

Visegrad Fortress and Transnational Populism

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Abstract: During some decades, Europe was separated because of the iron curtain that Churchill has identified from Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, and only after the fall of Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union many of the Eastern and Central European countries succeeded to recover their complete political independence. For these countries, the moving from the Soviet State planning model to the western open-market type was a rough but necessary journey for joining the European Union. In 1991, three of these countries, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland decided to establish an informal political and cultural alliance aiming at a close cooperation, the so-called Visegrad Group (VG), designed to foster their integration into NATO and EU structures. However, after achieving these goals, in 1999 and in 2004, this group, already counting on the separated participation of Slovakia and the Czech Republic (V4), was not dissolved because the four countries consider that they needed a new type of cooperation allowing them a stronger common position towards European integration because the consensus-based decision-making of some European decision-making bodies allows V4 populist leaders to influence the communitarian decisions while internally presenting themselves as the moral guardians of the European civilization and diabolizing Brussels authorities accusing them of betraying European heritage. This paper shows that the Euroscepticism of V4 leaders is opportunistic, and that they are just pretending while complaining about Brussels because they know that they cannot leave the European Union also due to the increasing cooperation with other EU sub regional organizations. However, this populist alliance will be well worth watching as it can be the germ of transnational populism.

Keywords: Visegrad Group, European Union, Transnational Populism, and Euroscepticism.

Introduction

More than 6 centuries ago, in 1335, the reigning heads of Bohemia, Hungary and Poland met at the Visegrad castle and agreed that the expansion of the Habsburgs was a threat requiring cooperation among the three kingdoms. In 1991, History repeated itself, but for different reasons, and after a time when Central European countries believed that “membership in NATO and the EU could be attained on the principle of independent action [...] the need to autonomously pursue the international objectives under discussion [and] this would necessarily involve competition between countries where those better able to take effective action would gain priority” (Gizicki, 2012, p.7)

When, on 9th of November 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall opened the iron curtain, allowing a clear sight on the reality of the failed and outdated soviet model, Eastern and Central European countries faced a double challenge. First, to take their destiny into their own hands. Second, to look for new partnerships to help them to replace the communist model concerning not only the political features, but also the economic and social dimensions.

According to Václav Havel, one of the founding fathers, together with József Antall and Lech Wałęsa, of Visegrad Group, while coordinating their policies, the members could mutually help each other instead of behaving like rivals and trying to push each other aside. Thus, the initial motivation was: “commitment to democracy, peace, European integration and regional cooperation, all four of which reflect the founding pillars of the European Communities” (Skrzypek, 2017, p. 29).

The first step was not easy because in the beginning the Communist Party still held a key position and democracy is not just the opening to a multiparty system. Furthermore, the nationalism and nativism, crushed or hidden for decades, did not take long to reemerge powerfully in the new contest, and this emergence helps to explain the increasing role played by populist parties in the domestic arena some years after the independence.

The second goal required the choice of the European Union, concerning the economic model, and of NATO for military defense. A choice that, according to Havel, was not just for filling “in the place of the Warsaw Pact, neither [...] to form some sort of cordon sanitaire between the Soviet Union and Western Europe”¹. They intended to become members and not only allies of the European Community.

Thus, Visegrad Group was formed in 1991 to achieve regional cooperation and prepare the second step. Visegrad three became Visegrad Four after the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, and the cooperation only flagged when the Czech government thought that the double adhesion process required an individual approach. This situation ended when the Communists lost power in that country, although the first genuinely free general election in the Czech Republic was held only in June 1990 with the results indicating the overwhelming support for parliamentary democracy and a resounding defeat of the Communist Party that won just 13% of the votes cast.

The initial mission was successful as the former socialist countries became members of the NATO and the European Union. After the success of this action, Havel affirmed that the original purpose of Visegrad Group has been exhausted and fulfilled, but the group was not dismantled and the V4 started to engage in a sort of cooperation that “is not dependent on politics in ideological sense of it”, as “it is strategic, of which priorities are temporary and dictated not by the political principles, but by the needs of the moments” (Skrzypek, 2017, p. 30). This is the reason explaining Havel’s position about the future of the V4, as it is facing a stark choice between becoming a dead monument or a true and sustained model of regional cooperation within the European Union. Two scenarios of future susceptible of being added with a middle term, neither so catastrophic as the former nor so optimistic as the latter. Therefore, Viktória Jancosekova states that “the V4 just turned 30 years old, but there is not much to celebrate”², despite their successful economic development, as “between 1990 and 2015, the GDP per capita in the V4 countries nearly quadrupled (tripled in Hungary)” and “incomes and consumption grew even faster, allowing for the gap between the Eastern-Central and Western-Southern EU members being reduced” (Pakulski, 2016, p. 8).

In the political field, since the entrance in the EU, V4 is often pointed as responsible for some of the problems that the community has been facing because its leaders “see the Union as being on the crossroads and they would see that the solution is pursuing a kind of Europe of strong nations (states)” (Skrzypek, 2017, p. 31). This means that the group refuses the federalist vision and supports the institutionalist or intergovernmentalist way. V4 leaders do not agree with the building of a kind of European superstate as they are prone of their history and they put their efforts on promoting the identitarian or cultural populism.

The four countries “regard each other as natural partners on many topics and believe in pursuing certain policies together” (Neuman, 2017, p. 56), and despite receiving considerable European funds to promote their development and modernization, started a new type of Euroscepticism. Furthermore, this populist alliance intends to profit its presence in the European Parliament to promote cultural populism at a time when subversive Russian influence in Central Europe is increasing, profiting of the existence of “internal forces in each of the Visegrad group countries trying to subvert and undo this journey and change the cultural and geopolitical orientation of each country” (Milo & Klingová, 2017, p. 4)

This essay analyses this mix of Euroscepticism and populism that never refrains from promoting the national interest of the four members and gives origin to the so-called Visegrad fortress. A sort of populism that is against Brussels but does not intend to leave the European Union. Moreover, the essay presents the origin of this model and the agreed or common policies of Visegrad Group designed to protect its regional interests. Finally, it proves that the leaders of this subregional group intend to impose their model of illiberative democracy outside the region, giving origin to an international populist wage aiming at becoming a supranational one.

The Position of Visegrad Group towards the European Union

For a long period, Visegrad Group played a minor or peripheral role in the European Union. However, this subordinate paper has changed when waves of immigrants and refugees started to knock at the EU doors. Then, in different moments, V4 did not hesitate “to voice their criticism of various policy initiatives coming from

¹ Havel’s discourse at the meeting.

² Available at <https://euobserver.com/opinion/150977>.

Brussels, especially on the handling of the issue of migration” (Végh, 2019, p. 11). However, to criticize the EU politics does not necessarily mean Euroscepticism.

As it is well-known, every definition of Euroscepticism is like Cinderella’s shoe and the same can be said about its typology. For example, following the proposals made by Kopecký & Mudde (2002, p. 300), according to “David Easton’s seminal distinction between different forms of support for political regimes”, and “distinguishing between ‘diffuse’ and ‘specific’ support for European integration”, one can find a four-branches typology. When considering diffuse support, the authors “mean support for the general ideas of European integration that underlie the EU” while specific support denotes “support for the general practice of European integration; that is, the EU as it is and as it is developing”.

As said before, this definition leads to a four-branches typology, combining the support for European integration – Europhiles and Europhobes – and the support for the European Union – EU-pessimists and EU-optimists. Or, crossing the two dimensions, one can find the Euroenthusiasts, being EU-optimists and Europhiles, the Eurosceptics, combining Europhiles but EU-pessimists; Eurorejects, when Europhobes and EU-pessimists, and, finally, Europragmatists, being Europhobes but EU-optimists.

According to this typology, the best label for the Visegrad Group seemed to be Eurosceptic, i.e. Europhile but EU-pessimist. However, I think that, despite being Europhiles, they share some common positions with the Europragmatists, as “on the basis of pragmatic (often utilitarian) considerations decide to assess the EU positively because they deem it profitable for their own country or constituency”, even when their public and official discourse points in another direction. In fact, they can shout against Brussels and the European Union, but they will remain members of the community. Moreover, some of V4 countries also use this pragmatism towards other countries or organizations. For instance, in Slovakia, the position of the former SMER-SD Government towards the Russian Federation was referred to as “friendly pragmatic” and “characterized by pursuing economic interests and avoiding open criticism of Russian domestic and foreign policy” due to “Slovakia’s high level of energy dependency on Russia and the economic profitability of providing transit for Russian gas into Western Europe” (Milo & Klingová, 2017, p. 7).

Volk (2019, p. 134) tells that a transnational populist organization, Fortress Europe (FE), at a protest event in Prague, in June 2016, visualized its “populist critique by drowning a straw man representing the EU”. The FE followed “the pagan cult of drowning a straw doll representing the Slavic goddess Morana (Czech; in Polish: Marzanna) to mark the end of the winter [...] named the larger-than-life sized straw doll the ‘evil witch Eurana’, covered it with the EU flag, and drowned it in the Vltava river”.

The Visegrad Group knows that the European Union should be regarded rather as a safe than a witch, despite the regular disagreements and misunderstandings with the organization. A safe, even when it refuses to repay Hungary for the border fence that, according to Viktor Orbán, aimed to protect “all the citizens of Europe from the flood of illegal migrants”. One of the clashes between V4 and the EU, as the following point will prove.

Kazharski (2017, p. 1) warns that “although the situation of being structurally locked into the EU does not allow the V4 countries to openly challenge its main principles, the V4 political elites pursue a counter-hegemonic strategy, subverting and resignifying some of its key political notions”. Moreover, if one compares the attitude of the elite with the degree of citizen satisfaction of the four countries regarding the democracy in the European Union and in their countries one can conclude that the elites and the people can have different views on that. Hobold (2012, p. 92) states that in Czech Republic the satisfaction with democracy in the European Union is higher than in the nation – 57 versus 48, and the same happens in Hungary – 46 versus 20 – in Poland – 79 versus 71 and in Slovakia – 60 versus 44. These data show that citizens of V4 are more satisfied with the European Union governance than with the performance of domestic government. Then, one can conclude, as Sánchez-Cuenca (2000, p. 147) that “the levels of national support for integration are higher in those countries that suffer greater corruption and have less-developed welfare states”.

However, there are also studies pointing in a different direction. For example, Janebová & Végh (2019, p. 11) conducted an on-line survey consisting of 21 questions addressed to more than 1,900 people, out of which approximately 23% responded, in V4 countries, to see “to what extent the Visegrad countries’ foreign policy elites agree on various issues and also where they disagree”, and they came to the conclusion that “it is in Poland and

Hungary where the EU is seen rather positively by the majority of the population (54% and 52% respectively), whereas in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the EU is viewed less positively (29% and 36% respectively), rather neutrally by the biggest share of the population". The authors were surprised because it was "in the two countries that have serious conflicts in the EU, including their ongoing Article 7 procedures, that the population shows more enthusiasm toward the Union" (pp. 27-28).

In fact, Poland and Hungary are facing a difficult situation in the European Union. Orbán, after mounting tensions between Hungary and some EU members due to his way of understanding the rule of law, decided to cut off ties with the European People's Party (EPP), in March 2021, after the political group of the European People's Party in the European Parliament "passed - with an 84-percent majority - the amendment of its rules of procedure that may enable the suspension of whole delegation's membership"³. Curiously, it was a Polish, Donald Tusk, the EPP chief, who answering to the tweet of Katalin Novak, the vice president of Fidesz, also tweeted that "FIDESZ has left Christian Democracy. In truth, it left many years ago". This statement depicts a rowdy relationship because Fidesz had previously been suspended and the divorce was unavoidable. It is noteworthy that, according to Freedom House, in 2020, Hungary, with a 69 score, is only partly free, an unprecedented case in the European Union countries, proving the continuous Hungary's democratic backslide since Orbán is sitting on the chair of power.

In Poland, PiS is also facing a troublesome relationship with EPP Group because the Group considers that "PiS Government continues to undermine press freedom, most recently with the attempt to strip Polish free media of their revenues", and so, in February 2021, the EPP Group "demanded an urgent debate for the March plenary session on the Polish Government's attempt to silence free media"⁴. Furthermore, PiS has already been accused of adopting a controversial judicial law, restricting the judiciary's independence, a sign that illiberal democracy does not accept the traditional separation of powers. Moreover, this politicization of the justice has started some years ago because, since 2016, the European Commission has been forced to take the EC steps against Polish Government for its sweeping judicial reforms.

Polish President Andrzej Duda, despite holding a PhD in Law, seems not understand that the Polish law must conform to European Union law. That is the price to be paid to remain in the European Union. As he knows, Polesit is a false solution because the two World Wars proved that Poland is probably the worst situated country in the world. Poland, as the other Visegrad Group members should understand that EU membership rather than being regarded as "the bride turned out not as pretty as advertised" (Kazharski, 2017, p. 13), must be seen as a space allowing an increasing economic development due to the cooperation with other EU subregional organizations, namely with the Benelux.

The Several Clashes between VG and the EU

The migration crisis made clear a strong clash between Visegrad Group and the European Union. However, this is not the only one. In fact, the group, namely Hungary and Poland, disagrees with the core of European Union members not only on migration and asylum politics, but also in several issues, such as, representative democracy, social Europe, and environment measures. Stojarová (2018, p. 32) affirms that, in VG countries, "until the "migration crisis", the far-right parties focused mainly on Roma issue, anti-Semitism, anti-communism, anti-establishment and used anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-German, anti-Czech, anti-Slovak or anti-Hungarian card", but, when migration crisis started "the parties re-oriented against immigrants, more precisely against the Muslims presenting them as a threat and also increased their criticism on the EU". Along the same lines, Kazharski (2017, p. 2) states that the migration crisis "contributed to the normative rupture between the 'East' and the 'West' already existing inside the European Union" because the V4 countries changed their position "from normative conformity with the West to an ambiguous stance" that he calls "partial identification, whereby only some Western principles and norms are accepted unconditionally, while other ones are subverted and resigified in the political discourse of the local establishments". This is the explanation for the emergence of the so-called illiberal democracy.

³ Available at <https://euobserver.com/opinion/151131>.

⁴ Available at <https://www.eppgroup.eu/newsroom/news/epp-group-requests-urgent-debate-on-media-freedom-in-poland>.

Regarding the representative democracy, the Index of Democracy 2020 indicates that democracy is already declining in some of the four countries and the initial dream of democratic and decentralized institutions threatens to become a nightmare, as the self-confident civil society is being replaced by intermediate bodies whose origin comes from top to bottom. In fact, democracy is deteriorating in Hungary and Poland according to V-DEM because “they continued their downward decline after continued assaults on the judiciary and restrictions on the media and civil society” (p. 19). Moreover, they are in the first and second places of the Top-10 autocratizing countries 2010-2020.

Respecting the Liberal Democracy Index, Hungary ranks 89 out of 179 countries with 0,37 score and Poland ranks 63 with 0,49, while Czech Republic scores 0,71 in the 34th place, and Slovakia ranks 26 with a 0,76 score⁵. The data prove that Hungary is no more a liberal democracy and Poland is following the same road.

Concerning immigration and asylum, it is worth nothing that, as many of other European countries, V4 had no previous experience with the mass influx of refugees and this fact, in a circumstance when the populists ruled over the region and “the mainstream parties also accepted far right topics and actively promoted them” (Stojarová, 2018, p. 32), explains the rejection of the European Union politics dealing with the problem, namely transferring refugees from one EU member to another. The European Union tried to prevent unilateral actions and “to strengthen solidarity within the European Union”, and then, “many new proposals were adopted in Brussels since April 2015”, namely “the JHA Council Meeting conclusion adopted on 20 July 2015 about voluntary pledges concerning refugee resettlement plans”, aiming “a more equal distribution of refugee resettlement across the EU”, according to the capacity of each country. However, in the case of Visegrad Group members the numbers “were significantly lower than others’ pledges” because Slovakia “offered a pledge of 100 persons with a population of 5 million, the Czech Republic offered 400 with a population of 10 million, Poland offered 900 with a population of almost 40million population, while Hungary insisted that it will accept no resettled refugees” (Stepper, 2016, pp. 76-77), refusing any signal or gesture of solidarity.

These clashes prove that V4 members see EU membership in a utilitarian way, as the following point will show.

V4 and Russia’s Subversive Foreign Influences in the Region

As said before, one of the goals of the Visegrad Group was to overtake the soviet influence in the region. In fact, the Visegrad Group played a significant role “in the withdrawal of Soviet troops from the region, the dismantling of the Warsaw Treaty Organization with crucial help from Hungary and in dissolving the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance in 1991.

However, in later periods the Visegrad form at played an occasional role in shaping relations with Russia” (Marušiak, 2015, p. 29).

Thus, three decades after the dismantling of the Soviet Bloc, Russia, is trying to restore its influence in Central Europe profiting of the discontentment about some EU or NATO politics. Russia’s strategy involves “diplomatic activities, energy and economic policy, information warfare and support to domestic political forces (both mainstream and fringe) sympathetic to the Russian narrative” (Milošević & Klingová, 2017, p. 4). The GLOBSEC Policy Institute developed fact-based Vulnerability Index of Central European countries measuring “the on-going dynamics in Central Europe and attitudes towards the United States, Russia, the European Union and NATO”, based on five areas: social attitudes; political landscape; media landscape; recognition and countermeasures; and civil and uncivil societies, which is quite important to understand V4 political positions.

The overview is worrying in all the V4 countries, mainly in Hungary with “an overall score of 57 out of 100”, confirming “the growing rift between Hungary and Western Europe on many fundamental issues” (p. 5). Furthermore, “the government’s orientation is quite pro-Russian” and among the two largest opposition parties, “the far-right Jobbik is – like the government – pro-Russian” (p. 15), and “the majority of mainstream media outlets are under the direct control of the government, including the Public Broadcaster (PBS)”, meaning that there is no free information and “Hungarians are subjected to highly inaccurate information that does not deviate from the official stance of the government” (p. 23). Scheppele (2013, p. 5) states that “Hungary is a Franken state

⁵ Available at https://www.v-dem.net/media/filer_public/c9/3f/c93f8e74-a3fd-4bac-adfd-ee2cfbc0a375/dr_2021.pdf.

in point” because Orbán was able “to hide a non-democracy in plain sight” while creating a Frankenstate “neither fully repressive nor fully free”⁶.

The situation is also unsettling in Slovakia “with an overall score of 51 out of 100” due to “transactional and opportunistic attitudes towards the EU and NATO, widely shared by the political elites and the public” (p. 5). Moreover, “Slovakia is clearly the most vulnerable country in the region in terms of public opinion” (p. 10), and despite “the majority of Slovaks are still supportive of the EU” and “only 19% would vote for Slovexit” (p. 11), it is problematic that “Slovakia is considered a “friendly pragmatist” state; i.e. a country with good relations with the Russian Federation, interested in economic cooperation and avoiding open criticism of Russia’s domestic and foreign policy” (p. 17).

The situation seems to be better in the Czech Republic “with an overall vulnerability index of 38 out of 100”, despite Czech President, Miloš Zeman, being “regarded by many as the most important and visible pro-Russian political actor in the region” (p. 5).

Finally, in Poland the score is “30 out of 100” due to “the hard lessons learned by Poland in its turbulent history and the contemporary geopolitical situation” (p.5). The actual Polish government is Eurosceptic, but “its society is very cautious about Russia’s intentions on the geopolitical scene” (p. 8).

The previous paragraphs prove that “Visegrad Group countries have rarely adopted a common position on the Russian Federation on account of their different perceptions of security risks and national interests” and this divergence “can sometimes undermine confidence between the V4 countries, and this may weaken Visegrad cooperation in the future” (Marusiak, 2015, p. 28) because Russia influence can turn them against one another.

Transnational Populism: from Difficulties to Potentialities

Populism, as Euroscepticism, is a controversial concept, because scholars define it as an ideology, a thin ideology, a style of politics, a specific discourse, a political and so on. This paper defines populism as “a way of articulation of the discourse aiming at fighting for hegemony. A fight between two entities – people and elite – considered as homogenous.

A conflict that can never be solved through negotiations” (Pinto, 2018, p. 3).

At first glance, populism is a domestic issue, a fight between two pretending homogenous bodies - people and elite – inside a country, with populist parties presenting themselves as the prophets of the patria. However, transnational populism is possible if it succeeds to construct “the people in truly transnational terms: as a post-national, marginalized subject, mobilized against exploitative and hegemonic transnational elites” (Blokker, 2019, p. 345).

There have already been some attempts of transnational populism concerning the left-wing parties and socioeconomic populism. Kuyper & Moffitt (2020, p. 34) state that the first case was “Hugo Chávez, who made some efforts in his later years to not only act as the spokesperson of ‘the people’ of Venezuela, but of the Latin American region”. However, on the 29th March 2016, Mazzolini & Souvlis, in an open letter to Yanis Varoufakis about the recent DiEM launch in Rome, affirmed that “despite all its regional internationalism, the Latin American pink tide has been first and foremost a collection of national phenomena” and that “Chávez’s Venezuela served as a powerful source of inspiration, but each experience manifested its own distinct particularities which have resulted in a case-by-case seizure of power, only to be followed by some inter-state convergence at a later stage (ALBA, UNASUR, CELAC)”⁷.

⁶ Scheppele (2013, p. 5) defines a Frankenstate “an abusive form of rule, created by combining the bits and pieces of perfectly reasonable democratic institutions in monstrous ways, much as Frankenstein’s monster was created from bits and pieces of other living things. No one part is objectionable; the horror emerges from the combinations. As a result, if one approaches the monster with a checklist, the monster will pass the test (elections, CHECK; parliamentary government, CHECK). But the combinations—free elections with a paucity of parties; a unicameral parliament without independent “transparency institutions” like ombudsmen and audit offices—are where the problems lie”.

⁷ The letter is available at <https://lefteast.org/an-open-letter-to-yanis-varoufakis/>.

On this topic, it is important to say that Henderson (2018) presented a case-study about one of these organizations: Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and stated that transnational populism was possible and it revealed “the relationship between populism and nationalism to be no more than an unstable construct, a contingent, historically determined articulation and attempts to construct the people beyond national borders” (p. 13). Moreover, she considers that transnational populism “might be particularly suited to the expansion of who is included in the human rights regime and in practices of democracy” (p.1), a far from consensual position.

Still on this issue, De Cleen (2017) “prefers to analyze Latin America’s populism as a case of inter-national and not properly transnational populism”, as “it is more about the inter-national ties between nationally organized populisms (that revolve around nationally defined people-as-underdogs) than about a truly trans-national politics across national contexts” (Panayotu, 2017, p. 6).

Later, former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis launched the mentioned movement called The Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25), aiming at the construction of a European people against the elite formed by the powers of Europe, a designation that, according to the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 Long Manifesto, includes not only the Brussels bureaucracy but also “lobbyists, the Troika, the Euro group, ‘bailed out bankers,’ ideologically bankrupt political parties, austerity imposing governments, ‘media moguls’ and ‘corporations in cahoots with secretive public agencies’”. A project in which De Cleen, Moffitt, Panayotu & Stavrakakis (2020) identify potentials and difficulties, as well as Mazzolini & Souvlis (2016) who have questioned Varoufakis about the movement, asking him about its real goal: “more precisely, who are you fighting against? Is the enemy the structures of the European Union? Or possibly the economic elites? Or just the Brussels’ bureaucrats? And who is DiEM? Is it something that is constituted by individuals, pre-constituted groups, or is it just a story by Yanis Varoufakis?”. These questions prove that DiEM 25 was far from being a clear project and explain that Mazzolini & Souvlis referred “a certain statutory uncertainty inscribed in its very foundation” and accused Varoufakis of “totally neglect the very recent experience of Syriza” because they believed that he was making the same mistake i.e. not creating previous solid democratic structures within the project. Still about DiEM 25, Fanoulis & Guerra, 2020, p.223) present a different vision, saying that “the eventual absence of transnational populism does not mean, however, that we should altogether discount the political strength of transnational progressive Euroalternativism”.

In V4 countries, as the Visegrad Declaration signed on 15 February 1991 emphasized, the common heritage was due to “the similar character of the significant changes occurring in these countries, their traditional, historically-shaped system of mutual contacts, and their cultural and spiritual heritage and common roots of religious traditions”. The final part of the statement explains that, nowadays, the prevalent type of populism in the region is not socioeconomic but cultural or identitarian. Or, as this modality of populism uses nationalist and nativist ideological elements, this point can play an opponent role about the option for a transnational model. Therefore, Steve Bannon faced real problems for implementing his project of uniting right-wing populist parties all over the Europe. A list including some populist parties belonging to Visegrad Group and neighboring countries. Nowadays, the so-called «The Movement» is almost stopped because “electoral laws in many countries bar or restrict Bannon and his organization from campaigning or interfering with national politics, and also because many populist right parties and leaders he has approached appear to want nothing to do with him” (Kuyper & Moffitt, 2020, p. 35). In fact, to join right-wing populist leaders, like Marine Le Pen, Viktor Orbán, Matteo Salvini, Santiago Abascal, Geert Wilders, and Jarosław Kaczyński, is a hard task because their parties have their own domestic agenda, and the clash of personalities is almost unavoidable as each one of them considers him/herself as fated for the mission.

However, this is not the first attempt at right-wing level because Geert Wilders has already “made representative claims on behalf of ‘the people’ of Western countries across the globe who are allegedly under attack by radical Islam and the multiculturalist elites who are allowing their ‘shared Western culture’ to be denigrated” (Kuyper & Moffitt, 2020, p. 35).

Respecting Visegrad radical right parties, Stojárová (2018, pp. 35-37) considers that “the only exceptionally successful and long-standing parties in the Visegrad context are Jobbik and SNS, all other parties seem to be the party for one use”. However, the situation changes about populist parties because she states that “the parties which fit the cluster populist are currently extraordinary successful in Poland (PiS), Hungary (Fidesz) Slovakia

(SMER) and the Czech Republic (ANO), all four being members of the government and except of the Czech ANO all well-established parties which have participated in previous governments or served as opposition parties”. After the 2020 Slovak parliamentary election, Ordinary People and Independent Personalities (OL’ANO) emerged as the largest party winning 53 out of 150 seats but this data does not contradict the previous statement because OL’ANO is also a populist party.

These populist parties belong to different groups of the European Parliament. The 26 deputies of PiS are members of the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR), the 6 deputies of ANO are part of the Renew Europe Group, OL’ANO deputy seats in the Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats) (EPP), the 3 deputies of SMER-SD belong to the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D), and the 13 Fidesz European Deputies belonged to the EPP Group until March of 2021. After leaving the EPP Group, Orbán said that he was already negotiating the formation of a new group with Italian and Polish parties. However, it seems difficult to meet the officially required conditions: at least 25 deputies belonging to a quarter of the members, i.e. 7 countries.

After the 2019 European electoral act, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini formed the Identity and Democracy (ID) Group counting on 76 member’s from 10 countries, the fourth largest group in the European Parliament, but they failed to build a true transnational populist group because some important populist parties decided to belong to other groups or not integrate any group. If Orbán can become the transnational populism prophet is a doubtful mission. V4 support is not enough. However, it can be the germ for changing national into international populism, the initial step toward the transnational one. This hypothesis must be taken into account because the present situation is quite different from the phase in which populist parties were anti-system. Nowadays, as Smilov & Krastev (2008, p. 8) state: “the new populism does not represent a challenge to democracy understood as free elections or as the rule of the majority” because “unlike the extreme parties of the 1930s (fascists, communists), the new populists are not planning to ban elections and to introduce dictatorships”, In fact, they “like elections and, unfortunately [as in V4 countries], tend to win them. What they oppose is the party-based representative nature of modern democracies, the protection of minorities’ rights, and any constraints on the sovereignty of the people”. This means that populist parties are profiting of the mechanisms of representative democracy to reach power and replace the representative model by the so-called illiberal democracy, a euphemism hiding a sort of returning to a State-centered model.

In V4 countries, Canovan’s metaphor of populism as the shadow of democracy is being replaced by the populist siren songs of the future based on returning to the officially glorious past, but without leaving the European Union. The rhetoric of the great pretenders.

Conclusion

This paper proved that Vise grad Group was a very successful project because V4 countries achieved the initial goal, i.e. regional cooperation for overtaking the communist model and becoming members of the European Union and NATO. Furthermore, despite their internal differences, V4 is like a fortress. However, the European Union strategy to deal with the arrival of waves of immigrants and asylum seekers, in a phase when populist parties were already leading V4 countries, caused a troubling relationship between the alliance and the community. Moreover, the immigrant crisis is not the sole problem concerning the relationship because cultural populism is increasing in the Eastern region and calling into question the representative democracy, namely the separation of powers, and the core of the European Union values. After the Brexit, some populist parties of EU members started campaigning for leaving the community. However, V4 countries perceive that their place is in the European Union, despite their complaints about Brussels and the influence that Putin’s Russia is trying to increase on the region.

To sum up, the potential threat for the European Union is not the exit of one or some of Vise grad countries, but the possibility of V4 populist leaders, namely Viktor Orbán, develop close ties with other populist leaders, originating an international cultural populist wave aiming at a transnational populism.

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