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Slovakia's View of the Visegrad Group

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In the debate on the future of the European Union, Slovakia favours more integration. The sharpening discussion about a multi-speed Europe could undermine political cooperation within the Visegrad Group. Slovakia uses the V4 to strengthen its position on selected issues but, at the same time, signals shortcomings associated with group membership. The response to the possibility that political cooperation will be undermined requires joint action on the future of the EU based on the V4 March statement.

Slovakia's size (just 49,000 km²) and population (about 5.4 million) make it the smallest member of the Visegrad Group. Its economy of just 0.5% of EU GDP has limited potential, its military is small, and it has limited energy resources. The Visegrad Group (V4) is therefore an instrument to increase its potential in foreign policymaking. In the past, membership of the Visegrad Group facilitated Slovakia's integration with Western structures after the nationalist and non-democratic rule of Vladimír Mečiar (1994–1998) led to the country's inability to join NATO with the other Visegrad countries in 1999.

Interests and Positioning. Slovakia is trying to use the V4 to defend its national interests by involving the group in joint activities in the EU forum. A recent example of this is Slovak Ministry of Agriculture's publication of test results on the quality of food products in Slovakia and Austria. The government in Bratislava then initiated an extraordinary V4 summit in Warsaw in March to act to eliminate double standards in the EU on the quality of food products sold by multinational companies under the same brand in different countries.

Slovak economic interests are often implemented without prior V4 agreement. This applies, for example, to gas supplies. Slovakia's gas supply via Ukraine has been restricted at times, and after the Nord Stream gas pipeline was launched, gas transmission in 2011–2014 through Slovak territory decreased by 37%. On the one hand, Slovakia seeks to expand energy connections with its Visegrad partners and integrate with the gas markets of Central Europe. On the other hand, it presents an ambivalent attitude towards Nord Stream II, even though the Visegrad Group opposed it in a letter from March 2016, and confirmed its stance at the V4 presidents' meeting in Rzeszów, Poland, on 15 October 2016. In the meantime, Russian state-owned Gazprom has developed new transmission capacities in Slovakia crucial to the future delivery of Nord Stream II gas. Slovakia is dependent on Russian gas supplies and is also interested in exporting it to Ukraine.

Between the EU and the V4. Integration among euro area countries is likely to deepen. Because Slovakia is the only Visegrad country with the common currency (since 2009), it will be part of the process. It is likely to favour further institutionalisation of cooperation between euro area states, including setting up a separate budget for it. Beyond the eurozone, Slovakia also supports, for example, the establishment of a European Public Prosecutor's Office while Hungary and Poland oppose the move. Also, the Socialists and Democrats Group in the European Parliament, which includes the Slovak ruling party, Smer, accepts the multi-speed vision for the EU with the inclusive variant, that is, open to those wishing to join.

Closer integration within the EU should can be interpreted as Slovakia's response to the threat of the V4's marginalisation in the EU. The possibility was noted by Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico in Warsaw at the

Central Eastern Europe Innovators Summit when referring to the Rome Declaration signed on 25 March. The content of the jubilee document, apart from mentioning things significant for the V4, speaks of the "different paces and intensity" of Member State actions. At the same time, the Slovak government has signed up to strengthen the role of national states in the EU decision-making process, as highlighted in the joint V4 statement "Strong Europe—Union of Action and Trust," issued in early March. There is no contradiction in this because the statement does not exclude Slovakia's participation in closer European integration in selected fields.

Meanwhile, since the Slovak presidency of the EU Council (second half of 2016), Fico's government has been trying to improve the country's image. At the beginning of 2017, he warned EU leaders against the temptation to hold referendums like the British one. His words about the presence in the country of fascist ideology were also widely spread. Fico's statements condemning extreme attitudes contrast with his previous anti-Islamic rhetoric criticising the EU's policy on the mass-migration crisis. During a meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel in April this year, Fico even pointed out that every EU country must help to solve the migration crisis. The Slovak government also distances itself from extreme right-wing politicians sitting in parliament, such as the People's Party–Our Slovakia (ĽSNS), which wants the country to hold an EU-exit referendum, as well as from its own Eurosceptic rhetoric of the past.

Membership of the Visegrad Group can be seen in Slovakia as a burden. In addition to comments by Prime Minister Fico about the threat of V4 marginalisation in the EU forum, Slovakia's President Andrei Kiska in the autumn of 2016 signalled that the Visegrad Group has never had such a bad image as now. The original concept of "flexible solidarity" proposed by the V4 was shaped by the Slovak presidency of the EU Council into what is now called "effective solidarity." This concept of solving the refugee crisis, although not approved in the EU forum, can be interpreted as an attempt to respond to the weakening image of the V4 in the EU.

Conclusions and Perspectives. Slovakia does not intend to build stronger political ties within the Visegrad Group at the expense of closer integration within the EU. This conviction is stronger after the positive experience of the Slovak presidency of the EU Council and due to its membership of the euro area. At the same time, Fico's government will selectively support itself by drawing on the strength of the regional grouping to achieve its own national interests, as seen in its fight against double standards of food quality in the EU. From the Slovak point of view, sectoral cooperation such as efforts to develop gas infrastructure and diversify gas supplies may be more important and come at the expense of the development of political cooperation.

The Slovak example shows that the positions of states on such policy issues as finding resolution to the mass-migration crisis or closer integration are shaping the debate on the future of the EU. Divergence in these positions will become increasingly visible, not only in the EU but also in the V4. Meanwhile Slovakia's membership of the eurozone, willingness to co-mainstream the EU, and decisions such as support for the creation of a European Public Prosecutor's Office, reduce the county's need to engage with the V4 to shape a common position.

For these reasons, Slovakia's European policy will be an increasing challenge for Poland. Differences in the perception of the future of European integration by the governments in Warsaw and Bratislava mean that joint Visegrad initiatives concerning talks on the future of the EU will require readiness to compromise. It is very unlikely that a revision of the European treaties will become part of any bargain. Both Slovakia and the other V4 countries are sceptical of that. But even achieving a coherent group position is not enough for the V4 to effectively influence the debate now taking place in the EU. It will need a wider coalition of states. To secure its numbers, the Visegrad Group may use the invitation from the Benelux countries to talk about the future of the EU and cooperate with other countries within a "V4+" formula.