

The Visegrad Group: a regional integration model for advancing the Europeanization process in Central and Eastern Europe

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Think Visegrad – V4 Think Tank Platform is a network for structured dialog on issues of strategic regional importance. The network analyses key issues for the Visegrad Group, and provides recommendations to the governments of V4 countries, the annual presidencies of the group, and the International Visegrad Fund.

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Introduction

In the last two decades, the concept of Europeanization has been widely used to describe different processes taking place within and beyond the European Union's borders. Its analytical value consists in explaining how a set of values, actors and institutions interact in order to deepen the EU's leverage over the national politics of the member states or the member states' influence on the EU's policy-making. In this respect, the Europeanization occurs when there is a clear interdependence link between the EU and member states, leading to policy-based results.

This paper aims at analysing to what extent the establishment and mechanisms of the Visegrad Group has advanced the Europeanization process of its four member countries. By looking into the evolution and the institutional setting of the Visegrad Group, this paper argues that one could identify two models of Europeanization occurring in the V4: 'top-down and 'bottom-up'. While the first model has been common for the pre-accession period to the EU, the second one can be used for explaining the interaction between the V4 governments and the EU institutions in certain policy cases, such as the dual quality of foodstuff. In this context, the paper discusses both perspectives over the Europeanization process and their role for explaining the behaviour of national governments within the Visegrad Group.

Europeanization: a multifaceted concept of today's EU studies

The Europeanization process has been one of the key mechanisms to advance the modernization and reformation of the Central and Eastern European states after 1989. Defined as a 'change in the logic of political behaviour'¹, which is aiming to produce 'shared beliefs and norms that are first defined and consolidated in the EU policy processes and then incorporated into the logic of domestic (national and subnational) discourse, political structures and public policies'², the Europeanization has shaped the

¹ C. M. Radaelli, 'Whither Europeanisation? Concept stretching and substantive change', *European Integration Online Papers*, nr. 8 (2000): 3.

² C.M. Radaelli, (2006) 'Europeanization: Solution or Problem?' in M. Cini and A.K. Bourne (eds) *Palgrave Advances in European Union Studies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, pp. 56-76.

discourse and the policy actions of the EU towards the candidate countries. The association and, later, the integration process of the Central and Eastern European states was largely influenced by the convergence and the harmonization of the national legislation and policy standards in accordance with the European ones. The 'political behaviour' of the national governments has been aligned in correspondence with the criteria which needed to be fulfilled for acquiring the membership status. In other terms, a 'top-down' Europeanization process has occurred, which has emphasized the crucial influence of the EU on domestic politics³.

The areas of impact of the Europeanization process have concerned both the national political actors and the actions developed by these actors. According to Borzel and Risse, we can differentiate between three dimensions of domestic impact of the Europeanization phenomenon: *policies*, *politics* and *polity*⁴. While the first refers to the policy-cycle within Brussels and the transposal of the EU legislation into the national one, the *politics* dimension is being characterized by the interest aggregation and political contestation based on societal preferences⁵. Given the strong interference between *policy* and *politics*, it is expected that the Brussels-based decisions will generate either support or criticism among the political parties in a member state. In this case, the *policy* area shapes the political discourse at the national level. Last, but not least, the *polity* represents the 'specific institutions'⁶ or 'system-wide'⁷ institutions that are making the object of Europeanization. Rather than being globally extended, this category looks into individual case studies for assessing the leverage of Europeanization.

All the previous mentioned three dimension reflect the 'top-down' Europeanization. However, this phenomenon relies on a 'bottom-up' hierarchy as well, in which the member states are pursuing and promoting policy arrangements with the aim to influence the EU agenda. While the 'top-down' Europeanization is more frequently observed at the level of supranational institutions, which pursuit mainly through the adoption of secondary legislation, the 'bottom-up' is a state-centric concept, relying on the member states' capacity to elaborate policy measures which will further be adopted by

³ L. Quaglia, M. Neuvonen, M. Miyakoshi, and M. Cini (2007) 'Europeanization' in M. Cini (ed.) *European Union Politics*, 2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.405-420.

⁴ Borzel

⁵ Idem.

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Idem.

Brussels and will be in line with their strategic interests. Therefore, these two perspectives can be visually represented through the following schemes⁸:

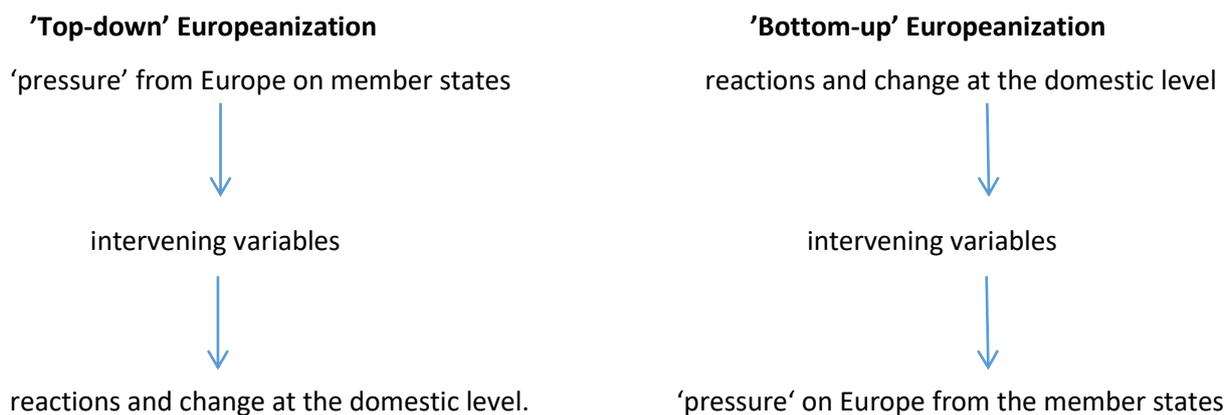


Fig. 1. Two perspectives over how Europeanization occurs.

The Visegrad Group: through the lens of a two-way Europeanization process

Historical development

The Visegrad Group has been founded in 1991 by three post-socialist countries from Central Europe: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Later on, after the dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1992, the V3 has transformed into V4, a joint initiative of cooperation which was supposed to empower the democratization and reformation of the member countries through the advancement of mutual projects and strategic partnership. Given the historical, cultural and civilizational links between the four states and the transition momentum of the post-1989 era, the creation of the V4 has been both influenced by the domestic factors, which were mainly reasoning from the political and socio-economic rehabilitation under the parliamentary democracy and the free market regime, and the external ones, with an explicit interest from both EU and NATO to extend their borders towards this region. Hence, the 'founding' Declaration has stated five guiding objectives, which were aiming to endorse the cooperation framework:

⁸ Based on Radaelli, *ibid.*, p. 4.

- 'full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom,
- elimination of all existing social, economic and spiritual aspects of the totalitarian system,
- construction of a parliamentary democracy, a modern State of Law, respect for human rights and freedoms,
- creation of a modern free market economy,
- full involvement in the European political and economic system, as well as the system of security and legislation'⁹.

While the aim of European integration has been stated the last one, the group itself has served as a structural instrument for accelerating the EU accession procedures. The signing of the Central European Free Trade Agreement in Krakow (1992) served as starting point for the enforcement of the economic cooperation between the V4 countries. The document has announced the introduction of the non-tariffs measures from 2001, leading to a free trade area within Central Europe¹⁰. However, the political collaboration has stagnated due to the change of the government in Slovakia and the election of Vladimir Mečiar as the prime-minister of Slovakia (1994 – 1998). Mečiar's pro-Russian foreign policy has been doubled by the internal contradictions over the leadership of V4 between Czech Republic and Poland. Even in these circumstances, all the V4 countries have signed the Association Agreements with the EU between 1991 – 1993, agreements which formally initiated the accession path towards EU. With the nomination of Dzurinda as the prime-minister of Slovakia in 1998, the V4 foreign policy contradictions have disappeared, opening the road to NATO and EU membership (2004).

Since the V4 discourse of the pre-accession period has been relying on integration in EU and NATO, once this goal was fulfilled the V4 countries were entering a new phase of cooperation. The post-2004 collaboration was built upon the text of the The Kroměříž Declaration (2004), which has announced the new goals for the V4 future: 'The Visegrad Group countries are strongly determined to jointly contributing to the fulfilment of the European Union's common goals and objectives and to the successful continuation of the European integration. They reiterate their commitment to the

⁹ Declaration of Cooperation between the Czech and the Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration, February 15, 1991, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412>.

¹⁰ M. Slufinska, A. Nitzke, Activities of the Visegrad Group in the Context of the CFSP of the EU, *Historia i Polityka*, nr. 22 (2007): 4.

enlargement process of the European Union. They are ready to assist countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and experience¹¹. This Declaration was seconded by the a set of guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad cooperation, in which the member countries have pointed out four categories of the common interest: co-operation within the V4 area, co-operation within the EU, co-operation with other partners and co-operation with NATO and other international organisations¹².

Mechanisms

Starting with the Kroměříž Declaration, the poor institutional structure of V4 has been empowered by the mechanisms of cooperation settled by this document. Given that the only institution formally active within V4 has been the International Visegrad Fund, established in 2000, the four member countries have agreed to set up new instruments for knowledge transfer and sharing of experience:

- 'Rotating one-year presidency, each chairmanship prepares its own presidency programme ensuring, among others, continuity of a long-term V4 co-operation,
- One official Prime Ministers summit a year at the end of each presidency,
- Occasional informal meetings of Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers before international events,
- Deputy foreign ministers meetings preceding the PM official summits,
- Meetings of other ministers in V4 and V4+ format,
- Intensified communication of V4 national co-ordinators and their key role in internal and inter-state co-ordination,
- Meetings of Presidents of V4 countries,
- Co-operation of Parliaments of V4 countries'¹³.

¹¹ Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union, 12 May 2004, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2004/declaration-of-prime>.

¹² Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation, 2004, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412>.

¹³ Ibid.

The creation of the rotating one-year presidency and the presidency programme has offered the necessary means for a better coordination of the key V4 priorities. While the programmes of the presidencies do not fundamentally differ in terms of substance, they provide the space for the V4 countries to promote their own initiatives. For example, the Think Visegrad and the establishment of the network of V4 think-tanks has been initiated under the Czech Presidency of V4 in 2011¹⁴. According to Strážay, the presidency has become an 'important coordination and policy-shaping instrument'¹⁵, which can have even a wider leverage in times of crisis. However, the informality characteristic, predominant within the Visegrad Group, leaves little space, if any, for institutionalized leadership over the decision-making process.

Another novelty brought by these mechanisms has been the extension of policy discourse towards the external dimension. Visegrad Four Plus or V4+ has officially become a strategic area of interest and enabled the development of bilateral and multilateral communication formats with the neighbourhood countries. The V4+ format covers countries, regions and organizations from all over the world, including Japan, Korea, the African Union, Egypt, Israel and United States. Beside politics, it also envisages the cooperation with the business environment and the trade partners from the third countries. Last, but not least, V4+ is serving as tool for support and sharing of know-how between the V4, Eastern Partnership and Western Balkans. Hence, a convergent foreign policy vision of the V4 countries endorsed the sustainability and performance of the V4+ dimension.

Policy

The level of policy-making is the most stringent reflection of the Europeanization process. As discussed in the first part of this paper, two perspectives over how the Europeanization occurs are prevailing: 'top-down' and 'bottom-up'. In the case of the Visegrad Four, the 'top-down' perspective has been dominant, while the 'bottom-up' construct has manifested on a limited scale.

¹⁴ More information on <https://think.visegradfund.org/>.

¹⁵ T. Strážay, 'Visegrad – Arrival, Survival, Revival', in *Two Decades of Visegrad Cooperation*, International Visegrad Fund, 2011, available online at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/bibliography/two-decades-of-visegrad-120628>.

In the first years after the formation of the V4 until 2004, all the countries including Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia have passed through a process of association with the EU, which later led to the opening of the negotiations chapters and accession in the EU. This stage has been mainly influenced by a 'top-down' Europeanization process, in which the EU has been constantly pushing forward for the implementation of the EU acquis in sector such as justice, free movement of people, trade, fiscal policy and energy.

In the post-accession period, certain efforts have been done by the V4 to advocate for a 'bottom-up' Europeanization, especially on regional issues or current development within the EU. In this context, one should mention the Joint Declarations of the V4 on the Dual Quality of Foodstuff¹⁶, which pointed out a set of requests and recommendations of the V4 side concerning these two issues.

Dual Quality of Foodstuff: V4 as a policy-shaper actor

The case of the dual quality of foodstuff has been a key issue discussed within the food industry of the EU single market in the last years. The problem of double standards, which has been lying behind the release of different products across the EU food market, has led to serious allegations from the member states towards the interest groups and multinational companies responsible for the release of lower quality products. Although the debates around this subject have started in 2013, with a European Parliament resolution calling for a 'meaningful investigation'¹⁷ from the European Commission due to the consumers' concerns about 'possible differences in the quality of products with the same brand and packaging which are distributed in the single market', the core statements and allegations have been released a few years later, bringing into the light the serious concerns of the Central and Eastern European states about the food safety on their national markets.

Namely, in 2016, Slovakia has carried out a series of laboratory analysis for 22 types of products of different origin (6 dairy products, 5 types of meat products, 2 fish products, 2 kinds of chocolate products, 1 product of bakery products group, 2 beverages, 1 coffee, 1 seasoning mixture, 1 seasoning

¹⁶ Available at http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements#_2004.

¹⁷ European Parliament resolution of 11 June 2013 on a new agenda for European Consumer Policy (2012/2133(INI)), 11 June 2013, available at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2013-239>.

and 1 tea)¹⁸. The test results have proven that in 13 of these products small and bigger differences have been found¹⁹. The same findings were published by the Hungarian counterparts, suggesting that dual quality of foodstuff standards had a multinational character. Within the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting from the 6 of March 2017, Slovakia and Hungary have asked the Commission to take the necessary steps, including at the legislative level, for protecting the consumers' rights.

This request has been followed by the Joint Statement of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia on the dual quality of foodstuff, published on the 19 of July 2017. The common position has urged the European Commission 'to propose adequate measures'²⁰ on both normative and legislative dimensions. The language of the document and the call for immediate action at the EU level has proven the importance of this problem for the V4 member states. Furthermore, after the informative note in the Council, V4 joint declaration has endorsed Hungary's and Slovakia's willingness to pass the dossier in the EU institutional framework.

On the other side, the European Commission has manifested openness and readiness to tackle the unfair practices in the food market. In the State of the Union speech, delivered on the 17 of September 2017, Jean-Claude Juncker mentioned that is unacceptable that in the some parts of Europe, people are sold food of lower quality and national authorities have to be empowered by the law provisions for fighting against these illegal practices²¹. Juncker discourse has been followed by a set of guidelines released by the Commission, explaining the specific requirements for the EU food laws and EU consumer laws. Namely, they have included the Food Information Regulation²² and the Unfair Commercial Practices directive²³, both directed towards informing the consumers and producers on which characterises they should pay attention when buying/selling a product on the EU market.

¹⁸ 'Experience of certain EU Member States with dual quality of foodstuffs in free movement within the EU – Information by Hungary and the Slovak Republic', Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting on 6 March 2017, available at <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-6716-2017-INIT/en/pdf>,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Joint statement of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia on the dual quality of foodstuff and other commodities, 19 July 2018, available at http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements#_2004.

²¹ State of the Union 2017, available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/priorities/state-union-speeches/state-union-2017_en.

²² Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2011 on the provision of food information to consumers, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX%3A32011R1169>.

²³ DIRECTIVE 2005/29/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL of 11 May 2005 concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market, available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2005:149:0022:0039:EN:PDF>.

The advocating efforts of V4 have also included the Consumer Summit, hosted by Bratislava in October 2017. The meeting was attended by all the V4 heads of government and the commissioner for justice, consumers and gender equality. While presenting their requests on consumer's rights, the summit was a good opportunity for strengthening V4's common position and underlining the immediate need for action at the EU level.

Later on, in April 2018, the Commission has released 'A New Deal for Consumers directive'²⁴, which was aiming to achieve five main goals²⁵:

- **Strengthening the consumers' rights online** - more transparency in online market places;
- **Give the consumers the tools for enforce their rights and get compensation** – facilitate the consumer and consumers' organisations capacity to open a judicial procedure if their rights have not been respected;
- **Introduce effective penalties for the violations of the EU consumer law** – fix thresholds for the fines against the producers which will not respect the law when commercializing foodstuff. A maximum fine has been set at 4% of the trader's annual turnover²⁶;
- **Tackle dual quality of consumers' products** – national authorities can assess and address misleading commercial practices involving the marketing of products as being identical in several EU countries, if their composition or characteristics are significantly different;
- **Improved conditions for business** - lifting certain obligations for companies as regards the consumer's withdrawal right;

The directive's content has been empowered by the approval of a new methodology for assessing the quality of food products across the EU²⁷. The methodology has facilitated the compliance of the national norms with the European ones and defined in which terms national and/or EU's bodies could apply sanctions to the companies not respecting them. Furthermore, a pan European testing campaign

²⁴ 'A New Deal for Consumers: Commission strengthens EU consumer rights and enforcement', 11 April 2018, Brussels, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-3041_en.htm.

²⁵ Idem

²⁶ Idem

²⁷ 'Dual quality of food', available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/news/dual-quality-food-2018-jun-14_en.

is in place in order to determine to what extent the national laboratories are equipped and suited to analyse the food products²⁸.

The measures taken by the Commission upon the request of the Council are proving that the member states leverage on the policy making process within the EU is powerful, even if the policy agenda concerns only the small and medium countries. In the case of the dual quality of foodstuff, the V4 states have set the agenda and advocated for immediate reforms that would work in their benefit. As such, a ‘bottom-up’ Europeanization has emerged, in which the reactions and positions of the interest groups at the national level have led to pressure on the EU decision-making structures to mediate the reform of the existing norms and practices. The joint front of the V4 countries on this issue has helped them to advance their stance and convince the other states to support it.

Conclusions

Since its establishment, the role of the Visegrad Group in the advancement of the Europeanization process has gradually increased. Nowadays, the V4 has evolved into a full-fledged cooperation initiative with mechanisms of dialogue and a portfolio of activities aiming at shaping the policy-making at the EU level and beyond the EU borders. Given its priorities and areas of cooperation, the V4 has the potential to become a more influential actor in the EU and advance its strategic goals on the EU agenda. However, the democracy and rule of law climate in Hungary, Czech Republic and Poland has a negative impact over the V4’s bargaining capacity.

This paper has examined two perspectives over how the Europeanization process occurs and their explanatory function for the V4 internal evolution and external behaviour. Through analysing the case of dual quality of foodstuff, I have demonstrated that a ‘bottom-up’ Europeanization process has been taking place within the Visegrad Group. This case proves that the V4 countries can act as policy shapers in the EU, by advancing their priorities on the EU agenda and request immediate actions from the EU institutions. In order to increase the number of such initiatives, the V4 has to accommodate its shared commitments and develop a more institutionalized cooperation framework with long-term objectives.

²⁸ Idem

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