

## Macron's New Europe: How do the Visegrad Countries fit in?

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The prospect of cooperation between the Visegrad Four countries and France is a new key framework for debating the future of European integration. The election of Emmanuel Macron in May, 2017 was a powerful symbol of Paris's renewed belief that the V4 countries are key stakeholders in the future shape of Europe. It didn't all start on the right foot. For example, when the then-candidate Macron, in between the two rounds of the presidential election, awkwardly linked rule of law abuses in Poland with his desire to not let other French factories move their production lines to Poland, and in the same breath vowed to initiate infringement procedures against Warsaw within three months of his election. This harsh rhetoric, added to the admonition that CEE countries should "not treat the EU like a supermarket" (in an interview given at the moment of his first Council appearance in June 2017), was in his mind, the domestic translation of his notion of "a Europe that protects", which was one of his key campaign messages.

The relationship between the EU and France has never been a simple one, and the last two Presidents did not help to change this dynamic. Animated, much like Macron, with the desire to use the EU as a multiplier of French influence but also to restore French influence in relation with Germany, Sarkozy and Hollande soured on the EU and were not able to positively use the EU as a tool of French power. Instead, both dealt with unpleasant conversations about the EU's nefarious influence on the price of agricultural products or the fishing industry, uncontrolled migratory waves and the gradual dismantling of France's manufacturing industry – often moving to Eastern countries such as the V4. One case was the relocation of a Whirlpool factory where Macron had stood in front of when he took a tough stance against Poland last spring. This is the context in which Macron's "Europe that protects" came into play, and it was aimed at not turning the tables on Germany, like his predecessors has failed to do, but to set the new European table, even if the distant idea of "Central and Eastern Europe" had to serve as a rhetorical scarecrow during the presidential campaign.

Since then, it is clear that Macron sees V4 countries, with the newfound power they have acquired at least in nominal PR terms – even if negative, as essential cogs of building up his Europe. But unlike his predecessors, he seems to have understood the value and power of bilateral relationships and even if he respects the V4 format, he knows that the internal trends of the V4 may well spur the development of multi-speed Europe. In this framework, the Czech Republic is certainly seen as an essential and symbolic cog in attracting the remainder of the region. The Czech Republic a non-Eurozone member that is a prosperous but highly Eurosceptic nation whose prosperity depends in great part on its EU membership and the four freedoms. For Macron, attracting Prague will be crucial to the first circle and letting its leaders also set the terms of what is in the circle, in close partnership with Slovakia, is a key part of his agenda for including the V4 in the future of Europe.

There are certain elements of a "Europe that protects" agenda around which France and the V4 countries can find common ground, although we have to list a number of issues where we rather share common concerns than common positions

## Security

First and foremost, the Permanent Structured Cooperation on defense issues and the more ambitious role given for the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy can, on paper, serve multiple purposes: the more efficient management of crises in the EU's neighborhood and by extension, the prevention of another summer 2015 and increased security in Europe, or the modernization of the national armies of V4 countries and increased cooperative management of the armies.

However, the V4 links the defence cooperation to the protection of external borders and migration. External migrants and asylum-seekers are not arriving on the same route to the two regions. While the V4 has not seen a larger influx of migrants and asylum-seekers since the Turkish-EU deal, France, on the other hand, is more exposed in the Mediterranean, though not as exposed as Italy. Hence both groups are enjoying the advantages of the Dublin III regulation, however, it is just a question of time before they will have to compromise on a new way of handling asylum requests. Italy is an especially important partner for France if it wishes to avoid similar border control situations that it had to experience during the 2015 crisis.

The French society, with a few million voters with immigration background, must face the challenge of integration from a very different angle than the V4 countries with insignificant Muslim minorities. Given that francophone countries were hit the hardest by jihadist terrorist recruitment, the proportional number of possibly returned and returning foreign fighters is large. Hence the willingness of Paris to enhance cooperation on a European level on anti-terrorist measures potentially allowing for further cooperation possibilities in that field.

## Social and economic issues

Down the line, however, it will be clear that France will need to build a compromise on the elements of social Europe – the standardization of unemployment or health benefits across the continent, for example – and also on competitiveness issues, such as corporate taxation. One of the first symbolic steps of the new French president was to launch his campaign on the posted workers' directive. This led him to visit Central European capitals, except Budapest and Warsaw. This painful first experience between Macron and the Visegrad 4 was interpreted as an attempt by Paris to divide the four countries.

On the other hand, a compromise was finally reached and the item disappeared from the agenda. The question is how much this has harmed relations between the parties? This might be soon visible as negotiations on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework (MFF) are underway.

These will show the unease between the net beneficiary block of V4 and the net contributor countries like France. After the Brexit and the nominal decrease of the EU budget by the British contribution, the V4 has to seriously consider how they will argue for the maintenance of cohesion fund levels. To put in other words, actually, both Paris and the V4 are competing for German resources and for German diplomatic attention. This might depend on the new German coalition whether and how to manage this conflictual relationship.

Politically, it will be easy for Macron to find allies for raising political conditions in exchange for cohesion funds. It might mean compromises at the MFF itself, or it might be translated into formal legal measures that might suspend cohesion fund financing at some later stage between 2020-27 on formal conditions of rule of law. This latter is the hot potato between V4 and France, as it was already mentioned by the French president on his campaign trail previously.

## Multi-Speed Europe

Similar to France's adoption of the Euro to channel Germany's rise to power, Macron is using his momentum and European vision to create the new rules that will govern Europe. CEE countries are one of the key variables of the reforms he intends to put in place. The French President intends to finally build up the notion of European sovereignty and to assign it the same level as national sovereignty, and he does not intend to leave the V4 on the side of the road. However, it is clearer that concrete visions and proposals from V4 states for the future of Europe need to be heard, rather than lame declarations such as Czech PM-in-waiting Andrej Babis stating to the international press that he "is the only one who can save the Czech Republic from CZEXIT". Macron intends to give V4 countries a voice; the question is whether they will seize this opportunity which was rarely given to them in the post-accession phase, and especially at the time when Germany has finally emerged from coalition negotiations and is ready to weigh in on European integration discussions.

On the other hand, Macron made it clear in several instances that France could accept a multi-speed Europe. This declaration in the ears of V4 means that a periphery of the EU could be officially created, with less resource and less power at the negotiation table. The proposal by Paris to increase the Franco-German integration in domains like competition law is not necessarily interpreted as benevolent actions in the V4. The basic V4 interest, as already articulated by few PMs of the V4, is to have a single Europe, as Berlin repeatedly stated, and provide incentives for non-Eurozone members to enter the zone; to continue with the cohesion fund.

The Visegrad Four and the incumbent French administration have common concerns but not many common positions. This divide in attitudes and policies derive from simple geopolitical facts, mainly the East-West gap and are influenced by the interpretation of the nature of the relationship to Germany. However, it is a shared interest both for France and the V4 to balance the German dominance in agenda-setting and coalition building. If the V4 and France smartly manage its relations, the European agenda could be reformulated not only through a German- Eastern European a German-French Alliance or a Mediterranean – NB8 discussion, but could create a further option along common interests between Central Europe and France.

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