



Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group

Veronika Józwiak

On 1 July, Hungary took over from Poland the annual presidency of the Visegrad Group. Its motto, "V4 Connects", is meant to express both the importance of regional infrastructure development and group cohesion. Its presidency will work to facilitate more efficient use of EU digitisation and innovation programmes by V4 members. However, the presidency programme does not contain a common answer to the issue of deepening European integration. With an ongoing election campaign, Hungary might attempt to politicize its V4 cooperation.

EU Dimension. In the context of the V4 countries' European policy, the Hungarian programme is a continuation of the Polish presidency's main ideas. It does not take into account the possible emergence of a Franco-German political alliance that could eventually decide the form and fields of deeper European integration. Hungary, like Poland, assumes that a strong EU should be based on strong Member States. It therefore suggests that the role of national parliaments should be strengthened in the EU decision-making process and that the EU should focus on goals that unite all members to prevent fragmentation of the Union. Such goals include the deepening of the European Single Market and maintaining the four freedoms (free movement of goods, services, capital, and labour). In addition, due to the planned visit of the French president to Budapest in September, Hungary received from its V4 partners a mandate to hold talks with him on the amendments proposed by the European Commission on the posted workers directive. At the same time, Hungary favours enhanced cooperation in line with the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU in various fields, although the programme does not specify which ones exactly.

The programme also provides a Hungarian perspective on migration issues and relocation of refugees. Hungary insists that solutions to the migration crisis should be sought outside the EU. It points to the need to protect the EU's external borders and support transit countries. Therefore, it stresses the external dimension of the mass-migration crisis, which Hungary perceives mainly as a security problem. However, it is unlikely that such an approach can result in consensus between the V4 countries, on one side, and EU institutions and Member States most affected by the influx of immigrants, on the other. Some statements by the Italian prime minister confirm this assumption, just like the 26 July opinion of the Advocate General of the Court of Justice of the EU, which advises dismissal of Hungary's and Slovakia's complaints over the EU Council decision to redistribute refugees across all Member States (so-called quota system).

Hungarian government representatives stress the exceptional coherence of the Visegrad Group. This is a way to present their position as a common stance of the bloc of four EU Member States. It is also used by the government to demonstrate to the Hungarian public before the parliamentary elections scheduled for April 2018, that it fulfils the role of a regional leader. Therefore, on the topic of migration and others, Hungary may use that claim (also on the V4 level) for internal policy purposes.

Regional Dimension. Hungary has expressed its willingness to cooperate closer in the V4+ format with Austria and Slovenia, especially on migration, integration of the Western Balkans countries, and security. That is why it will propose Slovenia contribute to the EU Visegrad Battle Group, which will be on standby in 2019. In turn, it will add Croatia to the current format of meetings of agricultural ministers of the V4,

Slovenia, Bulgaria, and Romania. The same format will represent regional interests related to EU cohesion policy. The presidency foresees a V4 political dialogue with the Nordic and Baltic states, particularly on security. Hungary is considering initiating a joint V4 contribution to NATO's enhanced forward presence in the Baltic states. This would confirm Hungary's commitment to the Alliance activities on its Eastern Flank.

Hungary also assumes a strengthening of V4 effectiveness based on other formats of regional cooperation, including the EU Strategy for the Danube Region, in which it also holds the presidency, and the Three Seas Initiative (TSI). The TSI is defined by the Hungarian programme as a possible channel of political cooperation providing a forum to discuss transport and energy issues. Progress in these areas is among the priorities of the Hungarian presidency. As far as transportation is concerned, the programme emphasizes the development of railway connections along the north-south axis, as opposed to the Polish priority of building the Via Carpathia motorway. In terms of energy, the main goal is to complete the North-South Gas Corridor, however, Hungary's programme does not specify further details about this initiative.

Hungary also wants joint Visegrad actions regarding the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) to be better coordinated. The revitalization of the latter is in line with Polish foreign policy goals. However, while Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus are among EaP priority countries for Poland, Hungary calls for equal attention to Armenia and, especially, to Azerbaijan. It advocates the conclusion of a strategic partnership with Azerbaijan and strengthened energy cooperation between that country and the EU. Hungary considers it possible to diversify its gas supplies through the construction of a corridor linking it to the Trans-Atlantic Pipeline (TANAP), which could also provide access to gas from Azerbaijan. Earlier plans to create an energy connection with this country (including the AGRI project) have failed. Faced with challenges in the Western Balkans, including the mass-migration crisis and internal political crises, the V4 aims to maintain the perspective of EU membership for candidate and potential candidate countries.

Global Dimension. In relations with non-European partners, Hungary will try to expand through the Visegrad Group its concept of an eastern and global opening—economic expansion—since it aspires to become a bridge between the EU and the Eurasian Economic Union. Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Péter Szijjártó has identified building closer relations with the Central Asian states as one of the main objectives of the Hungarian V4 presidency. As part of its preparations for the presidency, he visited Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in June.

In addition, Hungary wants to enhance relations with Egypt, Israel, and the countries of the African Union. Israel has been identified in the programme as a key economic and political partner. At the first V4-Israel summit in July, cooperation on security and innovation was announced.

Digitisation and Innovation. The Hungarian presidency aims to facilitate active regional involvement in the implementation of the EU digital agenda and coordination connected to EU legislation, including the new initiative on the free flow of data. It also will encourage more effective applications for EU funds and better use of EU instruments (including the European Commission's Digitisation Initiative and Horizon 2020) in the region for digitisation, R&D, and innovation. There is consensus in the V4 on the need to improve efficiency in these areas. The four countries should take advantage of this push, especially because in the European Commission's assessment they are among the "moderate innovators" of the EU. Only two regions in the V4 are considered innovation hubs: Prague in Czech Republic and Bratislava Region in Slovakia.

Conclusions. The lack of reflection in the Hungarian V4 presidency programme on the likely changes to the shape of European integration could be problematic for Poland for two reasons. First, the V4's approach can be perceived by the biggest EU Member States as confrontational, refusing to adapt to political realities. Second, in the absence of a consistent V4 response to scenarios of deeper political integration, Poland should be prepared for the other three members of the group to suddenly revise their positions. This applies both to issues where there is relative consensus among the V4 countries, including on migration, as well as issues that have already proven to divide the group, such as eurozone membership. In a situation of accelerating deeper integration, the latter is likely to occur.

Better joint V4 absorption of EU funds from digitisation and innovation programmes is in Poland's interest. This would also strengthen the image of the V4. In addition, Poland can benefit from the openness of the Hungarian presidency to create synergy between regional cooperation platforms to promote the goals of the Three Seas Initiative, such as infrastructure development. It would also help depoliticise the Visegrad Group, especially if Hungary seeks to use it instrumentally in the election campaign.