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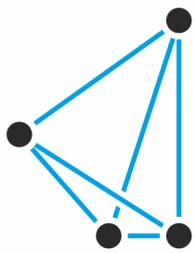
# POLICY BRIEF

2019/December

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**Myths and realities of an East-West divide in EU policymaking: A case study of V4's approach to the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten selection process and the upcoming budget negotiations**

*Zuzana Podracká*



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The rhetoric of divide(s) has been a constant underlying feature of the European Union discussions since the first wave of eastward enlargement of the Union in 2004. When the former Soviet bloc countries first became part of the European family, they metaphorically and literally sat at the back listening, defined by their status as new members. The expectation was that these countries would adjust their behaviour according to the leadership of the old EU core. Fifteen years on, the dynamics has shifted from the old vs. new member states to an apparently omnipresent East-West divide. Central and Eastern European member states have been gaining confidence and adopting a rather strong, arguably contrarian, stance on some of the key issues that will define the future of the Union. Regardless of that framework, the rhetoric of 'us vs. Brussels' has certainly remained a constant feature of the way EU matters are presented by political leaders on a national level. Having interviewed researchers and advisors from the European Parliament, the European Commission and Brussels-based think tanks, this paper will look at the 2019 Spitzenkandidaten selection process and the next EU budget negotiations to determine the extent of the East-West divide by looking at whether the V4 countries have become constructive players on the European Union level of policymaking.

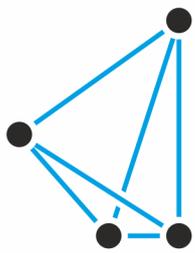
Few points are worth establishing here. In broad terms, the East-West divide does exist given the differences in recent historical experience, and the consequential differences in political culture and economic conditions. As Francesco Ronchi of the S&D pointed out, there is a differentiation of sensitivities and approach between the East and West on concepts including liberalism, cosmopolitanism, rule of law or national sovereignty; the latter being crucial to the Spitzenkandidaten process.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the relative simplicity of this divide, however, lies the complexity of growing divisions across the EU - a North-South divide that plays out in economic policy especially, and a growing return to stronger nationalism within the Union. According to Andrea Laskava of the EPP group in the European Parliament, the shared effort to always look for the European point of view on any given issue increasingly tends to give way to catering to the national position first.<sup>2</sup> As of yet, this trend has not been halted by any development or policy and is thus likely to persist, fuelling the regional factions based on common interests across the Union, including, but not limited to those built on the East-West axis.

The advantage of the V4 joining forces on issues that require coalition building is self-explanatory, however, to perceive the V4 as a homogenous block would certainly be a misconception. Ralph Pine of the EU Commission admitted that one will think of the V4 as a bloc only until they delve deeper into a particular file. Though the V4 has shown a particularly strong common stance regarding the Spitzenkandidaten process and candidates, they differ significantly on issues of foreign policy (the stance towards China or Russia, or the stance towards common European defence and NATO

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Francesco Ronchi, Information Union, Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, European Parliament, Brussels, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Andrea Laskava, Presidency, European People's Party, European Parliament, Brussels, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2019



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especially), economic policy (with Slovakia being the only member of the eurozone out of the four countries), even issues concerning the rule of law.<sup>3</sup> In Pine's words, 'if you look closely, you see nuances in every field; the political environment is not the same in every country and the pressures on the national leaders are not the same either.'<sup>4</sup> The V4 countries cannot completely escape the geographical, historical or political links with their neighbours, and the V4 as a unit can carry more weight than the countries alone in some cases. To think that the V4 does and has to agree on everything at all levels of regional and EU policymaking, however, is a misleading, unsubstantiated assumption to make.

A closely related point is that the perception, value and leverage of the V4 as a coalition varies from one EU institution to another. In the European Council – a body of primary importance to the V4 countries – and in the European Parliament, consensus is key. As emphasized by Charles de Marcilly of the EPSC, the vast majority of the Commission's proposals between 2014-2020 have been accepted by the Council without having to go to a vote.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore crucial to not only stick to your own country's position, but to constantly look for ways to build coalitions. If a country wants to strive for more than just expediting political capital on constantly opposing something, they should strive to be part of be 'coalitions of the willing, rather than coalitions of the blocking'.<sup>6</sup> The V4 dimension is especially diluted when it comes to the European Parliament, as the national political parties are scattered across the different major political families,<sup>7</sup> and the building of coalitions takes place on the basis of the issue at hand rather than geographical divisions. The presence and influence of the V4 (and CEE more broadly) has also increased significantly both in the EPP and the S&D group.<sup>8</sup> The framing as well as allocation of the new EU Commission portfolios reflects the importance of the region, but here too the V4 needs to work on consistence and coalition building; in Mancilly's words, 'if you are always outside the room crying, nobody can listen to you, because we can shut the door'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Whilst Hungary draws ever so close to Russia, <https://euobserver.com/political/146485>, Poland's willingness to engage Russia is 'limited' <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-poland-russia-macron/poland-sees-limited-room-for-russia-diplomacy-despite-macron-overtures-idUSKBN1YH1YA>. For a more thorough analysis on the perspectives of the V4 regarding European security, please see GLOBSEC Policy Institute's analysis by Zaborowski, M. 'Central Europe and European Defence Integration', Bratislava, Nov 2019. <https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/CE-and-European-defence-integration-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ralph Pine, Secretariat General, European Commission, Brussels, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2019

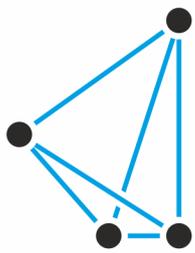
<sup>5</sup> Interview with Charles de Marcilly, European Political and Strategy Centre, European Commission, Brussels, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Charles de Marcilly, European Political and Strategy Centre, European Commission, Brussels, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019

<sup>7</sup> Whilst the majority of the Polish MEPs belong to the ECR party fraction for example, Slovak and Hungarian MEPs are mostly in EPP and Renew is the strongest party for the Czechs. <https://www.votewatch.eu/en/term9-european-party-groups.html>.

<sup>8</sup> According to VoteWatch data, the number of seats held by CEE countries in the four biggest European Parliament party fractions (EPP, S&D, ECR and Renew Europe) has increased from 2014 to 2015; the V4 itself holds 97 seats: <https://www.votewatch.eu/en/term9-european-party-groups.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Charles de Marcilly, European Political and Strategy Centre, European Commission, Brussels, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019



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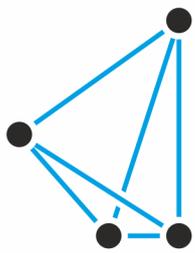
Judging by the press and public statements, the Spitzenkandidaten process is a prime example of the somewhat ‘troublemaking’ role of the V4.<sup>10</sup> Following the failure of the June 2019 European Council, Emmanuel Macron expressed doubts about the benefits of enlargement, and it was widely speculated that ‘the East’ was kept out of the top jobs in the new Commission as a consequence. Yet, my interviewees saw the V4’s criticisms as legitimate part of the discussion on the issue, which by no means simply confirmed the East-West divide. To begin with, though the stance of Frans Timmermans towards the rule of law issue in Poland and Hungary certainly played a role, as Laskava points out, the rejection of a particular candidate’s platform is a valid position to take if the Spitzenkandidaten process is to be taken as a political process in its own right, akin to elections on national level. More importantly, V4’s opposition to the Spitzenkandidaten process was not just about the candidates themselves. On a more fundamental level, it was an expression of their opposition to anything that gives the Commission more power and legitimacy to act independently of the Council. According to Pine, the V4 countries are especially opposed to any automaticity of the process, i.e. the idea that the lead candidate of the winning party is automatically the next Commission President. Whilst this does point to an East-West divide in the sense of the V4’s reluctance to get onboard with the process of further integration, it also remains a fact that they were far from alone in their view. The entire reform of the election process, from Spitzenkandidaten to European candidature lists, much as it was needed<sup>11</sup> was opposed by small and big countries including France. The opposition of Macron has even been speculatively linked to the sudden turn of the Renew group away from advocating for the reform. In addition, the issue also encountered strong opposition institutionally, in the administrative part of the Council, as it was seen as diminishing the treaty-based rights of the Council to pick a candidate for the Commission. The way the issue was communicated did demonstrate a certain weakness on part of the V4; some of my interviewees even saw their opposition to Frans Timmermans especially as an unnecessary expiation of political capital that could have been used in a more constructive manner. Nonetheless, their view was seen as a legitimate part of the discussion on the future of the EU that was rooted in, but not constrained by the East-West divide.

The V4’s attitude towards the proposed budget changes too reveal an aspect of EU policymaking that is not confined to the issue of an East-West divide necessarily, but reveals a political reality that is in some ways similar to politics at a national level. The proposed cuts to the budget are more of a mathematical than a political issue. Given UK’s departure, the EU member states have the the option to either accept cuts

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<sup>10</sup> <https://visegradinsight.eu/winning-by-losing-in-the-eu/>

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed reasoning regarding the institutional reform, please see ‘A Europe that delivers: Institutional options for making the European Union’s work more efficient’ The European Commission’s contribution to the Informal Leaders meeting of February 2018, Brussels, COM (2018) 95 final.



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or agree to contribute more<sup>12</sup> and the V4 appears to dig their heels in a little, not willing to concede to either. That being said, the element of fighting to keep items and policies in the budget that are important to the individual member states is an issue that goes beyond regional consideration. The same goes for the aspect of communicating the issue back to their domestic audiences - being able to prove that the national leaders are fighting to keep the funding flowing where it needs to is a popular political instrument, and a widely used one at that. The key point of contestation for the V4 countries are the cohesion funds, which are coincidentally key if the East-West divide that persists on an economic level is to be bridged. Though the differences run much deeper than that, economic convergence (aided by cohesion funds) is a key prerequisite to ensuring that long term, the V4 can be a constructive partner capable of negotiating and implementing EU's ambitions in the upcoming multiannual financial framework.

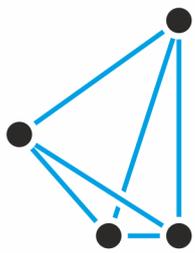
One more conclusion has been drawn across the political and non-governmental spectrum – the East-West divide does not have to remain a source of inequality of approach, perceived or real, however comfortable it might be to use that rhetoric to win political points at home. It can instead become a basis for broader coalitions on issues that the V4 cares about and is in a unique position to bring constructive proposals forward. Given the growing strength of V4 (and CEE's) in the European Parliament, and the positions the V4 has been given in the new EU Commission, there is a huge untapped potential for the V4 countries, as a bloc or individually, to use their leverage to a much greater extent. V4's unique geographical position and expertise on the EU neighborhood, especially the Western Balkans, is an opportunity for the V4 to be agenda setters rather than agenda followers on the matter. Slovakia as the only member of the eurozone is well placed to do more than simply follow the dominant (usually German) trend on matters of economic governance. Poland's role in shaping the Common Agricultural Policy is key, even more so given that Poland has secured the Agriculture portfolio in the new Commission. Some of my interviewees argued that contrary to the V4 and CEE being seen as second class members and denied key positions, they have by now been given considerable amount of power; all they have to do is capitalise on it.

The fundamental differences between the V4 and the Western EU member states are likely to remain for some time, and the V4 still has some way to go in terms of the way it communicates its points and protests, both at home and at the EU level. However, the points they bring to the discussion are valid and according to Laskava, the V4 countries have a deeply rooted pragmatism that eventually prevails (bar on the institutional and moral questions), and this attitude is well respected by their European partners.<sup>13</sup> There are many opportunities for the V4 countries to become agenda setters, rather than agenda followers in time, especially as the West more often than not meets them halfway. The V4 countries have a strong tendency to play the victim, but the key point to remember according to de Marcilly is that regardless of whether

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<sup>12</sup> <https://euobserver.com/institutional/146814>

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Andrea Laskava, Presidency, European People's Party, European Parliament, Brussels, 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2019



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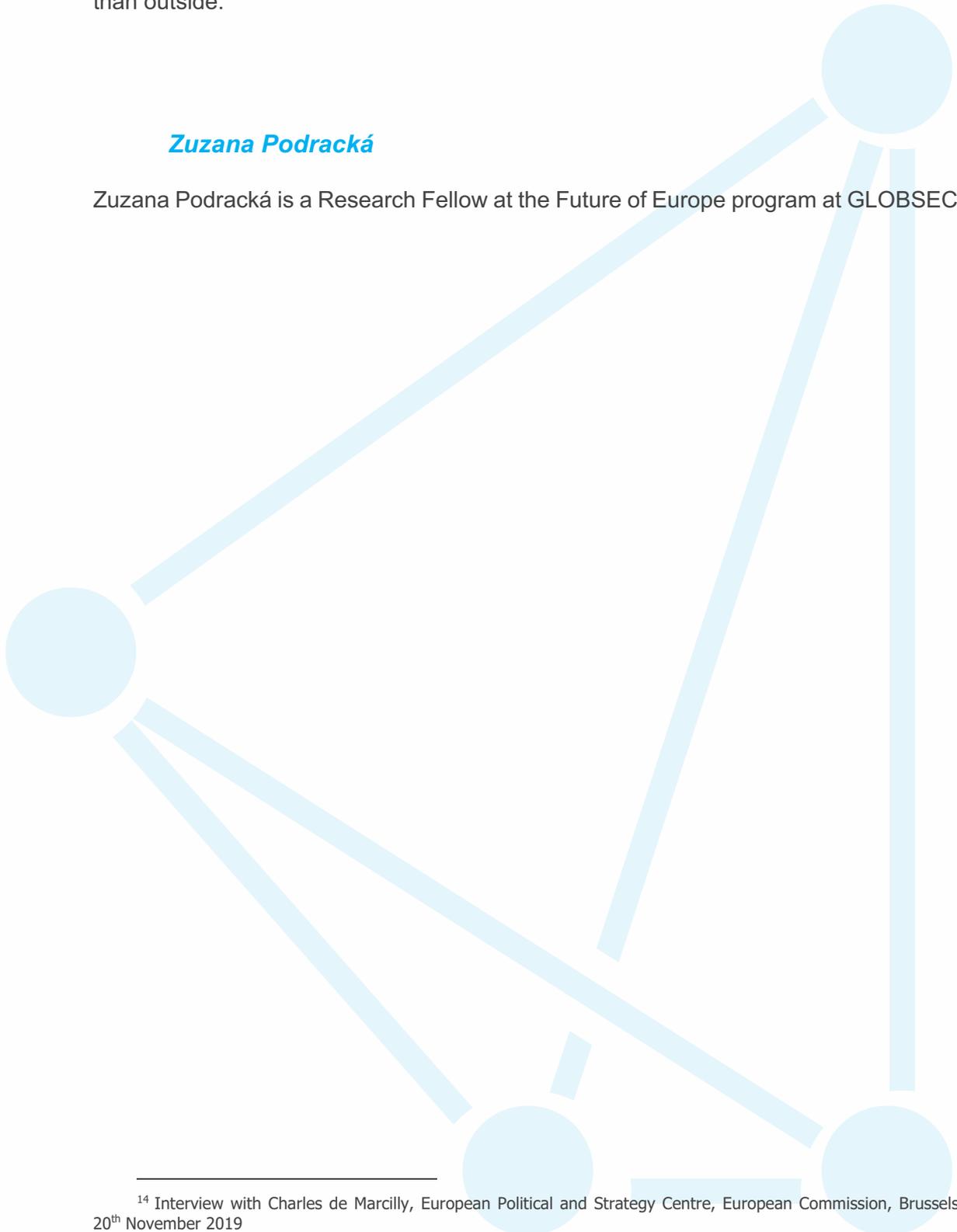
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you are going to sit at the table, or cry on the floor, it is better to do it inside the room than outside.<sup>14</sup>

## *Zuzana Podracká*

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Charles de Marcilly, European Political and Strategy Centre, European Commission, Brussels, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2019



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