20 YEARS OF EU MEMBERSHIP

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Twenty Years of Czech EU Membership: Between the Pragmatic Bandwagoning and the 'Visegrad-Effect'

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Czechia has presented itself as one of the leading post-Communist nations regarding Europeanisation. Such an assumption created the platform for the establishment of the Visegrad Group (V4) – the nations who share the same main geopolitical goals – NATO and EU Membership. Promotion of further EU enlargement as well as the importance of an Eastern Partnership became flagships of V4 nations declaring in 2009 their ambition to become the 'second engine' of the EU. Nevertheless, such ambitious goals were continually undermined with the transformation of the V4 into the populist cooperation and leader-driven format which presented the most visible internal opposition and challenge to the EU's mainstream and its values. This analysis focuses on the most important modalities and the oscillation of Czech politics and society between the two ideal types of Europeanisation – the role-model position stressing the need to finalise the catching-up process with the EU-15 and join the 'core', and the policies copying the national-populist narratives with an 'anti-Brussels' framing, which are labelled the 'Visegrad Effect'. In the first part of the paper we present the framework for how the East-West cleavage influences the perception of the EU in Czechia and V4 debate. We then examine the economic dimension of EU-membership. In the last part we focus on the growth of Euroscepticism and national populism in Czechia and the V4, including the modalities of Czech European policy related to the differences among the key political actors as well as societal groups[2].

Introduction

The development of new East-Central European (ECE) democracies after 1989 might be separated into two different parts. While the first fifteen years, crowned by the 'big bang' EU enlargement in 2004, could be evaluated as a generally successful story of democratisation and socialisation into the Western structures, the next nearly twenty years are often evaluated as the period of getting

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'sober'. Paradoxically, instead of continuing a Europeanisation of values, memory and identity in several ECE nations, we observed a strengthening of anti-EU and anti-European attitudes. As Attila Ágh observed in his latest works (Ágh 2019; 2021), starting with the 2008 financial crisis outbreak, we have had to deal with a situation of polycrisis accompanied with de-Europeanisation, failure in the catching up process, a strengthening of the core-periphery divide in the EU/Europe and a decline in democracy in ECE (cf. Zeitlin and Nicoli 2020). The problems with respecting the rule of law in the case of Hungary (after 2010) and Poland (after 2015) are usually discussed, but many authors speak of a more general principle of disillusionment, de-democratisation and democratic backsliding in the new ECE democracies (Cianetti, Dawson and Hanley 2019; Holmes and Krastev 2020).

Specifically, in the V4, the refugee crisis in 2015 and following years strengthened the mental gaps between so-called 'old' and 'new' Europe. The 'migrant cleavage' after 2015 generated within the politics of fear used by the populist neo-illiberal presents a new and strong mobilisation tool. 'By its explosive nature it generated an atmosphere of mass alarm and thereby hurled into the political arena an emotional wave of patriotism, nationalism and xenophobia' (Klíma 2020, pp.152-161). Securitisation linked to the 'tribal atavistic reaction to perceptions of insecurity' (Tucker 2020, p.132) produced a new negative quality envisaged in the nativist onset. Many politicians promptly and effectively used this issue and stressed the jeopardy caused by the fact that the politicians from 'Old Europe' and/or 'Brussels' do not consider such dangers seriously. The discussion on the so-called relocation quotas (Bauerová 2018), which put the V4 countries in visible opposition to the EU mainstream, has become just one piece of a mosaic based on an increasingly strong opposition to developments within the EU. Czech President Miloš Zeman (2013–2023) and the populist technocrat Andrej Babiš, whose ANO 2011 movement participated in the government from 2013–2021 with himself prime minister in 2017–2021, have also joined in the criticism of the EU as an institution that promotes allegedly flawed values (e.g. gender issues), self-defeating economic decisions (European Green Deal), and that ignores the sovereignty of nation states. In many ways, the V4 countries have become the most visible actors of a more general social and political polarisation based on the phenomenon of cultural backlash (Norris and Inglehart 2019) and the formation of an old-new cleavage between 'liberal cosmopolitans' and 'counter-cosmopolitans' (Rensmann 2012, p.77).

The polarisation of societies and politics continued during the COVID-19 pandemic and has continued throughout the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine (Hrbková, Voda and Havlík 2023). In particular, the latter crisis has sharpened and clarified the positions of the individual V4 countries. While Hungary, through its continuous cooperation with Putin's regime, has taken another significant step towards the role of European pariah, the new Czech government, under the leadership of Petr Fiala and the new president Petr Pavel, has managed to emancipate itself from the anti-EU discourse of the Viktor Orbán-dominated V4.

Against this background the aim of this paper is to examine the basic framework of the Czech position in the EU in the last two decades. With the use of selected typologies and classifications, we will try to reflect Czech European politics in its most prominent given modalities, among other things, by the specific characteristics of prominent political actors – that is, political parties and some influential individuals. Our analysis is carried out on two analytical levels, national and regional, using the most prominent institutional framework of regional cooperation in which the Czech Republic has been or is involved – the Visegrad Group. We have chosen this framework because, alongside Hungary's assertive post-2010 foreign and European policy and Poland's position as a regional power and actor of growing importance in pan-European politics, the Czech position is often less visible

and understandable. We also focus specifically on geopolitical and geocultural issues, which play an important role in building the image of the EU in the V4 and Czech discourse. In our opinion, it is precisely these issues that significantly influence the attitudes of the Czech public and political actors, especially in relation to historically anchored prejudices against certain powers (Germany) and the West (European Union) as a whole.

At the same time, one of our assumptions is that geoculturally embedded criticism does not represent as prominent an element in the Czech discussion about the EU as in the Polish or Hungarian case, and therefore allows Czech political actors within the union a far more flexible and pragmatic approach. This pragmatism is often referred to as a significant element of Czech foreign policy, fluctuating between 'principles' and 'interests' (Waisová 2012).

Pre-Accession asymmetry between the West and East-Central Europe

Analysing the history of ECE as the space between Germany and Russia in the last two centuries, we observe above all a history of uncertainty and insecurity. The behaviour of both big nations, as well as the geopolitically rooted activities of other European powers, led the ECE nations towards a specific victim-syndrome; the belief that the region has been repeatedly betrayed, abandoned, occupied and exploited. As a result of such narratives, there is a mixture of admiration, envy and hate towards the West that is embedded in the centre-periphery opposite. To belong to the European East means experiencing the 'permanent' insecurity given by geographical proximity (Bianchini 2017). To escape such pressure means joining the West, or, as Wæver (1992) proposes for the Baltic part of ECE, the North.

Along with the victim-syndrome, the inferiority complex specifically belongs to the ECE mentality, related to its difficult geopolitical position and resulting limited alternatives (Cabada 2019). Since the Early Middle Ages ECE has been understood as a less developed European region striving to catch up with the West. The modernity commencement in the 19th century presented a new form of this old challenge. In this sense Piotr Wandycz (1992) suggests that Central Europe, religiously and culturally belonging to the West, was ascribed to the East, regarding economic, technological and general civilisation development. Nevertheless, we have to stress anew that the post-Communist reality and legacy is unique. In 2003, shortly before the *Big Bang* enlargement, Martin Brusis (2003, p.259) wrote: 'From the EU perspective the candidate states evince much more common characteristics as some candidate states and the EU member states or nations from other East European regions'.

Returning to the victim-paradigm strongly influencing the internal political and societal discourse in ECE, we can also better understand how – based on this paradigm – the EU might be perceived by some actors as an external player and 'significant other' (Beneš and Harnisch 2015, p.157). Such a consideration was saturated before and after the Eastern enlargement. Phillip Ther describes the 'obvious asymmetry between the West and East Europe' (Ther 2015, p.229). The West approached the enlargement issue timidly and many steps of the EU-15 towards the ECE nations strongly violated one of the basic European values – equality. It is not only concerning about the uncontrolled migration of citizens of the new Member States to the EU-15 and the transitional periods that have restricted the free movement of labour. As Ther suggests, the issue was much more complex. The EU-15 fear was linked to three factors: 'insufficient participation in the revolution from 1989, fear from the concurrence at the labour market, and fear to share the own welfare with new members' (Ther 2015, p.330). The West European political elites tried to avert the negative and, above all, economic effects

of Eastern enlargement, unfortunately based in unequal treatment of which a typical example is agrarian subventions (ibid). Such development, embedded into the Europeanisation process and – at least from the point of view of sceptical voices – extremely long pre-accession period, provoked the critical discussion about the EU membership and its alternatives in several ECE societies, including Czech society.

Czech discourse and perception of the EU

Shortly after the Eastern Enlargement, Mats Braun analysed the contesting conceptions of the EU in the Czech political and public discourse, using Eriksen and Fossum's (2004) classification of three ideal types of   EU   role: 1) problem-solving regime; 2) value-based community; 3) rights-based union deriving its legitimacy from norms approved in a free and open debate (Braun 2005, pp.7-8). Specifically studying the two then dominating political parties alternating in the government – the liberal-conservative Civic Democratic Party (*Občanská demokratická strana*, ODS) and Czech Social Democratic Party (Česká *strana sociálně demokratická*, ČSSD) – Braun promptly exposed the lukewarm welcome of EU

membership by the ODS, as well as the weak position of pro-European actors within the ČSSD. Using the appellation 'marriage of convenience' (Braun 2005, p.15) he reflects the main motivation of Czech 'Thatcherians' such as ODS vice-chairman Jan Zahradil (who was leading the party ballot in the last four EP elections). As Braun notes, EU membership strengthened trade exchange, thus neoliberal Czech Eurosceptic economists and politicians such as Zahradil regarded the non-entry as the dramatic worsening of the Czech position. This was similar to Vaclav Klaus' discourse as the leader of the ODS in the 1990s and   2000s and his 'belief in the importance of deregulation and a reliance on the market, rather than on the government or EU institutions' (McManus 2022, p.141). On the other side, for the Euro-realists (pragmatics) and even more for the Eurosceptic in the party, the EU is an 'unnatural unit' and they 'argue that the EU is a state in making and thus a possible threat to Czech sovereignty' (Braun 2005, p. 13). As he summarises: 'The Czech Euro-realists faced a conflict between the perceived economic gains of membership in instrumental terms and the perceived losses of sovereignty according to the contextual rationalisation. Some Euro-realists´ heavy criticisms of the Constitutional treaty also fit into this pattern; because the Czech Republic is already a full member of the Union, the economic national interest is no longer at stake' (Braun 2005, p. 18).

Braun's analysis confirmed that Czech political actors are among the most sceptical regarding the development of the European integration process, including the deepening of European integration. In fact, 'Czech citizens have some of the most negative opinions in the whole Union on the EU and their country´s membership in it' (Bartovic 2016, p.48). Fortunately, this soft Euroscepticism did not dominate in Czech public debate before 2015. Quoting a famous Czech journalist Marek Švehla, Braun uses the metaphor 'refuelling station' to describe the dominating theme in Czech discourse on EU membership. 'This metaphor referred to the discussion on how much the different regions and municipalities in the country had "pumped" in benefits from the European Union' (Braun 2005, p.13). Presenting and reflecting the EU as the source of financial support became the predominant speech act by the mainstream parties – the abovementioned ODS and ČSSD, who led the governments from 1992 until 2017, as well as for the newcomer business-firm party ANO 2011 (*Movement of dissatisfied citizens*) established by the oligarch Andrej Babiš.

Furthermore, the cabinets following that of Vladimír Špidla (2002–2004), did not evince much

interest in EU affairs. In the first years after the EU accession, the Czech prime ministers Stanislav Gross, Jiří Paroubek and Mirek Topolánek showed little interest in European policy (Haughton 2009, p. 1385). The same might also be said about the 2010s, when leading figures such as Prime Minister Petr Nečas (2010–2013) and several leading politicians from the Social Democratic Party positively viewed China and often presented this actor as the 'alternative' to the EU. Furthermore, some of them also supported the presidents Václav Klaus (2003–2013) and Miloš Zeman (2013–2023) in their extensively pro-Russian policies (Waisová 2020).

Beneš and Harnisch (2015, p.156) present the Czech position in the European environment as the 'European dilemmas of a heretic'. As they point out, the 'Czech role learning was not linear; periods of alter-dominated Czech roles were often followed by the strengthening of self-expectations (ego part). The Czechs show a strong tendency towards negative demarcation vis-à-vis great powers as the significant (or even organized) other' (Beneš and Harnisch 2015, p.157). This might also be related to the differences between two leading parties – the ODS and ČSSD. The latter usually manifested more interest in the EU than the ODS, where the Eurosceptics were usually 'sent' to the EP, but leaders Topolánek and Nečas belonged to the Euro-realist faction in the party. For the Topolánek government (2006–2009), liberalisation of services was one of the key priorities. Analysts wondered about the inconsistency between the fact that the Czech Republic is heavily dependent on trade with EU member states and at the same time a recipient of EU support, but does not support greater harmonisation. In this respect, the government of Mirek Topolánek (2006-2009), which together with the British Conservatives was at the origin of the European Conservative and Reformist group, has been particularly criticised. (Haughton 2009, pp. 1378–1380). Let us stress that many observers consider the EU the actor which mitigates the strong neo-liberal stream in Czech politics. In this sense, the 'Europe effect' 'explains the continued support for social spending in the Czech Republic despite internal and external pressures to liberalize' (McManus 2022, p.147; Orenstein and Haas 2005, pp.132-133).

The economic dimension of the EU membership

Existing studies on the Czech position in the EU on the 10th anniversary of the EU entry clearly argue in favour of a positive effect of membership both economically and politically. The analyses estimated that the economic benefits of the 2004–2014 period were around €115 billion and 'that EU membership helped the Czech economy to grow by an extra 1.1 percent annually' (Bartovic 2016, p.45). Like all other nations in the new member states group, Czechia was economically supported from the beginning of the 1990s, and after their entry the sources from the EU´s funds dramatically increased. Czech regions and municipalities, as well as many other actors, were able to use the structural and cohesion funds for the improvement of infrastructure or environment, the strengthening of social services, etc. Czechia has had some problems with the use of funding in some years and sectors, in the last years these problems have been overcome and in February 2023 the Ministry for Regional Development, hosting the National Coordination Authority, declared that more than 86% of sources allocated for the period 2014–2020 were already reimbursed and that Czechia is among the EU member states with the highest success rate in the Union (the 4th place in July 2023).[3]

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3   ČR je úspěšná v čerpání fondů EU, o žádné peníze jsme nepřišli, Ministry of Regional Development, 8 February 2023, https://www.mmr.cz/cs/ostatni/web/novinky/cr-je-uspesna-v%C2%A0cerpani%C2%A0fondu-eu,-o-zadne-finance (accessed 2 April 2023).

This generally positive view is not shared by all actors. Firstly, recent analyses (cf. Klíma 2020) have clearly showed that the EU funds distributed within the operational programmes into the Czech cohesion regions (NUTS 2) created an environment for the growth of corrupt activities. Regarding both mainstream parties, the management of EU sources in the regions created the potential for party 'decentralisation', or in fact the establishment of strong regional structures acting often out of control of the party central office. Such a development – framed with the more general challenge of a fiscal crisis and subsequent crises – contributed to the 'electoral earthquakes' in Czechia in 2010, 2013 and 2017, and the growth of newcomer and challenger parties with anti-corruption, and in many ways also anti-EU, rhetoric.

Generally, corruption is still one of the key challenges regarding Czech politics, economy and society. Not only have analysts, NGOs and think-tanks repeatedly suggested that several sectors – such as railway infrastructure, military procurement and the energy sector – are still prone to corruption, but so has the European Commission (Rohac 2016, p.14). The challenger and rhetorically anti-corruption movement ANO led by Andrej Babiš as the main government party in 2017–2021 did not mitigate these problems and suspicions. On the contrary, during the pandemic it promoted pro-Chinese and even pro-Russian vaccine-diplomacy and the extremely expensive purchase of protective tools from China outside the regular selection process. Furthermore, government cooperation with President Zeman was also negatively influencing the selection process for new nuclear blocks in favour of China and Russia (Waisová 2020).

We still have to stress that 'the magnitude of the material and social progress seen in CE since the end of the Cold War should not be discounted. . . . The four Visegrád countries count among the most stellar successes of the transition' (Rohac 2016, pp.1-2). For the V4 as a whole, however, it is true that the general economic success, measurable e.g. by GDP growth or the position of the group's economies compared to some of the countries of the southern wing of the EU-15, has long been suppressed by populist rhetoric portraying the EU as an undemocratic project with the dominant position of the older member states, especially Germany. As Hloušek (2023, p.218) promptly suggested: 'After the economic crisis in 2008, the Europeanization of ECE politics was rather quickly replaced with the politicisation of European integration fuelled mainly by nationalist and Eurosceptic politicians.'

Here we observe the visible paradox linked to the unprecedented economic growth after 1989. On the other hand, such growth was not distributed 'equally' and analyses (Ágh 2019; Ther 2015) stress the creation of two visible economic (but also cultural/value) components: 'well-developed "European" cities and an "Asian" backward countryside, being two worlds apart with different worldviews' (Ágh 2019, p.140). Although this evaluation might sound overly dramatic, parliamentary election results in all V4-countries display a continual strengthening of this cleavage or 'relevant political distinctions between globalists and nativists, between supporters of open and closed societies, or between people from "nowhere" and people from "somewhere"' (Tucker 2020, p.200).

The feeling of insufficient growth and economic decline is one of the most significant polarising factors in the Czech Republic and other V4 countries. The maps of election results repeatedly show fundamental differences in the voting behaviour of western and eastern Poland, western Slovakia and other Slovak regions, as well as Czech cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants and other settlements.

Growth of populism, weak Europeanisation and the 'Visegrad Effect'

As already presented above, for important Czech political actors – political parties, as well as the last two presidents – the EU represents above all the   external actor. This tendency already became visible regarding the main right-wing party – ODS – in the late 1990s, when the more pro-European faction left the party. Since then, the party has been balancing between the Euro-realist and Eurosceptic position, and the most Eurosceptic actors were continually leaving the party and often fighting against the party and the EU. Considering the fact that Czech society is among the most Eurosceptic in the Union, we can even better understand why the Czech Republic belongs among the countries often understood as 'problematic' within the institutional framework of and in the ideological debate on the prospects of European integration (Kaniok 2014). As, for example, the 'contrastive' analysis of the Czech and Slovenian EU presidencies showed, the Czech Republic might be understood as a 'foot-dragger' and 'trouble-maker' within the EU (Drulák *et al*. 2010). Naturally, the continually deepening 'anti-EU' and pro-Russian position of Klaus, his provocative equations of the EU with the Soviet Union and criticism against the 'Sovietization of the EU' and the 'dominating left in Brussels' – which he shares with recent Central European leaders such as Jaroslaw Kaczyński and Viktor Orbán /(Fehr 2016, p.68) – and other similar steps, contributed to the Czech Republic's Eurosceptic label.

Nevertheless, Klaus's successors Topolánek and Nečas also contributed to the Eurosceptic (or at least Eurorealist) label connected with the ODS. Basically, it was the ODS that started building up the Eurosceptic image of Czech politics within the European Parliament, when – together with the Polish Law and Justice (PiS) party and the British Conservative Party – they established the new Eurosceptic faction in the EP after the 2009 EP-elections, namely the European conservative and reformist group. Paradoxically, in many aspects the Euroscepticism of the ODS EP-faction overlap with the position of the conservative and nostalgic ultra-left Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia (*Komunistická strana Čech a Moravy*, KSČM), which has been in the EP continually since 2004. Specifically, we have to mention their criticism against the EU as the new emerging power – and thus a threat for Czech sovereignty (Cabada 2015). Since 2015, such a position as well as one on the migration crisis have been adopted by President Zeman as well as newcomer parties and actors with nativist features, which usually take a more radical approach than the 'historical' parties from the period before the electoral earthquakes. Examples of such parties are both parties established by the Czech nativist T. Okamura – Dawn of Direct Democracy and later Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie*, SPD), as well as the Eurosceptic party Tricolour.

An even more alarming trend is the 'mainstreamisation' of nativism as the accompanying feature of the anti-EU stance in the V4. Here, the Hungarian Fidesz and Polish PiS parties – and more so their leaders – are the clear trend-setters not only in the region, but also in the EU. Furthermore, in the V4 the migration issues not only affected the far-right parties or national conservative mainstream parties, but also increased the soft Eurosceptic stances among historically rather pro-integration parties like the Czech Social Democratic Party and Direction – Slovak Social Democracy (*Smer*). 'The migration crisis exacerbated trends towards a sinister mixture of populism, Euroscepticism, and sovereigntist discourses among CEE parties' (Hloušek 2023). We are witnessing the 'return' of traditionalism in the V4 with regional aspects but also national 'specifics' – in Czechia and Slovakia we repeatedly observe a national-conservative 'coalition' of (former) Communists and pan-Slavic (pro-Russian) conservative streams, both with Eurosceptic tendencies. In Czechia, such

a government was led by A. Babiš in 2017–2021, whose movement created the minority cabinet with Social Democrats (thereby strengthening the nativist faction) and with the support of both extremes, the Communist Party and SPD. Babiš and President Zeman created a specific anti-EU duopoly during this period.

Hard Czech Eurosceptics 'deem West European powers as simply too dangerous, too arrogant, too dominating and too perfidious to accept the "Lisbon dictate"' (Beneš and Harnisch 2015, p.159). By these actors, Czexit is presented as the only tool to save the national sovereignty. The Eurorealists, or soft/pragmatic Eurosceptics, 'share some of the arguments of the hard sceptics – they singled out the strengthening of the great (most populous) states. . . . While they do not deny the perfidiousness of West European great powers, they see the EU as a bulwark against one even more perfidious and dominating great power – Russia' (Beneš and Harnisch 2015, p.159). Considering the development after 2015, even the last sentence might be problematised. Czech president Zeman, Hungarian prime minister Orbán and former Slovak prime minister and leader of the strongest Slovakian party Fico repeatedly showed their affinity towards Russia, even after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. In the Czech Republic, this role was taken up not only by the radical Freedom and Direct Democracy movement, but especially by Andrej Babiš, who repeatedly spoke out with clearly anti-Ukrainian and anti-European rhetoric.

In this sense, Ágh (2019, p.4) points to a clear strategy enacted by several ECE nations' elite in the post-accession crisis of the 2000s and even more during the global crisis in the 2010s 'to build up a nativist identity politics by blaming "Brussels" for all the problems in their own countries'. The catching-up process is presented as unsuccessful as far as the old EU member states did not accept the new members as fully equal. The new EU member nations became European, but within another Europe than was expected. 'Basically, the cultural identity in ECE – a firm commitment of ECE populations to being proud European citizens, which is reflected in history as an attachment to European values – has been in contrast to an alienation from Europe in terms of several EU policies because of the relative failure of the catching-up process within the EU' (Ágh 2019, p.22). As Ágh summarises, within the concept of differentiated integration, ECE became the 'Periphery-2' next to the older 'Periphery-1 (South)'. The EU-spatial framework also includes two cores – Core-1: West-Continental and Core-2: Nordic EU and 'the ECE region has become the direct semi-periphery of Core-1' (Ágh 2019, pp.44-46).

All this produced a new round of sovereignty-based conflict that 'has been the long-standing basic frame of ECE political communication, with regular offensives against "enemies", culminating in a hate campaign during the refugee crisis. In this recent stage the historical trajectory of populism from above with its primarilly cultural and nativist profile, identity politics gets the upper hand. Paternalistic elite populism has introduced an economic nationalism discourse with a strong anti-EU rhetoric' (Ágh 2019, p.121). Such conclusions are fully in scope with other recent observations labelling the V4 the populist cooperation and leader-driven format oriented against the Western institutions, including the EU (cf. Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi 2021). We should not forget that such a development also reflects the existence of a specific political culture in ECE, prone to nationalism and parochialism, which is still widely shared by vast parts of the population. Politicians can quickly mobilise civil society to support un-civil policies (Navrátil and Kluknavská 2020). Of course, this negative element is balanced by the existence of a different, liberal political culture, as we can see from the latest election results in Slovenia, but also in the Czech Republic. At the same time, we should not overestimate such a positive perception of an 'alternative' to a

rather parochial political culture, and on the contrary underestimate the power of anti-European nativism in the region, incl. Czechia.

All this leads to the very paradoxical situation where 'the ECE governments demand assistance from the EU but refuse to comply with European rules and values' (Ágh 2019, p.206). In other words, the 'adaptational pressures decreased after the CEE states reached the milestone of full EU membership. The pressure to comply with EU standards provoked opposition and adverse reactions from the outset: Euroscepticism (public and party), shallow Europeanisation, and illiberal democracy' (Hloušek 2023).

Shortly after May 2004, the V4 declared itself the successful role-model for the candidate countries and promoter of their upcoming EU membership. In addition to building its position as a model and mediator of 'Europeanization' and European policies toward the Western Balkans, the V4 has attempted to promote itself as an alternative or – neutrally speaking – an additional group of countries that introduces agendas within the EU and profiles itself as a significant collective actor. For instance, according to Michal Kořan (2012, pp.208-209), after 2009 the V4 changed its rather defensive style and began to offer significantly more proactive stances 'when it emphasized its ambition to become one of the needed and energizing factors in the project of European integration as its goal'.

The image of the V4 was clearly damaged during and beyond 2015 and the migration crisis. The V4's actions since 2015 show that regional cooperation can act as a motor but also a brake on European integration. Aside from the restrictive approach to migration, the V4 became infamous for its controversial constitutional steps taken by governments in Budapest and Warsaw, as well as dramatic conflict of interest by then Prime Minister Babiš. 'These non-liberal tendencies have only strengthened the image of the Visegrad as a backwards group of post-communist countries that are unable to integrate into a modern and multiculturally conceived Europe' (Hokovský 2017, p.54). Despite the clear leading position of V. Orbán within the V4 after 2010, the colourful and growing group of Czech Eurosceptics strongly contributed to the transformation of the V4 into the populist group with very problematic relations with the EU institutions and European mainstream.

From a European studies standpoint, the image of V4 as the 'laggards' – while they often see and present themselves as 'pioneers' (Koller in Cabada and Waisová 2018) – is not accurate. Firstly, we must stress the problematic position of the EU-12 member states within the EU institutions, in other words the visible dominance of EU-15 nations. Furthermore, we should not overlook the passivity of EU institutions regarding the clear rule of law violation (not only) in several ECE countries. 'A very lenient posture and delayed action of the EU Commission (and of member states) concerning the enforcement of the EU Rule of Law mechanism in the cases of Hungary and Poland has led to an ambiguous situation in EU politics and governance!' (Walsch 2022, pp.54–55). This led to even greater assertiveness of populist leaders in the V4 countries, who began to question the entire liberal international order (ibid; Söderbaum, Spandler and Pacciardi 2021).

Nevertheless, the V4 – including Czechia – was proposing important changes in EU policies: alongside migration and external border protection we have to mention energy security as well as further enlargement and focus on the Eastern Partnership. 'Under the Visegrad umbrella, the member governments have signalled their support for moving forward with the EU´s energy union plan, completing an internal energy market, and completing the North-South gas Corridor' (Schmitt 2016, p.24). Let us also mention the creation of the V4 EU Battlegroup in 2016. Last, we have to stress the dramatic change after February 2022, which showed the potential of the new member states,

but also undermined the picture of the V4 as (problematic) like-units within the EU. It was precisely in this difficult situation that the Czech presidency of the EU Council took place in the second half of 2022, which led, among other things, to a new security consensus within the EU and at the same time to the gradual emptying of the V4 by the new Czech executive – the government and, from March 2023, the newly elected president.

Conclusion

Czech foreign policy priorities in the 1990s 'were heavily concentrated on the accession to NATO and the European Union. The focus on these two goals created the illusion that Czech foreign policy elites shared a consensual view of the country´s future. . . . Today, many important foreign policy issues, including the nature of Czech security commitments as well as the involvement in European integration, have become subject to debate, with political differences growing rather than decreasing' (Kratochvíl 2015, p.12). Specifically, through the prism of the V4 membership, but also based on the visible and stable Eurorealist positions of both, the society and political actors, Czechia was often regarded as a 'heretic' and a 'trouble-maker'. Nevertheless, the development after February 2022 offered another picture of the nation, as well as the V4. Poland, Czechia and Slovakia officially accepted in total about 3 million Ukrainian refugees from the war, and hopefully shattered the image of bandwagoners not really contributing to the all-European development. All nations, as well as other ECE countries – with the very visible and problematic exception of Hungary – strongly support Ukraine with military and humanitarian supplies. Along with the Baltic states, Poland and Czechia became the most visible opponents of any attempts for appeasement at times coming from important EU-15 countries. It seems that during the crisis caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, these nations – including the new Czech government led by Petr Fiala, as well as the new president Petr Pavel – clearly showed their European identity and respect towards human rights and international law. The new Czech-Polish cooperation is perceived as very promising in other spheres as well, including one of the key general policies – namely the European Green Deal.[4]

All this does not mean that the visible attempt 'to reverse the legacies of Westernisation and Europeanisation set after the fall of communist regimes at the end of the 1980s' (Hloušek 2023) should be forgotten or ignored. We must still be fully aware that the successful transition and general improvement in ECE should not be taken for granted. 'Populist and short-sighted responses to the financial crisis have inflicted lasting damage on some CE economies. On metrics of corruption, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic are performing worse than 10 years ago, These problems stem from a common source: the lingering weakness of Central European institutions' (Rohac 2016, p.1). Indeed, the Russian aggression against Ukraine confirmed again that 'especially for the new member states from Central and Eastern Europe such as the Czech Republic, external and geopolitical vulnerabilities are also significant in preference formation' Haughton (2009, p. 1386).

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4   "Czechia and Poland are significant political players and have the potential to develop activities that would support a green economy. These two industrial powers can be strategic partners and leaders not only within the region, but also in the European Union as a whole (Nemecek, Yada and Kuzmanova 2023, p.1).

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