

**From Normalisation to Differentiation:**  
**Uncoherent Relations between the Visegrád States and Germany**

**Vladimir Handl, Charles University**  
**Institute of Europe, Russian Academy of Sciences,**  
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In the core of the post-1990 German foreign policy towards the Visegrád group countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary - further referred to as V4 countries), was the interest to secure democratisation, modernisation and stabilisation of its eastern neighbourhood – this corresponded with the German political, security as well as economic interests. The post-war experience proved that German interests are best served if there is stability and prosperity in Europe, if Germany is surrounded by a compatible, congenial milieu, by transparent and free liberal market.

The core interests of the V4 countries were (apart of regaining sovereignty and establishing themselves anew in international community) similar: to catch up with the political and economic development of Western Europe, increasing thus their security and prosperity, gaining access to decision-making as regards normative, political, security and economic development in Europe. Relations with Germany became a crucial part of this process.

A number of challenges made the process a complex exercise. Most obviously, multiple asymmetries between Germany and the V4 countries, as well as among the V4 countries themselves, complicated the relations. Also, diverging internal developments in individual V4 countries limited the coherence and functioning of the V4 as a group.

**Success of Normalisation**

Still, the German-V4 relations represented by and large an impressive success till 2014. Their development can be described as double normalisation and double multilateralization.

Coming to terms with the past was the first dimension of the normalisation process. There was a substantial asymmetry related to historical legacies and their interpretation in individual countries. Poles and Hungarians (unlike Czechs and Slovaks) have been traditionally perceived by Germans as historical nations. Czechs were often viewed as 'members of the family' rather than as a sovereign nation. Also, the Poles' role as victims of the Nazi terror is indisputable in Germany, while the role of the Czechs has been seen as less obvious. Furthermore, the post-war expulsion and transfer of the Germans primarily represent (given their scale and nature) a burden in Germany's relations with Poland and the Czech Republic. But most importantly, for Czechs and Poles their historical relations with Germany (and German minorities) have always been of existential importance; the propensity to watch Germany and its attitude to the past very closely has thus been very much a part of the 'genetic code' of their national politics. This has never been the case for Germany's relations with them; in Germany, the mutual problems arising from the past have been perceived as primarily moral issues, the political agenda has been perceived (at least on the federal level) as settled. While at the moment of EU accession in 2004, the past issues seemed to be largely closed, it has been some Czech representatives (mostly President Václav Klaus till 2013) and recently the Polish leadership which attempt to put the past issues on the agenda again. Except of some individual actors (some representatives and organisations of the Germans transferred and expelled from Poland and Czechoslovakia in 1945-7), Germany treated the past with caution. The past has largely disappeared from the agenda (Polish reparation claims are

relevant for the strained and specific relations between Germany and the Polish PiS government).

The second dimension of the normalisation has been material and institutional: it involved upgrading (and institutionalisation) of mutual relations up to the level corresponding with the geographical and cultural closeness and technological compatibility. The result of this dynamic has been development of largely de-politicised, decentralised, horizontal relations – a normality of bilateral relations in western part of Europe.

The double multilateralization of the German-V4 relations has been achieved mainly through NATO and EU accessions. Both have been perceived not only as a way to creating a new platform for co-operation on a multilateral level. Also, the accession processes represented a huge “policy transfer” exercise: the V4 countries had to download the normative and institutional set up of the EU (and NATO), emulating thus in fact “model Europe” and thus to some extent also “Modell Deutschland”. In addition to that, the membership in both NATO and the EU have represented the best “confidence building measure” mainly in German-Polish and German-Czech relations”. Multilateralization represents the best chance to moderate the huge asymmetry between Germany and the V4 countries. The Eastern enlargement relatively decreased the dominant presence of Germany in the region as other EU-member states started to engage with V4 more actively. Undoubtedly, Germany has become the most important economic partner of all V4 countries. Even before the anti-Russian sanctions, trade with Germany made up for 25% of Polish, 30% of Czech, 20% of Slovak and 25% Hungarian foreign trade.<sup>1</sup> Also, the Visegrád countries played a substantial role in German economy even before 2014. Poland’s share in German trade (3, 9 %) was higher than that of Russia (3, 8 %), with Czech Republic closely following (3, 2 %); the share of Hungary (1, 9 %) and Slovakia (1, 2 %) were also relevant, tendency growing.<sup>2</sup>

### **Current distorted dynamic and challenges**

However, after the main goals of normalisation and multilateralization had been reached, the question about the future relations between Germany and Central Europe popped out again. Differences in interests (for example in energy security) and culture between Germany and the individual V4 countries (increasing prioritisation of nation state in some of the V4 countries) started to appear more freely.

It has been mainly key questions of the EU development - such as the solution to the euro-crisis, Europe’s security and defence policy, most recently the refugee crisis - which have influenced the level of political co-operation between Germany and the V4 countries since the EU-enlargement. Obviously, the level of Europeanisation of the V4 countries has to be assessed with a great deal of differentiation. The recent domestic developments in Poland and Hungary have been cause of concern in the EU and Germany as well as in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

As a result, we witness, on the one hand, a dynamic development of the matter-of-fact co-operation and, on the other, a lack of coherence in the German-V4 relations. Moreover, the perceptions Germany has deteriorated mainly in Poland: Jaroslaw Kaczyński has argued that Chancellor Merkel seeks to “reinstate Germany’s imperial power” and to subdue Poland with the help of a “strategic axis with Moscow”.

While Germany may be the only globalized economy of Europe, it needs a strong and functioning EU – which is the purpose of the Lisbon treaty, but the exploitation of the treaty’s

potential is, however, still limited. Most importantly, the Eurozone crisis has pushed Germany reluctantly to the centre stage to become Europe's "reluctant hegemon" (Bulmer/Paterson).

Until the refugee crisis, the EU developments was making the V4 countries increasingly relevant for Germany. The post-Lisbon decision making presupposes coalition building of like-minded countries. Also, the German leadership of the EU, which is increasingly split along the north-south divide, requires backing by the Northern group countries. The V4 countries by and large share the German liberal economic culture, based on balanced budget, low inflation and export oriented economy.

There was, however, limitation to the co-operation: the V4 countries have always been differentiated when it comes to the deepening of the EU and the Eurozone (Slovakia being the only member of the Eurozone). Also, they were never united in their approach to either Germany or the USA and Russia. Germany itself kept a relatively low profile in military and defence co-operation until the Russia-Ukraine crisis. Most dramatically, however, the differences between Germany and the V4 countries was presented during the refugee crisis: the V4 countries directly and openly opposed Germany.

So, we witness a situation, when, on the one hand, Germany and Visegrád countries are predisposed geographically, politically, economically and culturally to co-operate; after all, co-operative and trustful relations with smaller neighbours and other European countries have traditionally represented an important source of legitimacy of German political action and her influence within the EU.

On the other, however, there is a growing distance mainly between Poland, Hungary and Germany.

Also, it is has never been clear whether the bilateral relations need also a regional multilateral framework of Germany-Visegrád Group co-operation: the question why, how and with what purpose should such co-operation be pushed forward has always been unresolved and recently has practically died out. Germany itself (like the European Commission) has never preferred group building in the EU: groups could distort the level playing field needed for flexible building of issue related coalitions.

Summing up we can say that two factors have played a key role in the present German-V4 countries' relations.

First, the volatility of the politics in the V4 states: given the limits of the national consensus on European and foreign policy, the nature of the relations of individual V4 states with Germany tends to change with the changing of governing coalitions.

Second, Germany and the individual V4 countries often reacted differently to the developments in the European Union, external security challenges and the changing policies of both the USA and Russia. In European policy, Germany has thus often perceived the V4 countries since the EU accession as rather "awkward partners" who, however, have to be involved. Yet, the co-operation has been far from intensive. An in the refugee crisis: the V4 (operating suddenly as a group!) has found itself in direct confrontation with Germany for the first time.

The Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Zaorálek thus stressed the need "to rebuild trust and bring Germany and Visegrád closer together" and to "reject any tendencies to position Visegrád as a counter-balance to Germany or the core of EU integration".<sup>3</sup> Victor Orbán welcomed the "end of multilateralism" and announced "the era of bilateralism".<sup>4</sup> Jaroslaw Kaczynski's political leadership (the real leader of the PiS) has transformed Poland into an

opponent of Germany in the EU, as it seeks to counterbalance Germany and “efforts in Europe aimed at total hegemony”.<sup>5</sup> The PiS also agrees with Donald Trump that the EU works only in favour of Germany and the competences of the EU have to be scaled back and the role of the member states increased.<sup>6</sup> The Polish fight against the re-election of Donald Tusk as the President of the European Council was linked with complaints about “Berlin’s diktat”.<sup>7</sup> Warsaw was abandoned even by other V4 countries on this issue.

Perhaps the biggest challenge here has been the growing gap in cultural and value preferences: the ‘conservative revolutionaries’ in Poland and Hungary openly reject their countries’ Westernisation.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by Viktor Orbán’s admiration for authoritarianism, illiberal and centralised political systems, Jaroslaw Kaczynski aims to establish a “Budapest in Warsaw”.<sup>9</sup> Both countries appear closer to Russian cultural conservatism than to Germany.<sup>10</sup>

### **Attitude to Russia**

Attitude to Russia has been an important issue of differentiation in the German-V4 relations long before the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

German policy was based on the conviction that European security could not be guaranteed without Russia, and that Russia posed no external threat except for its implosion. Seeking Russian modernisation, Berlin effectively pursued a Russia-first policy. Even after the Georgian war in 2008, Russia was still perceived as a state eager to modernise and to participate in the existing post-Cold-War international system. Germany thus offered Russia a “modernisation partnership”.

In contrast, the attitude of the V4 countries to Russia often represented a patchwork of positions and policies, which reflected the historical diversity of the East-bloc countries. The Visegrád Group as a whole never produced a common Russian strategy; the priority has always been to preserve at least some level of unity and co-operation within the group itself. Mainly the Atlantists in the V4 countries differed from Germany as to their attitude to Russia: they viewed with suspicion and scepticism the German strategy of the inclusion of Russia into the European co-operative security arrangements. Except for the Atlantists, however, foreign policy and Russia played a limited role in the policy of the smaller V4 countries, the main interest being a pragmatic cooperation and economic advantage. Viktor Orbán has announced a “21st century partnership” with Russia after 2009 and declared a foreign policy doctrine of “Eastern Opening”.<sup>11</sup> He also signed the first Paks II contract (expansion of the only Hungarian nuclear power plant) in Moscow a few weeks before Moscow seized Crimea.

After the Crimea annexation by Russia and with the Russia-Ukraine crisis the official positioning of the V4 group was largely compatible with the attitude of Germany, and the V4 group felt a part of the development, given the prominent role of Poland in the Kiev negotiations in February 2014. However, after Poland was side-lined when the Normandy format took over, the activity of the V4 decreased. The group has turned into an observer rather than an actor and has been differentiated (also on the national level) on issues such as a direct military support for Ukraine. Moreover, for the three smaller V4 countries, the prominence of the Ukraine crisis has gradually subsided and has been replaced by the prominence of the refugee crisis in 2015-2016. However, mainly in the defence area (both within NATO and the EU), the V4 countries have followed distinct multilateralist lines: The V4 has become more of a group and new chances for co-operation and co-ordination with Germany have been gradually emerging. The Framework Nation Concept agreement between Germany and the Czech Republic indicates a new dynamic in military relations.

## Conclusion

Germany and V4 countries have achieved a very high level of “EU-normality” in terms of pragmatic, decentralised, horizontal and de-politicized co-operation in all sectors of social and economic life.

Political relations, however, have been differentiated and rather ambiguous. While the current critical situation in and around Europe works as a stimulus of co-operation on political and multilateral agendas (the Trump effect, the Brexit, the Russia-Ukraine conflict) the main challenge seems to come from within the individual V4 states.

Whatever the pressure of the external factors, as long as the V4 countries do not separate party politics and short term economic advantage from foreign policy more clearly and do not develop a more sustainable foreign policy line, not even a general acceptance of the growing German role can result in an effective closeness between Germany and the V4 – neither as individual countries, nor as a group.

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<sup>1</sup> Gawrich, Andrea – Stepanow, Maxim: German Foreign Policy toward the Visegrad countries. DGAP Analyse, Berlin, 2014, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Gehöe-Dechant, Silke: Der Deutsche Außenhandel im Jahre 2013. Statistisches Bundesamt, Wiesbaden, 2014. P.240

<sup>3</sup> Rede des Außenministers Zaorálek an der Humboldtuniversität, 15 June 2016, available from [http://www.mzv.cz/public/d8/fa/d8/1984500\\_1532102\\_Humboldt\\_Uni\\_Rede.docx](http://www.mzv.cz/public/d8/fa/d8/1984500_1532102_Humboldt_Uni_Rede.docx) (accessed 3 December 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister’s Orbán Speech at the Lámfalussy Conference, 23 January 2017, available from <http://www.kormany.hu/en/the-prime-minister/the-prime-minister-s-speeches/prime-minister-viktor-orban-s-speech-at-the-lamfalussy-conference> (accessed 10 February 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Piotr Buras, Pariah No More, ECFR Commentary, 9 February 2017, available from [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_pariah\\_no\\_more\\_poland\\_weighs\\_its\\_options](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_pariah_no_more_poland_weighs_its_options) (accessed 10 February 2017).

<sup>6</sup> ‚Eine Atom-Supermacht EU würde ich begrüßen‘. Jaroslaw Kaczynski’s interview in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 February 2017, available from <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/ausland/polen-kaczynski-macht-werbung-fuer-angela-merkel-14859897.html> (accessed 12 February 2017).

‘German Lawmaker Says Europe Must Consider Own Nuclear Deterrence Plan’, *Reuters*, 16 November 2016, available from <http://www.reuters.com/article/ukgermanyusanuclearidUSKBN13B1GO> (accessed 12 December 2016).

<sup>7</sup> ‘Poland Says EU Is Under Berlin Diktat After Election of Tusk’, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2017, available from <https://guardian.ng/news/poland-says-eu-under-berlins-diktat-after-tusk-re-election/>

<sup>8</sup> Piotr Buras, ‘Pariah No More’, *ECFR Commentary*, 9 February 2017, available from [http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary\\_pariah\\_no\\_more\\_poland\\_weighs\\_its\\_options](http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_pariah_no_more_poland_weighs_its_options) (accessed 10 February 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Jacek Kucharczyk and Alexander Fuksiewicz, ‘The Long Shadow of Kremlin. Polish Domestic Relations to the Russian/Ukrainian Conflict’, in J. [Kucharczyk](#) and [G. Mesežnikov](#) (eds.), *Diverging Voices, Converging Policies: The Visegrad States’ Reactions to the Russia-Ukraine Conflict*, (Praha, Warszawa: Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2015), p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> Matheus Gniazdowski ‘Visegrad Group and Germany: Partnership of Convenience’, *Aspen Review Central Europe*, 4/2016, available from

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<http://www.aspeninstitutece.org/en/article/4-2016-visedgrad-group-and-germany-a-partnership-of-convenience/> (accessed 12.12.2016).

<sup>11</sup> A. Rác 'Multi-vectorialism Failing? The Russian Policy of the Orbán Government', *Russkij Vopros*, No. 2015/1, p. 1.