



The Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy

Visegrad: the winter is here, but will the spring ever come?

by Dániel Bartha

1

According to a Central European folk tradition, if the bear coming out of its cave sees its own shadow, the winter will be long. We are currently coping with a bear capable to cast a huge shadow, and that can be especially harmful if we are superstitious. Our bear doesn't really like most of us, but he hates specially one thing: if we cooperate. Therefore Russia has never seen V4 as a partner but rather as a challenge. Its continuous effort to divide us was both vital for better energy deals and for reaching its geopolitical goals. Goals, that can be at best described as a zero sum game.

The obvious response during any crises would be to deepen coordination and cooperation, rather than pointing fingers and declare ourselves dead. Still, following Central European traditions again, we have chosen the second.

The responsibility of Budapest in creating tensions cannot be questioned. Even those with some benevolence towards the Orban government have to admit that the timing of Orban's speech on illiberal democracies repeated at the visit of Chancellor Merkel in February, the demand for autonomy for Hungarians living in Zakarpattia Oblast, the loud criticism on sanctions, and the economic deals with Russia lacking any transparency were disastrous. The worsening US-Hungarian relations and the banning of Hungarian arm producing companies to export products to Ukraine only spilled oil to that fire.

Any criticism on the Hungarian position and calling for more solidarity with V4 allies, Ukraine, EU and NATO members could be a valid point. Orban understands that he has navigated the country into a quarantine (or rather a trap), and right now he tries to find the way out. The best example on how desperate Hungary is, was the strategic mistake to visit Warsaw basically without an invitation right after the visit of President Putin. The two days between the two events were just enough for the Polish experts and politicians to analyze the statements of Budapest on the Turkish Stream, European unity or the awkward silence of the Prime Minister to President Putin's statements regarding Debaltsevo. Orban ran to Warsaw just to get what he could have expected from an angry Pole: a slap on the face. Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz gave a cold reception, while his old ally Jarosław Kaczyński excluded the possibility of a personal meeting.

Poland's steps in the previous months already questioned their capability and willingness to lead the Visegrad cooperation any longer. Most of the Polish expert called for loosening the V4 cooperation and the government was a partner in this resentment, instead of leading or supporting any V4 initiative. The spillover effect to other policies was almost immediate, even though Polish diplomacy previously shared the position that the role of V4 is to promote common interests rather than solving active disagreements or bilateral disputes. These steps strengthened some previous interpretations that the V4 works as long as the other three countries support the Polish position. My bad news to Warsaw: their approach best served Moscow's interest. By now the situation seems much worse: Warsaw already gave up the hope that foreign policy directions of Hungary are reversible, and even giving up V4 is not a high price to contain the 'Putin-agent' Hungarians and not



The Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy

2

let them to turn Central Europe to their foreign-policy playground. At least not with Warsaw's assistance.

Slovakia's intention was very clear from the beginning. Not to hurt the Russians too much, and to clearly state that Hungarians are worse than them, when it comes to bilateral relations with Russia, democratic principles or supporting Ukraine. They have clearly managed to create a better international image, but they have forgotten to run their Visegrad Presidency meanwhile. The limitation of V4+ initiatives following the Hungarian Presidency had its own logical, but wrong message in the current crisis. The Slovak Presidency both failed to organize substantial international meetings involving V4 decision-makers or run any successful new initiative. The traditionally very active foreign minister Miroslav Lajčák, seemed to be hiding and being much less active during his own presidency. The upcoming V4- Eastern Partnership summit can still improve the picture, but can't change the overall results. Bad news to my friends in Bratislava: at the end of the day Slovakia will both lose Warsaw's interest and the V4 cooperation.

The Czechs with the exception of their President remained highly inactive in the recent months. Beyond sinking the only prospective defense procurement initiative of the V4, they remained silent in most of the issues. This could be explained by their fragile interior politics and their new foreign policy directions as well. Following a short time of limboing, they have supported silently Poland in a harsher Russia policy. Obviously their upcoming V4 Presidency could have also played a role in their inactivity. If Slovakia is not successful the bar would be extremely low for them. Although, we can't see all the elements of their upcoming Presidency, but deepening cooperation with Slovenia and Austria on neutral issues might be the wrong track right now to regain the relevance of the V4. (if that is not too late already). Definitely it won't help at all to rebuild trust or increase the support of Poland to V4 initiatives.

Budapest, being desperate and isolated is looking for quick solutions to restore any kind of Central European cooperation. If Poland is further increasing its distance from Hungary and the V4, Budapest will try to strengthen relations with Austria and Slovenia as well. This would possibly lead to a dead end as it did before. An even worse scenario would be revitalizing the Danube Strategy which could potentially never fill the gap of the V4 cooperation.

The Czech and Slovak interest, whether they like it or not, is to create a strong Visegrad agenda. This could possibly focus to the support of transformation in Ukraine. It is an extremely tough and expensive challenge, but possibly the only way to reenergize cooperation. All V4 countries will have to spend further euro millions, to prove their capability.

The winter should be soon over, but Visegrad is totally frozen. Our chance to show Russians that there is still life in and coordination among V4 is fading away. Following Orban's visit in Warsaw Visegrad seems rather hopeless....

Mr. Dániel Bartha is the Executive Director of the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy (CEID).

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the publisher. © CEID, 2015