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Misunderstanding, conflict and divisions between the Visegrad Group and the European Union – an analytical discourse beyond the public cliché of the migration crisis

Birgit SCHMÖLZ*

Abstract

The current connection between the European Union (EU) and the Visegrad group (V4) seems to resemble a parent-child relation: the perception of a dictating European Commission, on the one hand, and a rather stubborn driven behaviour on part of the Visegrad players, on the other hand, is undeniable. Certainly, the migration crisis was a crucial issue for both sides and it definitely destabilised the harmony balance between the EU and the Central Eastern European (CEE) states. Hence, the question raised is whether there are more fundamental reasons behind the phenomena of a highly tensed environment. This paper strives for an explanation on the self-perceived role of the Visegrad format and the perception of the 'other' within the European Union.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, European polycrisis, role concept, identity concept

Introduction

The recent developments in the European Union – e.g. the upsurge of right-wing parties and the increasing tendencies towards illiberal governance models – reflect perplexities and syndromes that have caused a great misunderstanding among its European members. The migration crisis has revealed profound disputes. Notable controversy gained the resolution plan on a relocation scheme that the European Commission developed in 2015. For the sake of sharing responsibility this mechanism was designed to navigate the transfer of refugees from one EU member country to another. The capacity of how many refugees a country should receive is objectively measured upon a set of criteria (e.g. number of population, GDP).[1] The Visegrad countries opposed the plan and thus received critics and accusations for their behaviour of showing little solidarity. Further procedures of a coordinated balancing of migration flows are progressing. The current action on the political agenda of the European Union strives towards a long-term policy on migration.

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[1] More information on the relocation model can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/2_eu_solidarity_a_refugee_relocation_system_en.pdf

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These developments certainly unfold future questions on how to proceed with the overall EU integration project – such as moving towards a stronger integration or remaining with the prevalence of demarcation. Yet, an answer to this holistic question may not be found as long as the current obstacles are in place. Hence, for reading this paper properly it is essential to understand that the migration crisis represents another trigger for a phenomenon that the European Union has been experiencing and is still struggling to digest: the clash of different mindsets or even ideologies among its member countries. A revival of alleged misperceptions between Eastern and Western European countries has been created amid the debate of the so-called 'polycrisis'[2]. It brought up again the narrative about an East-West normative gap (Kazharski, 2017). In order to understand this clash and the conflictual atmosphere in the European Union researchers need to study these challenges not only through the lens of migration's related matters but also focusing on the "understandings about the self" (Jakniūnaitė, 2009, p. 118) of the V4. In search for role- and identity-based answers, this paper will thus analyse the self-perceived or the so-called ego role of the Visegrad group and evaluates the assessment on the V4's EU membership at present. The group consist of four member countries: Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and the Czech Republic. It was established in 1991 in order to facilitate the accession process and the transfer to multilateral cooperation structures, such as the European Union.

The scientific core element is based on a qualitative database of expert interviews, which further verifies the overall project as strongly empirical. Firstly, the introductory part underlines the relevance of this essay emphasizing its dual dimension and introduces the theoretical approach. Further insights are given on the methodology and data collection, followed by the presentation of the findings that drive towards the final considerations.

1. The polycrisis of the European Union – a societal and scientific classification

For a long time, the Visegrad states have played a minor role on the EU level. But with the aforementioned incident of the relocation rejection, the V4 actors were identified and stigmatized because of their non-conformal behaviour with the set of EU regulations. They were given titles that described their contemporary role in the European Union. In this context the Visegrad states were considered as "enfant terrible" (Radziejewski, 2017). They established themselves as an antithesis to the Brussel's mainstream (Cameron, 2016). The migration crisis also revealed an inner-European

[2] In his speeches, Jean-Claude Juncker addresses the current challenges to the EU by using the term polycrisis. It describes the situational and current state of the European Union. For more information visit the following websites: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-18-1121_en.htm
http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-16-2293_de.htm

conflict between the Visegrad states and the European Union. Incompatible expectations between the V4 and the EU were thus a logic outcome and are further framed as a newly V4-EU conflict.

Furthermore, one should take into consideration that the crisis is not endemic to the Visegrad countries. The subjects of political confrontation, mentioned at the beginning, have spread all over Europe and are overlapping the spheres of political and societal realities. The migration crisis will be considered as a characteristic reference for the paper. It serves as an adequate point of departure for a deeper analysis of the status quo of the V4's EU membership. Since their accession, the V4's well-being in the EU has not been properly evaluated. A large amount of studies set the focus on the transformation and EU accession processes, predominantly in political science (Grabbe, 2006; Quadrio Curizo and Fortis, 2008; Schimmelfenning, 2005). A contesting research gap uncovers the still prevailing opinion of a successful integration and the advantageous evidences, e.g. political and economic cohesion. But lately these convictions have excluded the contemporary upsurge of antagonism. In this regard, the political research draws attention to the V4 due to the disruptions in the EU in the last couple of years (Dostál, 2015; Fuksiewicz and Lada, 2017; Skrzypek and Skóra, 2018). Nevertheless, an appropriate analytical connection between the aforementioned issues of the polycrisis and the status quo of the Visegrad states in social and political research has been missing so far. From this point of view, the given societal and scientific relevance increases the need for further research on this specific subject.

The reconstruction of social reality and the interpretation of contextual situations and activities are subsumed under the scientific lenses of constructivism. In turn, this alignment leads to an equivalent theory approach: the role concept which encaptures a states' self-image alongside a set of internal patterns like norms, interests and other aspirations that are communicated with the external parties (Holsti, 1987; Rosenau, 1987). The actual role performance which is the tangible outcome on the transnational scene depends on the ego role conception. The latter is processed on national levels in a fundamental way. Political entities are embedded in a transnational environment and interact in a multinational relation network. Therefore, they apply certain roles that incorporate diverse affiliations and identities. Since states interfere with each other, their manifested roles influence the negotiating process. It is in this framework where different expectations of the opponent's role create dissent and incompatibilities – and in the ultimate case it escalates in a role conflict (Backman, 1970, p. 313).

2. Methodological data collection

The commitment to constructivism is also transferred to the methodological realisation. Abstract constructs such as attitudes and viewpoints on selected issues, are collected most efficiently

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and epistemic through the qualitative approach. The reconstruction of the situational and political reality in the V4 region is the main scope of research. The underlying research procedure is built upon a strong empirical and interpretative nature. The empirical realisation focuses on public agents (experts) implying a discovery of the structure and conception of the role attributed to the Visegrad group. The participating four think-tank institutions in each V4 country are selected on the basis of the characterising definition of what an expert is: representatives of institutions that transfer professional know-how, and experts who have access to a vast spectrum of detailed information. The ability of the involved expert is to provide stakeholders with specific expertise and to simplify complexities for the public (Döring and Bortz, 2016, p. 375). These criteria are surely given and were highly valued. Personal short briefings with the experts were conducted in advance in order to examine the individual specialisation and level of expertise. At the same time, scientific accuracy is subjected to the contextual specialisations and orientations of the think-tanks and should be reflected critically. In this regard, concerns of other dependencies can be excluded.

Data was generated by means of conducting partially structured, open and problem-focused interviews (Mason, 2002). Over the course of nine interviews, experts shared their experiences and insights into the reasons for the conflictual and idiosyncratic role behaviour of the group. The implementation of a diverse set of questions concerning assimilating items, e.g. motivation for a group attachment or defining representative attributes has been applied (Roccas and Berlin, 2016). Hence, while the main focus lays on "unique behavior traits" (Brecher *et al*., 1969, p. 79) explained by the role conceptions, the preliminary use of empirical questions can be associated with intergroup relations and behavioural systems (Tajfel and Turner, 2004).

The elaboration of the data set was primary made in a qualitative-interpretative manner (Creswell, 2009; Esterberg, 2002). Furthermore, the generated interview transcripts were imbedded in a computer-based content analysis via MAXQDA (Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2002). Rules and techniques of coding and categorisation ensured the systematically processing and evaluation of the data. The specific construction and deduction of inferences and new findings from the sources was the major intention of the research (Krippendorff, 1969).

3. Empirical findings of the Visegrad group's assessment of their EU membership

The declaration of the V4's current role performance obtains an analysis of the present assessment of the EU membership. On a diagnostic stance, the 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' of the EU accession will be described in the following part. The findings of the database are structured in a latent and non-latent outline.

3.1 The persisting achievements of the EU membership in the non-latent testing area

The persisting achievements of the EU membership are still valued and recognized as great successes of the political and economic transformation processes of the former post-soviet states. The following key advantages are highly responsible for a positive association with the membership: stability and security; economic growth and prosperity and, unquestionably, the overall European peace project are considered enormous improvements. On the individual level the membership is exceptionally connected with prosperity and improved living conditions. Societal dynamics have changed insofar as integration and globalising processes enhanced cultural, non-material, and social acquisitions. Liberal values, the ideals of an economic and political most advanced Europe have been adapted and they replaced norms of the former socialist system (Genov, 2016, pp. 136-137; Grabbe, 2006, p. 53). Furthermore, the overall appreciation of the EU as a peace project delivers the connotation of an EU that is seen as a provider for stability and security.

In particular, the socioeconomic advantages – such as the cohesion policies, the structural funds and the access to the common European market – have deeply affected the V4's long-lasting well-being in the European Union. These socioeconomic factors still constitute the collective economic interests of the four states and can be regarded as tremendously important. Being integrated into transnational structures primarily implies the opportunity to benefit from it. During the budget distribution of the years of 2007-2013 the Visegrad states gained half of the cohesion funding (measured according to their GDP)[3]. During the European financial and banking crisis in 2008/2009 Poland was one of the most economically stabilised countries in the EU (Plóciennik, 2018, p. 234). Their recent economic endeavour was observable during the negotiations on the multiannual financial framework. Brexit and additional challenges – for example, terrorism, expenses for security and defence – have caused a budget reform shift that implies new investments for the last-mentioned priorities. The concern of the V4 increases, because they fear that the negotiations will result in financial cutbacks for the next term (MFF 2021-2027) (Balcer *et al*., 2017). Financial reductions in turn would lead to a perception of being left behind. Consequently, the group insists on a consistent financial support from Brussels since money is still indispensable for certain infrastructural projects in the region. The Visegrad states are well aware of their fragile position. For this reason, the EU membership can be regarded from a very pragmatic perspective, where it serves the rational self-

[3] This fact emerges from the report on 'EU Cohesion Policy in Central and Eastern European' Countries of the European Central Bank (cf. European Central Bank, 2008, pp. 14-15). Further research has been conducted by Mark Horridge and Bartlomiej Rokicki (2017). Their study analysis the impact of the cohesion policy on the income convergence in all four countries. On the basis of their thesis, which alternative scenarios would have been possible if the Visegrad four had not joined the EU, they introduce "computable general equilibrium (CGE) models" in order to resemble growth of per-capita income in the countries (Horridge and Rokicki, 2017).

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interests of its V4 members. Very likely their membership confers socioeconomic principles that serve V4's self-interests. This is responsible for their behavioural traits on the role of the consumer and beneficiaries in the EU and can be metaphorically described as 'cherry picking' (Kazharski, 2017, p. 12) behaviour.

The hard and observable facts prove the transformational progresses that the V4 underwent. Hence, the phenomena of the idiosyncratic role of the V4 is twofold with the second – rather invisible – results now drawing near.

3.2 Failures of the EU integration and the latent factors

The integration into new transnational structures and the adaption of market-based principles within the European unity is now being questioned (Genov, 2016, p. 145). Contrary to the prioritisation of economic long-term interests, scepticism towards the EU integration, especially towards the market transformation, is rising; this scepticism also involves reservations towards the global community with its intertwined cooperation and dependencies (Beasley and Snarr, 2013, p. 318f). The assessment of the EU membership at present can be defined as highly critical and is characterised by a growing feeling of frustration. This argument results from the following empirical findings: the formulation of the narrative of 'buying out the local market' – which meant that foreign investors and their FDI's (Foreign Direct Investments) swamped the business scene – and thus minimized the chances of an own establishment of the cooperate landscape. It also led to a perceived but implicit economic dependency on other European partners (Kagarlitsky, 2007). A second concrete example for the negative attitude towards the economic integration process would be the significant changes on the labour market. With the opening of the markets, high-skilled labour forces left the country to find better work abroad and thus did not contribute to their own emerging economies. Such developments are a contesting subject giving room for general but emotional doubts on the fruitfulness and successful functionality of the market economy. As a consequence, the notion of an economic discrimination occurs and is defining the sensitive relation to the European Union. The EU membership is generally speaking associated with economic improvements since the accession process was an instrument to implement new rules and structures for the economy remodelling (Grabbe, 2006, pp. 43-44). Hence, 14 years after the accession the overall economic growth is noticeable but economic discrimination on the individual level persists. The last-mentioned phenomenon is strongly related to the perspective of socioeconomic circumstances of each person. A connection between the assertions of individual prosperity permits reflecting assertions of the condition of social order (Bauman, 1997).

Frustration also exists when it comes to polity related issues. The V4 perceive themselves as a junior-partner since they are still regarded as the new ones in the European Parliament. An urgent request to be treated as equals among EU partners reinforces the frustration with the EU membership. The reforming process implied in a subtle but pressurized way that the V4 countries should integrate in an exemplary manner. 'Catching up' is an equivalent term that expresses this feeling of continuing the role model of the progressive economic and political post-socialist states. „[T]he term 'the Visegrad group' became shorthand for the politically and economically most advanced, most 'Western' post-communist states'" (Vachudova, 2005, p. 94). Nonetheless, there is a spatial economic gap between the core of the old European countries and the CEE-countries which underlines the still pending east-west economic approximation for the years to come (Gorzelak and Smetkowski, 2010, p. 35; Strupczewski and Guarascio, 2018).

From the perspective of the V4, the EU membership resembles a second-class membership and this in turn leads to a rising discontent. In a more metaphorical way, the EU membership can be described as 'the bride turned out not as pretty as advertised' (Kazharski, 2017, p. 13). The perceived inferiority and disparity on the EU level has an impact on the Visegrad's role performance. It has changed to a rather unnoticed EU partner and its image of a successful integration that is gradually fading. Instead it has been replaced by the self-perceived ego role of a disadvantaged group. This role concept is mutually dependent on their Foreign Policy Behaviour. It gives an explanation of the V4's critical or even rebelling behaviour. The best example for that is the migration issue. The group has bypassed or simply ignored the outcome of the negotiations on the relocation scheme initiated by the EU interior ministers in September 2015. Only Slovakia and the Czech Republic have accompanied a small number of refugees – Poland and Hungary completely eluded the regulation. The migration crisis finally brought internal positive and external negative popularity and an additional leverage of their resisting behaviour.

3.3 The role function as a disadvantaged group

Regarding their role performance of a disadvantaged group the evidence of the attached role function becomes clear: the V4 drawing attention to an internal and external level in order to proactively exploit and benefit from being treated as second-class members. On the external level the V4 still struggles with the image of humbling and devoted partners even though they are pursuing the status of serious, equal players. As a consequence, the rhetoric interaction among the two partners becomes harsher and it frames the predominance of a V4 versus EU conflict. The European Union emerges in a negative light – and harshly speaking – it is being presented as a scapegoat for the societal frustration in the V4 region. This frustrating strive for recognition serves internal-political

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ends. It is mostly utilized by populist voices in the region questioning the costs and advantages of being an EU member. As some experts mention, it is always easier to blame someone else for mistakes than reflecting one's own work and responsibilities. The EU is a convenient excuse for political arguments. With no surprise it can be stated that the EU has become a political match ball for national politics. This is a frequent conclusion in the latest discussions on populism.

Another prevailing component that serves the political reasoning line for a demarcation is the experience of the common historical past. It is deeply rooted in the collective memory of the Central Eastern European societies. The nostalgic practice of remembrance of the post-socialist past is used as a comparative tool to sustain the security related narrative of 'the good old times'. The enduring desire of socioeconomic security – individual as well as collective – can be explained from this angle. There is still the effort for an entire implementation of a consumption-oriented society because it is the prevailing and most obvious sign of a successful EU integration (Bauman, 1997). The impact of history is still part of the political culture and gives a strong explanatory factor. For a better self-comprehension of this intertwining phenomenon of past (perception of security) and present (perception of uncertainty) economic conditions as well as to better understand the position within the European landscape, the V4 group relates itself to post-socialist historical narratives (Segert, 2007, pp. 16-21). The common history triggers a feeling of unity on a national as well as on a transregional level. The concepts of national and collective identity gain revival since a discourse for identification is being created. The historical factor ties the V4 together and thus they act as one entity on the EU level. In this process of inclusiveness and exclusiveness the self of the V4 gets more validation for the political group but also for the citizens. Politically formulated messages are being sent to the citizens and foster the emergence of a regional ingroup. It entails strategies that evoke the narrative of a 'we/V4 versus them/EU'. The purpose of demarcation is pursuing rational interests of political actors such as recruiting their electorate. Contrary to the aspiration of a partnership of equals one can identify a 'we-ness' status, which the V4 communicates on the EU level: 'We are different, and we want be treated differently.' The anti-EU rhetoric is expressed by opposing against certain EU related policies, e.g. the debate on the double standard of food (Barteczko and Kelly, 2017). The V4 acted against the EU escalated during the debate on the relocation policy as of 2015 and has changed the V4's role performance ever since.

A precaution should be given when it comes to the V4's lack of experience with democracy and other political implementations in the transnational arena. To put it in a nutshell: the V4 are seeking for recognition and acceptance of their post-socialist status. This difference should be granted more patience. The aforementioned post-socialist role pattern constitutes the shared ingroup structures of the V4 group. However, there is a common understanding that this is yet an ancient

legacy that hinders the group in their regional progress. Political awareness is thus being generated and it will lead to overcome the image of the post-socialist history in the long-run.

The perception on the EU membership is overshadowed by the notion of an inequality of treatment among European partners and among the V4 and the EU in particular. The self-image of the V4 has radically changed towards the tendency of a looser-image. Mechanisms of economic advancement and economic interdependences have long been considered as substantial contributing factors of transformation but are now being questioned. It is the lack of efficiency that is vanishing, and it reflects not only the socioeconomic insecurity in the V4 societies but also the resentments. As a consequence, the categorisation between the V4 and the EU does not put an end to the conflict between the two actors – on the contrary; it is a sign for escalation. In addition, these results invalidate the outcome of other studies proclaiming an overall positive satisfaction with the EU membership of the V4[4]. Due to the given circumstances of the polycrisis, the paper revealed the critical opinion on the self and the membership in the European Union. Certainly, this should not intensify a narrowed, unilateral but rather a differentiated and contextual thinking of various existing social realities. This is because the latter does exist in the European Union.

Conclusions

Processes of transnationalism in particular the integration into EU structures are a breeding ground for the V4's multiple functional roles. Both the role of the provocateur and the disadvantaged group come with certain narratives – such as the post-socialist one. This enlargement fatigue is the core phenomenon and at the same time the core problem for the existing growing social frustration. The political orchestration of subjects such as national sovereignty and identity driven issues serve as a compensating political answer in times of great inner-societal uncertainty. Yet, it merely gives an answer to the complexity of globalisation and its immense social implications (Bauman, 1997; Makarychev and Sergunin, 2000, p. 402). The incapability of governments and the increasing failures of elites in their actions is a considerable reason for the high frustration potential in the V4 countries (Makarychev and Sergunin, 2000, p. 402). These unsolved, in fact urgent problems are not only listed on the political agenda of governments in the V4 states but everywhere. In the long run politics have to face these cracks in societies because to a large extend populist parties exploit the destructing symptoms of globalisation. However, these symptoms are equalized with failures of the EU

[4] The Standard Eurobarometer 88 survey is considered as a comparable figure for the above-mentioned argument. The survey question was: 'Would it be easier to face the future outside the EU?' (QA 18a.5) (cf. European Commission 2017, p. 84).

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integration and this in turn is responsible for the downgrading of the EU image. The noisy criticism against Brussels is lobbied under the pretext of national reforms. It will further harm the drifting-apart in the EU and the coherence of the EU community.

A problem-oriented solution approach is necessary. In order to avoid the deepening of rifts within the EU and in particular the rift between Eastern and Western European countries, political stakeholders need concrete instructions. First and foremost, the acceptance of the prevalence of different living conditions in the Eastern and Western part of the EU should be explicitly stressed. These differentials are particularly linked to individual socioeconomic resources (Horridge and Rokicki, 2017). Studies on the specific income convergence take priority in this regard. Another solution approach should aim for adjustments of the different mentalities that concern the future EU project. This attempt engenders a rather holistic assimilation and could be implemented in many different ways (e.g. comparison of electoral behaviour; direct voting mechanism). The retrieval for a common consensus should have priority.

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