

The Visegrad Group and Germany: Towards a new paradigm

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A strategic realignment is underway in Central Europe. The countries of the Visegrad Group – Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – entered the EU as hawkish Atlanticists, mistrustful of German power and drawn to the UK's views on EU economic governance. Ten years and a crisis later, their governments are presiding over a steady, if uneven, drift towards Berlin. Instead of hedging against German dominance in Europe, they are now embracing it.

The shift offers an opportunity for the Visegrad bloc to carve out a more influential role in European politics, including in debates on EU institutional reform. It comes at a time when Germany, bereft of credible and like-minded allies, is increasingly deferring to French ideas on enhanced intergovernmental integration of the eurozone. The pro-German turn of Poland and other Visegrad countries – broadly supportive of further integration as long as it preserves the integrity of EU treaties and institutions – opens up the possibility of an alternative German-led coalition for Europe.

Poland alone cannot act as a counterweight to France, let alone displace it as Germany's principal interlocutor. Collectively, the Visegrad countries just might manage. But it will require a degree of cohesion and strategic imagination that their current leaders – excepting Poland's – seem unable or unwilling to provide.

Changing perceptions of German power

The Visegrad countries' relations with Germany are in a better shape than ever before. Poland seeks to position itself as Germany's go-to partner in debates on EU institutional re-design, its confidence buttressed by a resilient economy and a successful 2011 EU presidency. Slovakia, the only eurozone member in the group, is far less ambitious, but no less comfortable with German leadership. The Czech Republic, notwithstanding the Eurosceptic streak of the previous conservative government – exemplified by its refusal to sign up to the fiscal compact and Charter on Fundamental Rights – continues to improve bilateral relations while following Berlin's austerity dictum. Moreover, the October elections dealt a heavy blow to Eurosceptic parties, and are likely to produce the most pro-European Czech government in years. Even Viktor Orban, Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister who enjoys an occasional public spat with Angela Merkel, is acutely aware of Germany's role as

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Hungary's indispensable partner. In fact, German pressure may have been the single most important factor in taming Orban's dubious constitutional overhaul.

For a region whose collective identity is shaped by centuries of German influence – stretching back to early medieval Frankish empire – the realignment carries historic significance. When Poland's foreign minister declares he fears "German power less than ... German inactivity",¹ or when his counterpart in Slovakia, a wartime Nazi satellite, expresses no qualms about "being part of a greater Germany",² it becomes clear that something profound is afoot.

Economic interdependence explains much of what is going on. German investment (over 70 billion € cumulatively) and demand from German manufacturers, especially big carmakers such as Volkswagen or Mercedes, provide the backbone of the Visegrad export-oriented economies. Germany is the largest trading partner of all Visegrad states. Its own trade with the group reached 200 billion € in 2012, for the first time exceeding that with France.

Nonetheless, it took the threat of a eurozone break-up for politics to catch up with the robustness of trade (as well as cultural and societal) links.

During the acute phases of the crisis, endorsement of Germany's hegemony crystallised as a default choice. To understand the leap, one must take into account that, for ex-Soviet satellites which had just regained statehood and embedded themselves internationally, the spectre of a eurozone break-up triggered anxieties that went far beyond an economic slump or social dislocation. Possible fracturing of the European project raised existential concerns, threatening to shatter the very paradigm inside of which post-communist countries had been developing since 1989. Germany's indispensable role in staving off the catastrophe imbued bilateral relations with a new strategic quality – hitherto reserved for the US – that pushed aside sensitive historical narratives or lingering bilateral issues, such as the Benes decrees.

To be sure, other factors and events have played into the reconfiguration. In retrospect, the April 2010 Smolensk tragedy comes across as a turning point, having expedited Poland's mutually reinforcing *rapprochements* with Russia and Germany. The self-imposed isolation of the UK, an erstwhile ally of new member states, further narrowed the strategic options for Visegrad policy-makers, although some rebalancing away from the Anglo-Saxon axis was to be expected once the 2004 entrants had climbed the initial learning curve in EU policy-making.

Prospects for cooperation on Europe

One possible consequence of changing attitudes toward Germany could be the emergence of a durable coalition. Closer rapport between Germany and the Visegrad countries is already evident in some dossiers, such as Western Balkan enlargement or Eastern neighborhood policy.

When it comes to the bundle of issues bearing on the future politico-economic order in Europe – from banking through fiscal to political union – there is considerable prospect for intellectual convergence and coalition-building.

Due to cultural proximity, as well as experience with painful but reward-yielding structural reforms, Central European policy elites, including some on the centre-left, are sympathetic to Germany's interpretation of Europe's economic predicament. Moreover, as export-oriented

¹ "German inaction scarier than Germans in action", *The Economist*, 29 November 2012.

² Kristina Mikulova, "Central Europe's Pivot to Germany: What does the US Stand to Gain?", *Huffington Post*, 1 May 2013.

economies, the Visegrad countries are closely attuned to Berlin's language of external competitiveness.

Nor are there any relevant domestic forces – barring factions within PiS in Poland, Fidesz in Hungary, and ex-President Vaclav Klaus' devotees on the Czech centre-right – fundamentally averse to ideas of a political union floated by Chancellor Angela Merkel or Finance Minister Wolfgang Schäuble.

All Visegrad countries – albeit for different reasons – have an interest in preventing re-nationalisation or fragmentation of the European policy space, and upholding the Community method, including in eurozone governance. Poland, for its part, leads the charge against proposals to bolster EMU institutions and establish new ones, such a eurozone budget or a special EMU committee in the European Parliament. In this context, Warsaw is likely to find an ally in a future social democrat-led government in Prague. But even eurozone member Slovakia is wary of the multi-tier model going too far, lest this would dilute the authority of the EU institutions or bypass treaty-based procedures, and leave Bratislava's influence diminished by the concomitant switch towards a more inter-governmental mode of decision-making.

Germany's position oscillates between taking steps to preserve national control on the one hand but working to enhance inter-governmental coordination within the eurozone on the other, as evidenced by its current position on the banking union or the German-French paper of May 2013,³ and a rhetorical commitment to a genuine political union in the future. The perpetual balancing act gives Visegrad countries some latitude to nudge Germany's European policy towards the latter path.

After all, a big factor in Germany's reluctance to follow through on political integration is the dearth of enthusiasm among fellow member states. Whereas Angela Merkel can always turn to France to deepen eurozone coordination, she lacks a comparably powerful partner with whom to walk in the direction of inclusive federalisation.

This is a role that the Visegrad bloc – whose collective voting weight equals Germany and France combined – should aspire to. Compared to France, they could offer greater support for Germany's economic vision, including more intrusive policing of national fiscal prudence. In return, they should demand German support for inclusiveness of EU policies and commensurate empowerment of Community institutions. Such a grand bargain, or a variant thereof, could lay the groundwork for stronger German-Visegrad cooperation on Europe, and eventually a broader pro-integration German-led coalition that might include neighbours such as Austria, the Baltic states, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania and Bulgaria.

In institutional terms, the Visegrad Four-Plus offers a promising vehicle for structured dialogue with Germany. In November 2012 and March 2013, Warsaw hosted V4-Weimar Triangle summits with Angela Merkel and François Hollande. Similarly, establishing a regularised V4-Germany platform at the ministerial level would be a step forward. So would Germany's backing for a V4 candidate for one of the top EU posts after May 2014.

Unlikely, but worth exploring

There are, to be sure, any number of caveats. For Visegrad countries, collective action on Europe remains a tall order. The bloc looks more fragmented than ever: Slovakia belongs to the eurozone; Poland aspires to enter and leads the pre-ins caucus; the Czech Republic is still

³ "France and Germany - Together for a Stronger Europe of Stability and Growth", released 30 May 2013 (www.bundestkanzlerin.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2013/05/2013-05-30-dt-frz-erklaerung-englisch.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5).

ambivalent about the euro; Hungary is galloping toward isolation. And while this heterogeneity implies a theoretical basis for shared interests – in preserving EU-wide institutions – it also chokes any sense of a common purpose. Hungary’s democratic backsliding poses an additional constraint on V4 cooperation; so do lingering suspicions of Poland’s ambitions of regional dominance.

If Central Europe is ever to “speak with one voice” to Germany on Europe, the smaller partners must accept that Poland would do most of the talking. Warsaw, in turn, must commit to V4 positions, forgoing some exclusivity in its bilateral relations with Berlin. Slovakia, for its part, must show solidarity with the interests of the three non-eurozone partners. Intra-bloc cohesiveness would also require the stabilisation of a pro-European majority in the Czech Republic; and, most difficult of all, a political sea-change in Hungary.

Even if the bloc raises its game, it may discover that Germany is not interested, preferring instead – as looks likely at the moment – to tie itself more firmly to France. Or relations may turn sour for other reasons, such as disagreements on environmental policy, or as a consequence of nationalist electoral gains in Poland.

All the challenges notwithstanding, it is hard to think of another point in modern history that permitted a scenario of Germany and its eastern neighbours working together to constructively shape Europe. It is a possibility well worth exploring.



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