

V4 in The European Structures

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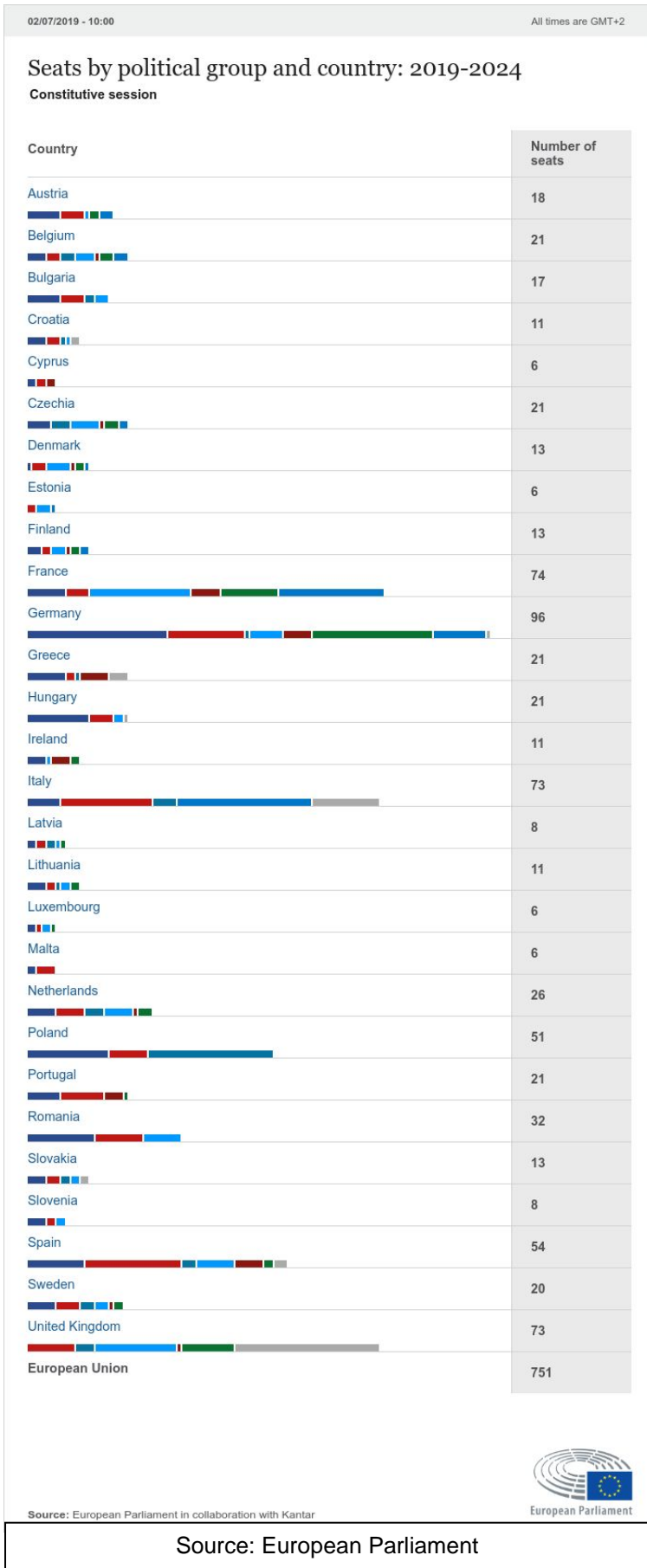
Abstract: *The countries of Central Europe are neither from an economic, nor from a military point of view belong to the strong actors of the European Union. However, within the framework of the Visegrad Cooperation, they have been consulting for more than three decades and in some key fields are even shaping their policy with respect to the interest of the others. The European Union, as a uniform actor has been looking for its own place in world politics for many years. Its structures, however, are deeply complicated and the decision making is over-bureaucratized where the key players as individuals are often at odds with the national interests of their country of origin. This present study aims to assess what weight the Visegrad Group has within the framework of the current bodies of the European Union and what role may it play in the future, when the absence of the United Kingdom will be ultimately reflected in the structures of the whole European institutional system.*

Keywords: *V4, Visegrad Group, Visegrad cooperation, European Union, European Parliament, European Council, European Commission*

Even though the Visegrad Group is primarily an interest-based endeavour, in the recent years in some cases it has been acting on value basis. However, the manifestation of this unity is not strong enough on the level of the European Union. Hungary and Poland have been aiming to shape the future of this community but the breakthrough support from their Visegrad partners is lacking. Criticism towards their policy can be heard not only from outside the V4 but from inside as well.

Visegrad Group in The European Parliament

The most spectacular, directly elected body of the European Union (EU) is the European Parliament (EP) which, contrary to its name, is only a co-legislator of this supranational community. One month after May 2004, when the members of the Visegrad Group (VG) – Czechia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia – entered the Union nationwide elections were held to determine the members of the newly assembling EP for the next five-year-long election cycle. At that time the total number of parliamentary seats was 732 of which the parties of the Visegrad Group possessed 116 (Czechia and Hungary 24-24, Poland 54, and Slovakia 14).¹ During that five-year-long period (2004-2009) after the accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007, the number of EP seats rose to 785.² Due to the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon, however, the final count of MEP's declined, which was 751 until Brexit³, of which Czechia and Hungary delegated 21-21 members,



Poland 51 and Slovakia 13. So, while the Visegrad Group at the time of the accession owned 15,85 per cent of the total EP seats, after the ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon this ratio declined to 14,11 per cent. Interesting to note that in parallel with the mentioned process the relative weight of Slovakia minimally, but has upscaled. Since the United Kingdom after the half-decade-long Brexit procedure left the community, the majority of her 73 seats remained empty; only 27 of those were redistributed among the current member states. In this process Poland and Slovakia received an additional seat.⁴ Today the VG possesses 108 out of the 705 mandates, which corresponds to 15,32 percent of the total. This means that after the farewell of the UK the VG minimally strengthened but does not reach the weight it had at the time of the accession.

It is not clear today how the UK's unilateral step will influence the future of this highly symbolical, but on the other hand more and more influential body. The Treaty of Lisbon explicitly directs that the members of the European Parliament "shall not exceed seven hundred and fifty in number, plus the President"⁵. It is both possible that the total number of elected MEPs will not change soon, but it could very well be that the currently empty seats will be divided proportionately among the member countries.

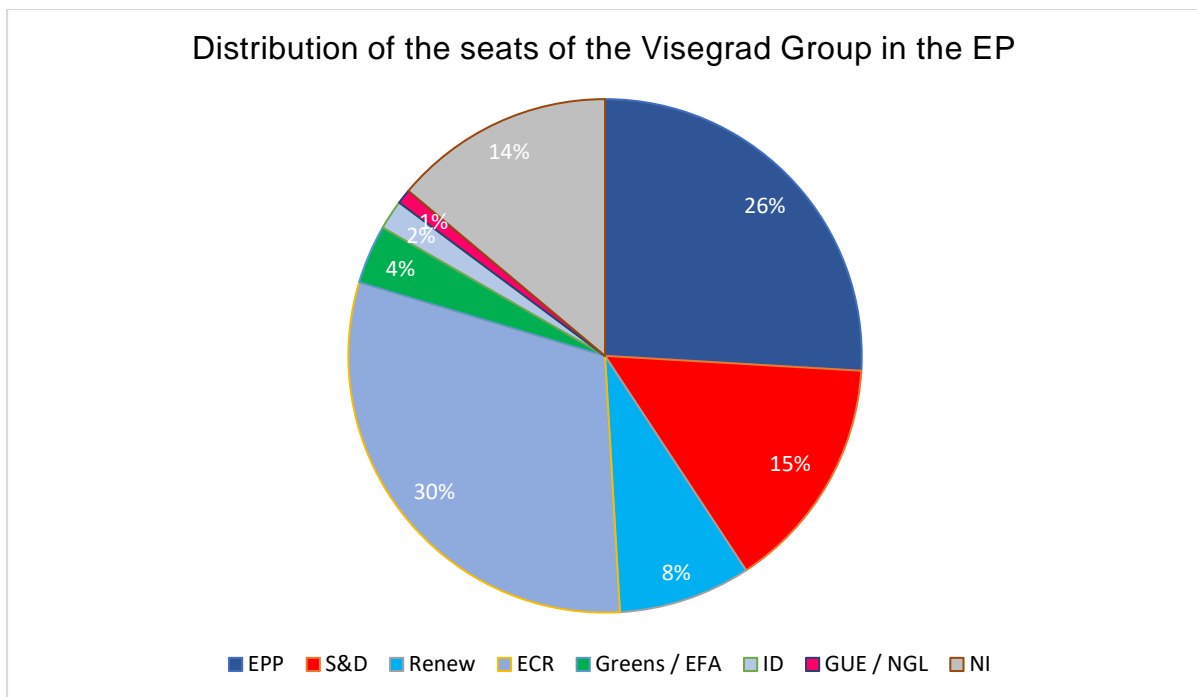
Since in the European Parliament the parties join into fractions according to their political affiliation and not by their national origin, the Visegrad Group's 108 seats cannot be understood as a power presentation, especially when it comes to real political advocacy.

The majority of the currently seating 52 MEPs of Poland are divided among the three biggest European political groups, the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR – headcount: 27), the Group of the European People's Party (EPP – hc.: 17) and the Group of Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament (S&D – hc.: 7). There is also one Polish MEP sitting in the Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance.

Hungary's case is more special since the 12 MEPs of the governing party Fidesz have just left the EPP fraction and are currently working on the establishment of a new conservative European political group. Five Hungarian seats are dedicated to the S&D, two to the Renew fraction and there is only one MEP who has not yet been a member of any groups.

In case of Slovakia, fragmentation can also be observed since five seats out of the 14 are dedicated to the EPP, 3 to the S&D, 2-2 to the Renew and the ECR. There are 2 non-attached members as well.

In Czechia the ratio of left to right is almost completely balanced on European ground. The Czechs currently fill 5 seats in the Renew Europe and 1 in the S&D, 5 in the EPP, 4 in the ECR, 3 in the Group of the European Greens/European Free Alliance, 2 in the Identity and Democracy and one in the Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left.⁶



Source: Own editing

The pie chart above clearly shows that the majority of the MEPs from the Visegrad Group belong to the European Conservatives and Reformists Group. They are followed by the EPP, the Socialists and the Independents. This line-up, however, is brand new. The reason for the EPP losing its majority (and for the above average representation of the independents) within the V4 is due to the farewell of the Hungarian ruling party Fidesz, which step can be considered as the final act of a lingering and wearisome struggle between the former partners. Since the split, the remaining members of the EPP have been talking about the victory of the rule of law, while Viktor Orbán is already engaging in negotiations with the former deputy prime minister of Italy Matteo Salvini and the Polish prime minister Mateusz Morawiecki about the possibility of establishing a brand new European political entity for those members

of the European Parliament who have become disappointed in the once conservative elite, which has been constantly shifting from the political right towards the left for ages. At their joint press conference in Budapest, the conservative trio has already declared the international need of a new European political renaissance.⁷

The European Commission and the V4

The European Commission (EC) is the politically independent executive body of the European Union, whose pan-European weight has been constantly increasing. Its main roles are to protect the interests of the union and to table laws for adoption.⁸ According to the one commissioner per member state principle, there are currently 27 commissioners led by the president, a post currently held by Ursula von der Leyen. It is important to note that commissioners in the course of their work are not allowed to consider the national or any other interests of their country of origin. They must work solely for the Union, and no one else.

Since the EU accession of the countries of the V4 in 2004, the currently running EC cycle has been the fifth one. For the new members, the first period lasted only for a few months since it only took from May 2004 till the end of November of the same year. This stretch represented the end of the prestigious era led by Romano Prodi. His successor, José Manuel Barroso had the privilege to lead the EC through two, five-year-long cycles. After him Jean-Claude Juncker stepped into the European limelight, however, only for one term. Since we are in the first half of the von der Leyen Commission it is hard to tell whether she will be able to win a next cycle in office. Thanks to the Brexit the chances of retaining the German leadership has significantly upscaled. In the Prodi Commission, the commissioners of the V4 countries served only for a few months. Even though the short term in office did not provide a real opportunity

Country	Commissioner
CZ	Pavel Telička
HUN	Péter Balázs
POL	Danuta Hübner
SVK	Ján Figel'

Chart 1: May - Nov 2004⁹

to achieve meaningful results, in the paradigm of the V4 only the representatives of Poland and Slovakia received domestic support to continue the work they had begun in Brussels. The first full-length term of the newcomers was completed under the presidency of José Manuel Barroso.

From the Chart 2 below it can be seen that the Central European countries have been entrusted with responsible and demanding positions among which hard and soft issues were both present. Personal changes, however, also took place during this cycle, and interestingly in both cases those commissioners left office before the end of their mandate who had started fulfilling their mission immediately after the accession in the Prodi Commission. None of them, however, stepped down as a result of failure as their careers continued to rise after leaving commissioner post.

Country	Commissioner	Commission	Term
CZ	Vladimír Špidla	Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities	full
HUN	László Kovács	Taxation and Customs Union	full
POL	Danuta Hübner	Regional Policy	until 4 July 2009
	Paweł Samecki		from 4 July 2009
SVK	Ján Figel'	Education, Training and Culture	until 1 October 2009
	Maroš Šefčovič		from 1 October 2009

Chart 2: EC 2004 – 2009¹⁰

In case of Danuta Hübner, the reason for her leaving was to become a Member of the European Parliament for Poland in the 2009 elections. Ján Figel', however, triumphed in the presidential election of his domestic party, the Christian Democratic Movement and returned to his homeland, Slovakia.

In the next cycle (2009-2014) the Slovakian Maroš Šefčovič became one of the vice-presidents of the European Commission. From the perspective of both the Slovak Republic and the Visegrad Group, this was a historical moment since no one had been appointed to this high office before him. The only personal change during this cycle within the studied countries happened in Poland, where Janusz Lewandowski got elected to the EP and was replaced by Dominik Jacek in the EC.

Country	Commissioner	Commission	Term
CZ	Štefan Füle	Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy	full
HUN	László Andor	Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion	full
POL	Janusz Lewandowski	Financial Programming and Budget	until 30 July 2014
	Dominik Jacek		from 30 July 2014
SVK	Maroš Šefčovič (VP)	Inter-Institutional Relations and Administration	full

Chart 3: EC 2009 – 2014¹¹

In 2014 the President of the Commission became Jean-Claude Juncker and the College of Commissioners was composed of 28 members. In this era the history repeated itself since the only representative delegated from a V4 country who managed to keep his mandate in the EC was Maroš Šefčovič again. He remained a VP too. From the perspective of Hungary, the year 2014 was also symbolic since the first time in history the political right proposed the country's next commissioner.

Country	Commissioner	Commission	Term
CZ	Věra Jourová	Justice, Consumers and Gender Equality	full
HUN	Tibor Navracsics	Education, Culture, Youth and Sport	full
POL	Elżbieta Bieńkowska	Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship, and SMEs	full
SVK	Maroš Šefčovič (VP)	Energy Union	full

Chart 4: EC 2014-2019¹²

Also, 2014 was the year when the Czech Věra Jourová entered the European Commission and from 2019 she has been serving as one of its Vice Presidents. From the Visegrad perspective, the latter fact is highly important but controversial too since on the one hand this nomination has been a clear sign of the continuous upscaling of the CEE region which now gives two EC VPs, however on the other hand Jourová has been the most determined opponent of the Hungarian and Polish governments on a European level and she is continuously interfering in their domestic political agendas.

In an interview the Czech politician even called Viktor Orbán's state building a sick democracy, in response to which the Hungarian prime minister publicly called her to resign.¹³ Jourová did not comply with this call.

Country	Commissioner	Commission	Term
CZ	Věra Jourová (VP)	Values and Transparency	
HUN	Olivér Várhelyi	Neighbourhood and Enlargement	
POL	Janusz Wojciechowski	Agriculture	
SVK	Maroš Šefčovič (VP)	Interinstitutional Relations and Foresight	

Chart 5: 2019-2024¹⁴

Orbán's grave relationship with Jourová, however does seemingly not affect neither the Czech-Hungarian bilateral nor the inner-Visegrad relations. This is true even though the commissioner is the member of the Czech governing party ANO, which is led by the prime minister of Czechia, one of Orbán's biggest ally, Andrej Babiš. He, in the manner of a good diplomat, wishes to conform to both sides. So not only does he praise Jourová's European performance but also strives to maintain good relations with his Visegrad partners. In an interview with the German opinion-maker Die Welt Babiš stated that *"Poland and Hungary are sovereign countries with democratic elections, the internet is not censored, and people are not stupid. If they are not happy with their government, they will replace it."*¹⁵

The European Council

The European Council (EUC) is the body that defines the European Union's priorities and political directions. During its meetings it adopts conclusions or agendas but does not pass laws. The members of the EUC are the president of the European Council, the President of the European Commission and the heads of states or governments of the member countries. When security issues are discussed, the high representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is also present. Decisions are mostly made by consensus, however, in some cases unanimity or qualified majority is sufficient.¹⁶ Since the adoption of the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009, the current president, Charles Michel is the third who fills the position. His predecessor was the Polish Donald Tusk, who served in office between 2014-2019 and Herman Van Rompuy between 2009-2014. Giving a president to the EUC was both a privilege to Poland and the

Visegrad Group. However, in Tusk's example it can clearly be seen that national and European matters and interests are separated and on European level the political affiliation usually surpasses the national one.

From the Visegrad perspective, the European Council is the main field of self-advocacy. Since most of the arrangements are made by consensus, practically every country has the chance to block the decision-making procedure. The last time this possibility came into the limelight concerning the EU's seven-year budget and the coronavirus recovery plan, since Hungary and Poland complained and opposed the European Commission's idea to link the community payments to a difficult-to-define, unprecedented rule of law mechanism.¹⁷ As a result a compromise was made. The budget and the recovery plan got a green light, and the mechanism is currently paused. It is the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) to decide about the equality and its conformity with the European legislation. These steps upscaled the international weight of both the Hungarian and Polish prime ministers, on the other hand new fronts have been opened that may be detrimental to countries wishing to follow their own path on European level. Also, the struggle between regionalism and federalism in Europe is becoming more and more explicit.

Conclusion

The European Union is a supranational actor that has been looking for its own place and structure for ages. There are strong voices claiming that its only possible future is the creation of a supranational super state; however, others believe that the further deepening of the cohesion of the Union will finally result in the community's disintegration. The reality of Brexit shows that this option is highly possible since the will of the political elite does not often meet the desires of the masses. From the perspective of the Visegrad Group it can be said that the only possibility for its members to actively form the future of the continent is the cooperation and cohesion. If these countries will not be able to act unitedly on international ground, the big players will always find way to divide them. In the last decade both Poland and Hungary have been forming the European policy actively, however this duo is not strong enough without the active support of Czechia and Slovakia. It is also a warning sign that the loudest criticism of Hungary and Poland can often be heard from inside the VG.

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