) party seem to have skipped their concept of building counterweights against Germany. With uncertainties over the Trump administration and Brexit looming, Poland obviously wants to find pragmatic coexistence with Germany – as it has been shown during the recent visit of Chancellor Merkel to Warsaw.

In sum, the prospects for the German–Visegrád cooperation are now better than the most observers would have expected even one or two years ago. Given the uncertainties of Europe, apart from the core policies priorities, the glue that binds Germany and the Visegrád countries together is the quest for the consolidation of the EU and the need for partners – given with the rising scepticism about traditional allies – like France in the case of Germany, and the UK or the United States for some Visegrád countries. It is unclear, however, where the contacts between Germany and its Visegrád partners will develop. There is some likelihood that instead of a
new “Visegrád Plus”–Germany format it might rather be adapted bilateralisms, a laborious but inevitable “special partnership” with Poland, an upgraded “strategic dialogue” with the Czech Republic, and economic as well as sectorial cooperation with Slovakia and Hungary, which will be the stable but flexible setting for Germany’s contacts with its Central European neighbours from the cooperative and confident “new Visegrád”.

**Anna Tamási**

After fulfilling its original purpose by integrating Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic to the EU and the NATO, the Visegrád Group struggled to find common cause due to its limited coherence and different national positions. This resulted that the Visegrád cooperation remained relatively obscure for Germany. This dynamism of the relations has fundamentally changed when – due to the migration crisis – the V4 countries found a common position. Even though this issue seriously strengthened the Visegrád Group’s cooperation at the same time, however, it also generated tension between the V4 and Germany. From the very beginning of the crisis, Germany – with its „open door“ policy – has taken a fundamentally different position than the Visegrád Four, which was in contrast on several occasions condemned as an „anti-German coalition“.

Despite the obvious disagreements in certain questions, the refugee crisis also opened an opportunity for the V4 countries both on bilateral and group level for a more intensified coordination with Germany, as the latter had to experience the limit to its power demonstrated by the crisis blurring the classical boundaries between domestic and foreign policy and reducing control possibilities of the national state. Representatives of German politics have recognised the need and advantage for initiating a more intensive communication in order to better understand the position of the V4 countries and avoid occasional misunderstandings that sometimes occurred in the past.

In order to avoid being seen as a single topic group the V4 should work on increasing its visibility for Germany both in the field of economic cooperation and as a reliable partner to form alliance with on the most relevant and crucial issues of the European Union. This position, however, can only be reached if the V4 countries manage to develop a common agenda instead of prioritising their own national interests. Collectively the four countries have the potential to significantly contribute to the further development of the EU’s single market strategies thus coming in line with the German ambitions while representing the economic and fiscal stability and austerity expected and promoted by Germany, thus making themselves reliable allies within the EU, especially in light of the upcoming Brexit. These circumstances serve the V4 with the opportunity to raise the profile of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region within the EU, while economy and trade also remain a robust area for a mutual V4–German dialogue.
At the same time, some of the present challenges and uncertainties can affect Germany’s attitude towards the V4 to a large extent overshadowing the relevance of the dialogue. Germany’s attention is traditionally focused on global issues and an effective globalisation management: terrorism, heightened conflict in the Middle East, the migration crisis, emerging economy struggles, the rise of anti-establishment parties in Europe, continued falling commodity prices, low oil prices, question marks around the transatlantic relations, the future of the NATO and the TTIP negotiations under Donald Trump’s presidency, conflicts and rivalries among leading great powers. All of them represent potential risks for the global markets and through it to the export-oriented German economy as well. Accordingly, Germany’s international agenda covers several issues where the V4 has only limited weight or common voice, which brings the group out of German’s primary focus. On the other hand, the above-listed challenges showed Europe’s dominant agenda-setter the need of better coordination with countries from the CEE region even though the V4 countries sometimes distance themselves from Germany with their political agendas.

In conclusion, despite the sometimes differing perceptions and opinions, it is of a crucial importance for the future stability of the EU that Germany and the V4 makes serious attempts to find room for an open, trustful and constructive dialogue based on shared values and mutual respect. To achieve this, it is essential for the Visegrád countries to better synchronise their agendas and accordingly identify the areas of cooperation with the greatest practical potential with Germany.

Jakob Wöllenstein

Two years ago only some people had heard of the term “Visegrád Group” in Germany, and among the expert community it was a common view that the format was practically outdated because its purpose – mutual assistance on the path of post-communist transformation towards EU and NATO membership – had long been fulfilled. (Indeed, in 2015, Hungarians appreciated relations with China higher than those with Slovakia. The Czechs preferred the relations with Romania and Lithuania over the cooperation with Hungary. The Poles considered Turkey and Romania to be more important than any V4 country.) The reinvigoration of the V4 during the refugee crisis of 2015 took many German decision-makers by surprise. The Central European countries had been among Berlin’s most reliable allies during the Euro crisis and suddenly it seemed as if a group of four had joined forces in order to hinder the chancellor’s refugee policy. The notion of Visegrád as an “anti-German bloc” seemed to be underscored when a leading Austrian right-wing populist called for his country to join the group for that precise reason. Of course, neither the Visegrád Group nor any of its member states have an a priori anti-German orientation – quite to the contrary. The relations between Germany
and its Eastern neighbours are deep, multifold and based on shared history, cultural, and social ties as well as economic and security interests. In 2015, all V4 states saw Germany as their single most important partner in the European Union and felt that the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia were key partners for Berlin as well. Even though the sense of shared values – which is the basis and the condition for mutual trust and understanding – was shaken when the governments revealed some considerably different interpretations of these values in the autumn of 2015, steps have been taken to restore the lost trust – be it just for practical necessity.

The question whether and how Germany will cooperate with the V4 countries as a group in the future strongly depends on how the format will define its common policies. The shared goals between Visegrád and Berlin include the European monetary and austerity policy, economic growth, stabilisation of the Western Balkans, the common protection of external borders, and the support for the countries of origin to reduce migrant flows. Furthermore, both Germany and the V4 reject the idea of a two-speed EU that could marginalise Central Europe. These topics offer some scope for common action but will not be limited to Germany and the V4. Nevertheless, priorities and interests within the Visegrád Group remain diverse to a notable extent – just to mention different attitudes towards the European integration or the relations with the Kremlin. The different political colours of the incumbent governments could pose a further obstacle towards the V4’s internal coherence. These practical and ideological reasons contribute to the fact that especially the smaller Visegrád countries prefer bilateral relations with Berlin over a “channelled” common approach on most issues.

This means that V4 activities will focus on two areas:
• Regional integration in fields like infrastructure, cultural exchange, tourism, or mutual assistance with the implementation of EU’s environmental goals. This corresponds to the original purpose of the V4 and will be welcomed by Germany for its stabilising effect on the region.
• The V4 will play a role where its members see a need to develop some kind of counterweight – be it against a perceived “Western” or “German” dominance. This will mostly be the case regarding energy relations (North Stream 2) and the question how to “share” European solidarity towards (muslim) refugees.

In these fields it will be important for Berlin to continue (and extend) the dialogue with the V4 countries wherever possible. This could include, for example, joint meetings of the Weimar Triangle and the V4 countries, as was suggested. (In late 2016, both German Chancellor Merkel and Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier attended meetings with their V4 counterparts.) This dialogue will not necessarily dissolve concrete conflicts of interest. But it will certainly help to avoid misunderstandings and to keep in mind that Germany and East-Central Europe have much more in common than what sets them apart.

The texts reflect the private opinions of the authors.