

Spotlight on the Visegrad Four and Populism –

V4 EUROPE – Pieces of Populism in Europe and how to overcome the Challenge

International Workshop, 8 June 2017, Budapest, Hungary

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In the current political era, populist forces seriously threaten dominant liberal and democratic values, undermine human rights and constitutional checks and balances, and build illiberal states inside four Central European countries – Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia – that are also known under the common name the Visegrad Group or V4. IED decided to address this and in collaboration with

Hungarian Europe Society organized the international workshop titled [“V4 Europe – Pieces of Populism in Europe and how to overcome the challenge”](#) which took place on Thursday **8 June 2017** in **Budapest, Hungary**. The goal of the event was to discuss the current populist threat, analyze the main features, driving forces and technique of populists and suggest fresh policy proposals in order to overcome populism at national level within the V4 region as well as at the European level in general.



Speakers (in the order of speeches):

François Pauli, Member of the Board of the Institute of European Democrats (IED), Deputy Secretary-General of the ALDE Group, EP, Brussels.

Zsuzsanna Szélényi, Member of the Hungarian Parliament, Member of the Hungarian Europe Society, Budapest, Member of the Board of IED, Brussels.

Milada Anna Vachudova, Jean Monnet Chair in EU Studies, Associate Professor of Political Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Ivan Vejvoda, Permanent Fellow, Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna.

Anna Visvizi, Head of Research, Institute of East-Central Europe, IESW, Lublin.

Alena Holka Chudžíková, Senior Research Fellow, CVEK, Bratislava.

Márta Pardavi, Co-President, Hungarian Helsinki Committee, Budapest.

Bölcsü Hunyadi, Senior Analyst, Political Capital, Budapest.

Bartłomiej E. Nowak, Foreign Affairs Secretary, Nowoczesna, Warsaw.

Balázs Váradi, Senior Researcher, Budapest Institute.

Miroslav Beblavý, Associate Senior Research Fellow,

Center for European Policy Studies, Member of the Slovak Parliament, Bratislava.

Andrzej Potocki, Vice-President, European Democratic Party (PDE-EDP) and Vice-President, Stronnictwo Demokratyczne, Warsaw.

Jacek Kucharczyk, President of the Executive Board, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw.

Dániel Hegedüs, Research Consultant, Freedom House, Berlin and Member of the Hungarian Europe Society.

Edit Inotai, Senior Fellow, Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy, Budapest.

Milan Nič, Senior Fellow, German Council on Foreign Affairs, DGAP, Berlin.

Olga Wysocka, Deputy Director, Adam Mickiewicz Institute, Warsaw.

Moderators:

Zsuzsanna Végh, Vice-chair, Hungarian Europe Society, Budapest.

Zsuzsanna Szélényi, Member of the Hungarian Parliament and Member of the Hungarian Europe Society, Budapest, Member of the Board of IED, Brussels.

István Hegedüs, Chairman, Hungarian Europe Society, Budapest.

“Thanks to Netherlands and France we can be more optimistic in Europe now...but we have to continue our work do defeat populism in other EU Member States.”

François Pauli



The workshop was opened by **François Pauli**, Member of the Board of IED and Deputy Secretary-General of the ALDE Group, and **Zsuzsanna Szélényi**, Member of Hungarian Parliament, Member of the Hungarian Europe Society and Member of the Board of IED. According to Mr Pauli, the rise of populism has been for the moment stopped thanks to two states – Netherlands after the victory of People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy in the parliamentary elections last March, and then in France with the victory of Emanuel Macron in the presidential elections

in May. “Thanks to Netherlands and France we can be more optimistic in Europe now, we can make democracy and EU stronger... but we have to continue our work to defeat populism in other EU Member States,” he emphasized. Ms Szélényi introduced the pilot project “V4 Europe” which has been launched in 2016 with the goal to make other EU states **understand the challenges that the Visegrad states face in respect**

to their similar historical, cultural and geopolitical development. She also presented the outcomes of the recent research on V4 which reveal that there are many common patterns in the perception of the EU by citizens in the Visegrad region. Particularly, citizens see the benefits of the EU mainly in the provision of structural funds and the opportunity to work and travel in other EU Member States; on the other hand, citizens think that the EU has caused the loss of independence, autonomy and sovereignty of their governments – the argument which is at the root of populist rhetoric. In Ms Szélényi’s opinion, alongside nationalism, **migration has become a key symbolic identity issue of populism in the Visegrad states.** This brings the question what kind of EU people in the Visegrad countries want and how their view fits in the overall picture of the EU’s future. “We need to provide the alternative; we not only want to speak and understand but also formulate the policies because otherwise the populist proposals will be the only existing ones people can choose,” she highlighted.

The first keynote speaker was **Milada Anna Vachudova**, Chair of the Curriculum in Global Studies and Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of North Carolina. She has studied the sources of political change in the post-communist democracies since 1989 and, in her view, a political change is always driven by the interplay of domestic and external factors. Out of all these factors, she considers that **political parties are real drivers of political change.** Party leaders lead people to certain positions and shape public opinion which causes that at the end of the day there are always political parties that inspire the change. On the basis of the recent expert survey she conducted with her colleagues at Chapel Hill, **we can now see a significant polarization in the Visegrad Four’s political spectrum.** Specifically, after the fall of communism there used to be a common pattern that majority of political parties in the Central Europe were moving from authoritarian and nationalist positions towards liberalism and democracy; however, nowadays some parties strongly adhere to nationalism and illiberal democracy again, which is the most notable case in Hungary. “Struggle for the nation is used for justification of illiberal policies and

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Zsuzsanna Szélényi

diverting attention from real problems,” Ms Vachudova stressed. In this regard, she explained the situation in the Czech Republic which case is specific because Andrej Babiš, oligarch and leader of the most popular party in the country ANO, does not use nationalist rhetoric but the concentration of power, anti-corruption platform and economic issues in order to strengthen popular support for his party – despite all his corruption scandals. In Ms Vachudova’s opinion, better opposition mobilization and more young people in politics are one of the clearest solutions how to overcome populism.

“Struggle for the nation is used for justification of illiberal policies and diverting attention from real problems.”

Anna Milada Vachudova

The second keynote speaker was Permanent Fellow of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna **Ivan Vejvoda** who began his contribution with a short historical discourse. “During the Cold War, the big powers divided Europe by Iron Curtain and the Visegrad countries ended up on the wrong side of it,” Mr Vejvoda reminded, “but the year 1989 put Europe back together.” However, many people in the

Central and Eastern Europe are now forgetting on their communist past and on the fact that liberal democracy cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, people across Europe take peace for granted and do not realize that war cruelties can be repeated if we are not careful enough. “History can always come back, evil can return” Mr Vejvoda emphasized. In his opinion, **people in Europe and the United States vote for populists out of uncertainty and fear**. They are disillusioned with the elites that have failed to deliver, they are losing the trust in institutions and as a result, they vote for a first person who comes and says s/he will resolve their problems. “When you are blind to danger that is in front of you, then Trump happens,” he illustrated. But in his opinion, **Emanuel Macron is an example what one can do to fight populism**. The election of Macron set an example that we can defeat populism which is characterized by negativism and cynicism by the Macron-style optimism and positive politics. “Whether we like it or not, the old system lives within the new system for a very long time and it is our job getting up every day to defend our values and slowly push back those old habits back; without this we will not achieve what we wish,” Mr Vejvoda concluded.

“When you are blind to danger that is in front of you, then Trump happens.”

Ivan Vejvoda



Welcome and keynote speakers (left-right: F. Pauli, Z. Szelényi, A.M. Vachudova, I. Vejvoda)

The impact of migration on the rise of populism

The speakers of the first panel discussed migration and its role on the rise of populism in Europe in recent years. The moderator of the session, Vice-chair of Hungarian Europe Society **Zsuzsanna Végh** reminded that in last two years, migration has become a playground for populist parties. For these parties, an increasing number of migrants escaping from the conflict zones to Europe gave a perfect

momentum to spread xenophobic rhetoric. But what is very specific to the Visegrad region is that harsh anti-migration rhetoric has been taken over also by mainstream political parties. This led to the negative reactions of the Visegrad countries to proposed re-allocation of a limited number of asylum-seekers on governmental level which worsened the image of the V4 countries on the EU level.

On the example of Poland and Greece, **Anna Visvizi**, Head of Research in the Institute of East-Central Europe (IESW) in Lublin, talked about the factors which drive the migration-populism nexus. In particular, the country's history, ideology and culture directly shape its global geopolitical position, domestic economic development, maturity of its political scene and civic society as well as the quality of its media. All these variables then influence actual strength of popular support for populists in particular country. Accordingly, this methodology explains why almost all populist parties existing in the Visegrad countries are anti-migrant in spite of the fact there is a limited number of migrants in these states – the point is that populists know that due to general mentality shaped by historical and cultural development of the V4 region they will benefit from anti-migrant rhetoric. Ms Visvizi considers the Polish governing party Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice) as the most eloquent example of this tactic. In contrast, the same set of variables cause that although Greek Syriza is considered to be a populist party, its stance towards migration is generally positive. “Historical and cultural reasons explain why migration is used as a source of political competition,” she explained. In case of Poland (and this is applicable for practically all states in the Central and Eastern Europe), she suggested that NGOs and media should emphasize that **migration is a socially unavoidable phenomenon that has always been here**. “Without objective dialogue on migration initiated by all political parties, migration is bound to remain a source of political competition,” she summarized.



“Historical and cultural reasons explain why migration is used as a source of political competition.”

Anna Visvizi

[Click here to access the Full Presentation “Querying the Migration-Populism Nexus – towards effective ways of navigating the problem”](#)

Alena Holka Chudžíková, Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for the Research of Ethnicity and Culture (CVEK) in Bratislava, talked about the perception of refugees in Slovakia. Since 2015 when migration has started to dominate public discourse in Slovakia, people generally consider migrants coming to Europe as potential security and economic threats. However, according to the recent survey on refugees in Slovakia, the majority of respondents admitted they are uncertain which stance they should take towards migration because they do not have enough information about the current refugee crisis. In the view of Ms Chudžíková, **it is the responsibility of the government and political parties to address the migration issue for public objectively and with adequate facts**. However, populism causes that even formerly traditional democratic parties very often use populist practices in order to increase their popularity – for instance, the migration issue was extremely violated in the election campaign of one of the current Slovak governmental parties SMER-SD before the last parliamentary elections in 2016. “Populists give people

“Populists give people the impression that they will bring security and safety to their lives, but fulfilments of their policies would cause the exact opposite.”

Alena Holka Chudžíková

impression that they will bring security and safety to their lives, but fulfilment of their policies would cause the exact opposite,” Ms Chudžíková highlighted.

“Lack of information is at the root why populism has been so successful so far,” said Co-President of Hungarian Helsinki Committee in Budapest **Márta Pardavi**. This is predominantly the case of refugee crisis which has been successfully abused by populists also thanks to the lack of objective and fact-based information presented to public through media. She is convinced that **migration has been identified as the ideal tool by populists to advert attention from their own scandals**, which is mainly the case of the current Hungarian government led by the Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, well-known for their corruption scandals. Media and democratic politicians also continually fail in informing citizens about migration objectively. Consequently, Ms Pardavi believes that civic organizations and NGOs should mobilize much more in order to inform and provide real facts about migration for citizens.

“Lack of information is at the root why populism has been so successful so far.”

Márta Pardavi

The last speaker of the panel was **Bulcsú Hunyadi**, Senior Analyst of the Political Capital in Budapest, who put his attention on the impact of migration on the rise of populism in Hungary. The governing party Fidesz uses massive media

and billboard campaign to control popular discourse in the country and influences what kind of topics are discussed within society. In particular, he listed some of the most significant features of far-right rhetoric thanks to which populist politicians attract new supporters and control public mood:

- **careful word choice:** they talk about ‘illegal immigrants’ instead of refugees
- **securitisation:** they equalize migrants with criminals and terrorists
- **cultural-religious aspects and symbolic enemies:** ‘Christian Europe will be conquered by Muslim immigrants’
- **eurosceptic elements:** ‘It’s the EU’s fault’
- **conspiracy elements:** ‘Migration is organised by George Soros’
- **anti-establishment sentiments as the source for mobilization:** Orbán and the people of Europe vs. European leaders

Due to this strategy, xenophobic sentiments have increased a lot in Hungary since 2015 – for a clear illustration, there were about 36 % people who described their attitude towards migrants as xenophobic in October 2015; but in January 2017, this number raised to 60 %. According to Mr Hunyadi, this is the direct result of the governmental propaganda in Hungary which has made immigration the most important issue in Hungary’s political discourse. At the same time, **the anti-migration campaign of Fidesz also aims to divert attention from bad governance and eliminate critical voices by the creation of artificial enemies – refugees.**

[Click here to access the Full Presentation “The Political and Social Impact of Migration in Hungary”](#)



Speakers of 1.panel (left-right: A.Visvizi, A.Holka Chudžíková, M.Pardavi, B.Hunyadi, Z.Végh)

Populism, economic nationalism and corruption

The second session presented another important aspect that has an impact on the rise of populism – economic patriotism combined with the demand for regaining national sovereignty. Moderator of the panel **Zsuzsanna Széleányi** explained there is a revival of economic nationalism and hostile attitude towards globalization, global economy and the European single market. The major goal of populists is to introduce new protectionism, initiate economic re-nationalization and restore customs barriers. The results of such economic proposal can be analyzed in practice namely in Hungary where state-led corruption, which is often related to the EU structural funds, has worsened economic performance of the country significantly.



Foreign Affairs Secretary of Nowoczesna and the Head of the Chair of International Relations at the Vistula University in Warsaw **Bartłomiej E. Nowak** talked about the relationship between the European single market and economic protectionism. “Proposing protectionism is very popular now, but we have to question whether it is actually real,” he speculated. He supported his arguments by the fact that actually **very**

few populists argue against the single market – for instance, Marine Le Pen is strongly against the euro but she has never openly protested against the existence of the single market; the same is true for Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość that even wants to advance the single market. A more serious issue lies in the external dimensions that include international economic agreements such as CETA or TTIP – in the opinion of Mr Nowak, Europe is already on a losing side in the global arena. “When it comes to measuring the attitude towards globalisation, Asia is generally very positive but Europe and USA are generally negative... Europe will be much more selective in concluding international agreements and this can cause troubles,” he highlighted. Mr Nowak is also worried about the slow advancement of the single market and insufficient implementation of the single market rules on national level.

Balázs Váradi, Senior Researcher and co-Founder of the leading Hungarian policy think-tank Budapest Institute, focused on the analysis of pros and cons of the EU structural funds and their impact on economic nationalism. “The existence of EU funds which transfer money from richer to poorer EU Member States shows European solidarity at its best,” he stressed. The major goal of the EU cohesion and structural funds is to reduce regional disparities in development of all EU Member States. Despite anti-European rhetoric, populists are very effective in using these funds. Since this extra money has not been raised by taxing their own tax payers that can be their potential voters, there is a big room to spend them how they want – channel them to the party and/or oligarchs or use them for corruption. **Typical practise of populists is spending European money for national propaganda against the EU.** “There is no guarantee then that EU funds help beneficiary countries,” Mr Váradi explained. He sees the solution in modification of the system of relocating funds which needs to provide more efficient checks on what kind of projects money can be granted and how EU funds are used in practice. However, to reach this, the V4 countries as well as other beneficiary states of the EU aids need to take active role.

[Click here to access the Full Presentation “The Impact of Cohesion Policy on Corruption and Political Favouritism”](#)

According to Member of Slovak Parliament and Associate Senior Research Fellow at the Center for European Policy Studies **Miroslav Beblavý**, the EU funds are not at the source of corruption. In his opinion, if the governments had the same amount of money available for public investments without

receiving the EU money, there would be even more corruption in place. He praised that economies of the Visegrad countries are very open and well connected globally; moreover, Slovakia and Hungary, to less extent Poland and Czech Republic, have large international factories that are real drivers of their domestic economies. As a result, **economic nationalism is absolutely contra-productive for domestic economy** but people have to learn this; he used the example of extensive and highly controversial privatization happening during the 1990s in Slovakia which had catastrophic consequences on the Slovak economy that time. According to Mr Beblavý, the V4 region is one of the most growing regions of the EU which is doing well in terms of catching-up; however, he sees a great problem is the existence of huge regional differences inside the Visegrad – notably the Eastern and/or southern parts of all four states are poorer and less advantaged. These **regional disparities are at the root for the rise of populism**: “People in poorer regions think that capitals and Brussels do not care about them and that they are left behind.”

***“Lack of solidarity within the EU
can cost us our common
future.”***

Andrzej Potocki

Vice-President of the Polish political party Stronnictwo Demokratyczne and Vice-President of the European Democratic Party **Andrzej Potocki** stressed that populists are very successful in having an impact on those who are in need. “The EU was born on the common values and we cannot forget on this,” he reminded. He sees a big problem in the fact that **the Visegrad countries seem to be pure beneficiaries of the EU aids because they do not want to show any solidarity or responsibility when there are problems such as migration**. Mr Potocki compared this behaviour of the V4 countries to children who eat just meat and refuse to eat potatoes too: “If you want to eat meat, you have to eat potatoes too... so if you want to receive benefits, you have to perform your duties,” he stressed. With regards to migration, he pinpointed that Cyprus is the most welcoming EU country towards refugees because 40 % of population are refugees since the division of the island in 1974. Although Poland, Hungary or former Czechoslovakia had extensive experience with refugees who were running from their territories to the West during the communist era, the major difference from Cyprus lies in the fact that former Polish, Czechoslovak and Hungarian refugees do not live in their home countries now because most of them never returned after the fall of communism. As a result, despite a similar experience with refugees, V4 is very different from Cyprus in the perception of migration. “Lack of solidarity within the EU can cost us our common future,” Mr Potocki warned.



Speakers of 2.panel (left-right: B.E.Nowak, B.Varádi, M.Beblavý, A.Potocki)

The populist *Zeitgeist* and the foundations of a democratic, liberal counter-tendency in Europe

In the last roundtable discussion, the experts were debating the major events and elements that have caused a strong shift in global political landscape in last two years. In particular, the British vote for Brexit and the victory of Donald Trump at the presidential elections in the United States shook the liberal political systems on both sides of the Atlantic. To a great extent, populism might be blamed for these two outcomes. Both, Brexiteers in the UK and Trump in the USA were heavily using the strategy of spreading fake news and “alternative facts” – usually through social media – in order to

deceive citizens to vote for them. However, the populist take-over has failed inside the European Union in the first half of 2017, especially thanks to the victory of the pro-European Emmanuel Macron over Marine Le Pen at the French presidential elections. Nevertheless, there is still significant support for populist politicians across the whole continent that urges all democratic forces to mobilize and be active in countering illiberal and anti-European forces in the EU.

“The recent revolution in social media which has brought previously unimaginable forms of communication is one of the most important reasons for the rise of populism.”

Jacek Kucharczyk

President of Institute of Public Affairs **Jacek Kucharczyk** reminded that **populists rely on the instruments of democracy – free elections being the most eloquent one – in order to get to power.** “The recent revolution in social media which has brought previously unimaginable forms of communication is one of the most important reasons for the rise of populism,” he pinpointed. Thanks to social media, populists can very easily and with minimal financial input spread their message and find the audience. As a result, Mr Kucharczyk speculated that if technological revolution did not

arrive, populists would not have been so successful in attracting voters. Consequently, a great challenge for democratic politicians is to use internet communication as efficiently as populists.

Dániel Hegedűs, Research Consultant in the Freedom House in Berlin and Member of the Hungarian Europe Society, presented **five major reasons why such big proportion of citizens started to trust anti-elitist political parties:**

- **arrival of social media** and very effective use of them by populists
- **crisis of representation** in politics and related general loss of trust in traditional elites
- **lack of political alternatives** and lack of space for political manoeuvring
- **crisis of traditional political left** – across Europe, leftist parties have difficulties to re-gain their traditional electoral support
- **populist contagion** – far-right and far-left parties have become the part of mainstream politics and entered the parliaments or even governments in several EU Member States. This is a dangerous phenomenon because by entering mainstream politics, the policies and activities of populists have de facto been legitimized.

“The roots of populism in the Central Europe are different from the roots of populism in other parts of Europe,” said **Edít Inotai**, Senior Fellow at the Center for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy in Budapest. Consequently, **it is not an easy task to define populism and we should be much more careful when using the term.** Concerning the role of social media in politics, she believes that importance of internet and social media is often exaggerated because not all citizens use social media, especially elderly people. “If this was not the case, then there would not be so many efforts by populists to get control over national TV and radio channels or newspapers,” she explained. As a result, we need to also take into account the traditional media such as TV or radio when speaking about the tools that anti-elitist political parties use for their political goals.

In the view of **Milan Nič**, Senior Fellow in the German Council on Foreign Affairs (DGAP) in Berlin, **the mainstream politics is now attacked from two sides – not only by “Trump-trend” but also by a very new, unexpected and positive “Macron-trend”.** He also speculated under which circumstances we can say that some politician is a populist and whether politicians have to be necessarily anti-European in order to be considered as populist politicians. Mr Nič also talked about the necessity of the generation change in European politics because in many of the EU Members States and especially in the V4 region the politics is dominated by the politicians who entered politics in 1990s.

Olga Wysocka, Deputy Director in the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in Warsaw, thinks that populism has always been a part of democracy to a lesser or greater extent. The current new type of populism

benefits from the extensive use of technology to attract and control people. **She sees the way how to tackle populism in education.** Although this is a long-term solution which will require much time, only teaching people to think critically and to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong may secure that future generations will not be deceived by “alternative facts” as is the case nowadays.

The workshop was concluded by Chairman of the Hungarian Europe Society **István Hegedűs** who stressed that even though we can detect pieces of populist discourse such as migration and economic nationalism, **we need to keep searching for more elements populists use in order to receive the trust of voters.** He is convinced that we have to analyze all “pieces of populism” in order to reverse negative trends in the voting behaviour of the electorate and save democratic liberal order not only in the Visegrad countries but in Europe in general. The conference was attended by the representatives of NGOs, civic organizations, academia, Embassies and media.



Speakers of roundtable discussion (left-right: J.Kucharczyk, D.Hegedűs, E.Inotai, M.Nič, O.Wysocka, I.Hegedűs)

Main outcomes and proposals:

- migration has become a source of political competition – increasing number of migrants coming to Europe gives a perfect momentum to populists to spread xenophobic rhetoric;
- elections Netherlands and France have stopped the rise of populism but there is still significant support for populist politicians across the continent;
- Visegrad states face similar challenges in respect to their historical, cultural and geopolitical development;
- populists use nationalism to justify illiberal policies and diverting attention from real problems and their bad governance; they also use lack of information about certain issues, e.g. migration, to spread “alternative facts” and misinformation;
- Visegrad countries experience a significant polarization in their political spectrum with more and more parties turning to authoritarianism and nationalism;
- people vote populists out of uncertainty and fear;
- historical and cultural reasons influence actual strength of popular support for populists in particular country;
- one of the ways how to tackle populism is education – teaching people to think critically and to distinguish between what is right and what is wrong;
- we need to analyze all “pieces of populism” in order to reverse negative trends in the voting behaviour and counter illiberal and anti-European forces in the V4 and the EU;
- democratic politicians with the help of civic organizations, NGOs and media must provide the strong alternative to populist policies.

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Prepared by Adriana Ciefova (IED, 2017)

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