

# Illiberal democracies, the Visegrad Group and future prospects for the EU

## Expert workshop on the growing divide between Central European States, West Europe and the future of the EU

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Sala Jordi Maragall, CIDOB. Elisabets 12, 08001 Barcelona

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### **Background**

The last few months have witnessed a growing divide between the central European states and the Germany-Brussels tandem. The refugee crisis has sparked bitter reactions among the governments of Hungary and Poland regarding Germany's and the European Commission's proposals to jointly tackle the crisis. In addition, the October elections in Poland gave the absolute majority to the Eurosceptic Law and Justice Party (PiS), who has joined up with Hungary's Viktor Orbán to establish an alliance of "illiberal democracies".

The growing divide between the Visegrad Group (the so-called V4, formed by the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia) and the EU also happens at a time when the EU faces several threats of disintegration, including the effects of the Eurocrisis and the Brexit referendum. This group of countries continues to benefit from the EU's contribution to their societies and economies (either in the form of structural or cohesion funds), yet their distance from the core of the Union keeps growing.

This workshop will be aimed at exploring the causes of this growing divide, the genealogy of the so-called East-West crisis in the EU, the politics of V4 countries –in particular Hungary and Poland- and the EU's response to the political reforms initiated by Orbán and the PiS. To what extent is the fracture between East and West Europe here to stay? Is it only a matter of time until these countries elect more EU-friendly governments? What degree of internal opposition do they face? Is the alliance of the V4 strong enough to counterbalance Germany's leadership? What are the consequences of Poland and Germany's growing distance? What are the prospects for the resolution of EU crisis, particularly the refugee crisis?

## DRAFT PROGRAMME

09.15 **Welcome remarks**

**Jordi Bacaria**, Director, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)  
**Gero Maass**, Delegate, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Spain

09.30 **Session 1: An alliance of "illiberal democracies"? The political situation in V4 countries**

When Viktor Orbán came to power in 2010, he pioneered the birth of Europe's illiberalism. He introduced the constitutional reforms and limits to the freedom of press that would be later replicated by PiS in Poland. Illiberalism has been embraced by government parties but also faces even more populist threats by far-right parties like Jobbik. Despite divergences persist among V4 countries (for example regarding the relations with Russia), is an alliance taking shape around illiberalism? What is the relation of the forces in government with more extreme parties? What domestic political agenda have they put forward and what's the likelihood of their survival?

*Chair:* **María Pallares**, Program Coordinator, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Spain  
**Michal Vít**, Research Fellow, Europeum Institute for European Policy, Czech Republic  
**András Bíró-Nagy**, Co-director, Policy Solutions; Research Fellow, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Hungary  
**Katarzyna Szymielewicz**, President, Foundation Panoptykon, Poland

11.00 **Coffee Break**

11.30 **Session 2: The V4 and the refugee crisis**

The refugee crisis has offered a new opportunity for EU-bashing to V4 countries. Their opposition to the relocation of refugees suggested by the European Commission and their opposition to Germany's handling of the crisis has been the most prominent example of the formation of the V4 alliance. Anti-migrant rhetoric has gained ground in all of them. What is the criticism of V4 countries with regards to the refugee crisis? What is their alternative agenda? How has the V4 common voice and strategy been articulated? Is this common agenda signalling an expanding drift between East and West Europe?

*Chair:* **Blanca Garcés**, Associate Researcher, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)  
**Máté Szalai**, Research Fellow, Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Hungary  
**Vít Beneš**, Research Fellow, Institute of International Relations, Czech Republic  
**Jarosław Kuisz**, Editor in chief, Polish online weekly newspaper Kultura Liberalna

13.00 **Lunch**

14.00 **Session 3: Prospects for the EU and the European integration crisis**

Trust in the EU is falling sharply in V4 countries. This reveals a broader malaise regarding the health of the European integration project and speaks about Europe's accumulation of crises in the last few years. However, V4 countries continue to be net beneficiaries of EU funds and have witnessed a progressive consolidation of better living conditions since their accession to the EU. At the same time, there is a growing divide between Brussels and V4 capitals, especially since the European Commission started to investigate PiS-led reforms. Some observers even hinted at the possibility that the EU removes voting rights and funding to those countries legislating against European values. What does this divide tell us about the state of the European project? Is it possible to overcome? How can an ever more divided Europe face the multiple challenges it faces?

*Chair:* **Pol Morillas**, Research Fellow, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs (CIDOB)  
**Josef Janning**, Senior Policy Fellow, European Council on Foreign Relations, Germany  
**Daniel Smilov**, Programme Director, Political and Legal Research, Centre for Liberal Strategies, Bulgaria  
**Marek A. Cichoński**, Research Director, Natolin European Centre, Poland

15.30h **Closing remarks**