



Report

V4 and larger regional platforms: Convergence or competition?

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On 21st April 2021, Think Visegrad in Brussels and the Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy organised an online webinar ‘V4 and larger regional platforms: Convergence or competition?’. Main focus of the discussion was put on the impact of Three Seas Initiative (3SI) and 17+1 platform on the cooperation within the Visegrad Group and its compliance with the platforms mentioned.

The event was opened with words of welcome delivered by **Žiga Faktor**, Head of Brussels Office of EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy, and a keynote speech of **Ambassador Edit Szilágyiné Bátorfi**, Executive Director of the International Visegrad Fund. Panel discussion was moderated by **Jana Juzová**, Research Fellow at EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy.

Tackling the first point of debate on the compliance of larger regional platforms with the V4, **Alica Kizeková**, Senior Researcher at Institute of International Relations Prague highlighted the specifics and possible shortcomings of the cooperation with China within 17+1 platform. **Konrad Poplawski**, Head of Central European Department, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), emphasized that 17+1 platform was initiated to develop economic and political relations with China which was, at that moment, underrepresented in the region. However, given to the diversity of the platform and countries represented, as such was not tailor suited for the CEE.

Adding to the previous argument, **Tomáš Strážay**, Director of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, noted that in the last decade various new formats of cooperation emerged in the region such which raised a question to which extent these platforms (3SI and 17+1, but also C5) complement the Visegrad Group. Furthermore, Strážay emphasized that some countries are still reluctant to be fully active in these new platforms, as have different priorities and are coping with different issues. That might bring certain danger to for the continuation of both 17+1 a 3SI. However, both initiatives can be characterized by the words of diversity and work in progress where tangible results are not yet visible. Regional ownership might play in favor of 3SI as it was

originated and promoted by Poland, while 17+1 is initiated by China. For Slovakia, EU-China dialogue stays as a main instrument for the communication, while 17+1, although potentially useful, stays on a lower level and should only serve to discuss specific issues such as infrastructure, economic development and investments.

Over the past decade a lot of infrastructural projects in the EU were done on a track East-West, while only few of them tried to also link V4 countries. Because of that, it is not a surprise that these regions started to look for the alternatives, emphasized **Márton Ugrósy**, Director of Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, adding that great powers, such as China recognized this opportunity. There are notable differences between two platforms. While 3SI mostly focuses on the business side such as projects, investment fund and how existing projects are contributing to the economic cooperating in the region, 17+1 is build more as a political format. However, everything that is done in the region should be in line with the commitments to the EU and NATO and existing initiatives should come thereafter, despite the high expectation that countries have from these additional formats.

Second part of the debate touched upon the question of geopolitical aspects of the platforms. **Alica Kizeková** emphasized that currently countries struggle not only with how to handle pandemic, but also how to save multilateralism. What is needed is that CEE countries step up from geopolitical game and create joint projects that are feasible, using existing frameworks as opportunity. She mentioned that strengthened internal cooperation of V4 countries, when engaging with China, is crucial for future investments in the region. Also, when settling those deals, the V4 could reach out to other EU members states such as Germany, or Benelux countries who have more experience with Chinese investments.

As **Konrad Poplawski** highlighted, existence of geopolitical rivalry in the world put a burden on these platforms, adding that China tried to use 17+1 as a geopolitical tool. Certain geopolitical aspect can relate as well with 3SI, since those countries are not only the part of the EU, but as well share similar



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attitude towards the US and NATO. Despite the 3SI being a young format, it already singled out as a driver for closer relation between US and the Western Europe, especially during the Trump administration, which showed that 3SI can serve as a tool for strengthening transatlantic agenda.

Pointing to the previous argument posed that EU membership is crucial for V4 countries, **Tomáš Strážay** noted that the EU can serve as some sort of shelter against non-transparent procedures, that are existing in some countries such as Western Balkans. Concerning the 3SI, Strážay added that some countries seek reassurance, especially from Poland, that 3SI should focus on sectoral policies and as such doesn't have any political aspirations. Building upon the debate on EU membership, **Ugródsy** stressed that the EU rules apply as well to outside projects and as such 3SI could be overloaded with administrative burden that arises from existing EU rules, requiring additional time and resources for compliance.

Debate was concluded with the discussion on 3SI and 17+1 influence on V4 cooperation. **Kizeková** pointed out that 17+1 platform as such served, especially in the early stages, as a point for divergence and internal division for the V4 countries. However, nowadays can serve as a good impetus for strengthening space and connectivity between the V4 and serve as a good learning experience. 3SI as such can be complementary to the V4, however it is not likely that any of the existing initiatives can substitute V4 because of similarities between countries, level of growth and development, concluded **Poplawski**. In light with this, **Strážay** added that 3SI initiative is complementary to the V4 cooperation. Further, it is useful to have another format that is looking at the same direction and promote projects that can bring added value to the region. However, in the future, it is likely that all big infrastructural projects would be financed by the EU and from different sources. Added value of 3SI for the region can be in the projects that are not financed by the EU and that are complementary to the big ones.



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EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy is a non-profit, non-partisan, and independent think-tank focusing on European integration and cohesion. EUROPEUM contributes to democracy, security, stability, freedom, and solidarity across Europe as well as to active engagement of the Czech Republic in the European Union. EUROPEUM undertakes original research, organizes public events and educational activities, and formulates new ideas and recommendations to improve European and Czech policy making.

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Building on a long history of EUROPEUM in Prague, we opened our office in Brussels in January 2016. EUROPEUM has been the first think-tank from the Central Europe to branch out to the heart of the European Union. Our motivation has been to follow the debates on EU policies and politics from close and to contribute to them by strengthening the voice of the Czech Republic and other central and east European countries. At the same time, we would like to use our Brussels presence to boost discussions on the EU back in the region, through introducing research by Brussels-based experts, offering their perspective at local events, cooperating with the media, etc.

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