

# THE VISEGRAD COUNTRIES FACE THE CHALLENGES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## **Abstract**

The article highlights the measures taken by the Visegrad countries during the pandemics. To overcome the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, the Visegrad countries decided to adopt both individual and joint action plans and work closely with them to address the problems. EU financial assistance packages, as well as negotiations on a multiannual financial framework (MFF), came to the forefront of Visegrad members' European policies during the pandemic. As for the domestic political situation in the Visegrad countries, significant changes were less noticeable after the first wave, and the ratings of the ruling parties were almost maintained. Differences of opinion in the Visegrad group on fundamental issues were also evident during the second wave of the pandemic.

**Key words:** Visegrad Countries, pandemic, action plan, financial assistance, political situation.

## **1. Introduction**

Since the establishment of the Visegrad Group (1991), member states have been acting in a coordinated manner and sharing their experiences on a number of issues. Their joint activities are based on an agreement between Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia to develop common strategies to address problematic issues. In the 1990s, the common goal of all Visegrad members was to overcome the legacy associated with totalitarianism and to build a new order ranging from democracy to a modern market economy and human rights. They tried to share the „old European“ experience, as well as to develop reforms acceptable to the „new European“ society. With the establishment of the Visegrad International Foundation, the activities of the Union became highly productive and authoritative at the regional level. However, in terms of institutional development, the Visegrad Group could not reach the scale of the EU at that stage and had no claim to such a level of development. The main goal of the Visegrad countries was to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic space, for which each country worked towards political, economic and social transformation.

## **2. Presentation of the main research material**

To overcome the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, the Visegrad countries decided to adopt both individual and joint action plans and work closely with them to address the problems. Like all other European countries, the Covid-19 pandemic has spread to the Visegrad countries. Unlike parts of southern and western Europe, it became possible to prevent the virus from exploding in the first place. Following a series of measures and based on the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, Poland,

the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary are positioning themselves on the problem in the spring-summer. Although crisis management does not divide them strategically, there are some differences with regard to Brussels financial packages. It should also be noted that, with the exception of a few cases, it is still important for the organization to involve the four countries in European politics and, moreover, to seek an agreed solution to ensure broad economic relations.

EU financial assistance packages, as well as negotiations on a multiannual financial framework (MFF), came to the forefront of Visegrad members' European policies during the pandemic. The discussion around this topic revealed differences of interest from the outset. Poland and Slovakia (with small reservations) support the Franco-German proposal and the EU Commission's initiative for a € 750 billion reconstruction fund. By fall 2020 estimates, these were considered potential beneficiaries of the two Eastern European State Funds. This instrument of the „next generation“ of the European Union has been strongly criticized by the Czech Republic and Hungary. The reason given was not just that they would meet for a relatively small amount of money (Slovakia could receive almost as much grant and guarantee as Hungary, which is twice as big as it is) or, in the case of the Czech Republic, an estimated contribution. Moreover, Prague and Budapest, among other issues, negatively assessed the criteria for allocating funds. Slovak Economy Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Richard Sulik pointed out that „the increase in EU finances is pointless in terms of regulatory policy“ (1.1), but supported the Reconstruction Fund in the interests of his own country. Although the leading political forces in the Visegrad countries openly expressed their dissatisfaction, this did not cause any disagreement between them. In early June 2020, at the Visegrad Summit in Lednitsa and a month later in Warsaw, a consensus was reached that all four countries would abide by the „Fair“ agreement on the Reconstruction Fund (1.2). But the main message was that – the rich countries of the South should not be funded at the expense of the less affluent countries of the eastern part of the EU. Visegrad members also expressed interest in achieving greater flexibility in emerging financial flows (an additional 8-9 percent of gross national income through grants from Poland and Slovakia and „next generation“ grants). So, if Visegrad does not shy away from EU financial matters, it is only because, in the negotiations with the MFF (Multiannual Financial Framework) and the Reconstruction Fund, topics of common interest related to the internal market are taken into account. In general, it should be noted that such an attitude, or preference for common interests, was characteristic of the Visegrad group in the 90s, with the exception of Slovakia (Vladimir Meciar's government), which at one point cut off the course of the Visegrad members.

As we have mentioned, after the announcement of the epidemic, a „containment action plan“ was quickly implemented in the Visegrad countries, the borders were closed and the so-called Lockdown. In parallel, financial stabilization packages were developed. Even after achieving relative stability, if we do not take into account the exceptional cases, the members of Visegrad moved to a new management of the crisis. Based on the comprehensive assessment of the economy and foreign policy, some positive forecasts were identified. Also, as discussed above, issues were agreed with other EU members on plans for the next phase.

As for the domestic political situation in the Visegrad countries, significant changes were less noticeable after the first wave, and the ratings of the ruling parties were almost maintained. This was due to the fact that the members of the group had more or less success on the epidemiological front. If we look at the world statistics in this direction, in general in the political landscapes and countries where elections were scheduled, the ratings of the ruling parties were mostly maintained or improved. This was due not so much to the high level of management of Covid as to the new psycho-social factors emerging in the societies. In most cases, the citizens promptly received state aid and the promise of gradual improvement of the programs, which created a previously non-existent positive attitude towards the current authorities. Covid's relatively effective control has „alleviated the situation“ even for some politicians with unstable ratings in the Visegrad

countries. Political activism was revived from the first to the second wave, as evidenced by the possibility of holding elections among the members of Visegrad. In various news sources we will meet the assessments of the leaders that their rating was saved by the quality of Covid-19 management. Which is probably less to say about Polish politician Andrzej Duda, who did not complain about his authority even before Kovac and remained in the post of President of Poland as a result of the second round of elections (July, 2020).

Experts point out that the bonus earned by keeping the covidium could easily be lost if they did not take auxiliary measures during the subsequent wave or to alleviate the economic situation. In the Visegrad countries, especially during the pandemic, there was a high level of export orientation, which is a major component of the economy. Exports of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia account for three quarters, compared with 55% in Poland (2.1). Based on the analysis of this data, economic experts think that Poland will become the main beneficiary of the European Reconstruction Fund. According to the Vienna Institute for Economic Research (WIIW), the economic crisis will be more pronounced in southern Europe after the pandemic than in the Visegrad countries.

During the visit of the Prime Minister of Slovakia Igor Matovič to Prague in June 2020, the expansion of ties between the Czech Republic and Slovakia at various levels was highlighted. The Czech Prime Minister, Andrej Babiš, in his review of the „post-Covid economic situation“, noted that the criteria of the „Recovery Fund“ are tailored to countries that do not have the same responsibility for key issues – debt, budget discipline and unemployment as the Visegrad Four. He added that if the members of the Visegrad Group work together, it will not be difficult to deal with problems (3). It should also be noted that the leaders of the Czech Republic and Hungary, not only in this case, but also in general, are critical of EU policy. However, not only these two leaders, but also some of the political elites of the Visegrad countries are trying to score points in societies skeptical of the EU and constantly emphasize the „Brussels directive tone“.

The Visegrad countries have differing views on the EU’s reconstruction plan, creating little opposition within the group but no principled controversy. Fragmentary disagreement on these and other issues points to the main challenge of the Visegrad Group: They are similar in many ways, and at the same time, differences between them have emerged recently, but they almost always manage to reach a procedural consensus. Czech political scientist Jakub Eberl says: „Precisely because these four countries are very similar, informal contact between them works well. It is difficult to represent common interests at the political level only because after the elections the leaders change and with it the political orientations ...“ (4.1.).

Since the formation of the Visegrad Group, the main goal has been the implementation of transformation processes (more or less successfully) and integration into the Euro-Atlantic space. When the integration was completed, a critical attitude emerged among the Visegrad members, especially towards EU policy. From 2014-2015, differences of opinion were expressed on the issue of migration, monetary and financial policy, foreign policy and other topics. „Since 2010, Visegrad has clearly emerged as an accountable force and an active player in the EU,“ said Eberl. There is always someone from this group who does not agree with the policy of the organization (NATO, EU)“ (4.2.). It should be noted that criticism of migration policy and appropriate actions by some Visegrad members did not cease even in Covid (especially Hungary).

Differences of opinion in the Visegrad group on fundamental issues were also evident during the second wave of the pandemic. While Poland refused German aid, Hungary sharpened its criticism, the Czech Republic increased demand, and Slovakia took a moderate position. The second wave turned out to be quite difficult for the Visegrad countries, the members trying to carry out all the measures that the actor states apply – „lockdown“, organizing vaccinations, various forms of assistance to citizens, etc. Leading the way

in this regard is Hungary – in terms of liquidity elimination of companies affected by the crisis, convertible loans, expansion of the state aid program and the promptness of the purchase of vaccines.

### 3. Conclusion

To summarize, the pandemic is not over yet, there are different opinions on the third wave and its consequences. Accordingly, qualified scientific research and assessments will be done after the pandemic is completed, which we will also join with our scientific research.

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