



# Connecting V4 and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V4 & Benelux

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## Introduction

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union has been reshaping the dynamics of decision-making within the EU. Partnerships among the remaining 27 Member States are to be rethought and new alliances established. The coalition potential of individual EU members is changing, and it directly affects qualified majority voting as well as the blocking minority in the Council of the EU.

Benelux, as well as the Visegrad Group (V<sub>4</sub>), have proved to be viable coalitions in promoting the interests of their member states on international forums. However, even coalitions of three or four states need to actively engage in partnerships with other regional networks.

The international online expert roundtables titled "Connecting V<sub>4</sub> and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V<sub>4</sub> & Benelux", which took place on June 16 and 17, 2020, marked the beginning of a 19 month project focused on building inter-regional connections across the EU by connecting V<sub>4</sub> and other regional expert networks and thus researching the potential for future EU coalitions.

The events were organized by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) in cooperation with the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy, the Res Publica Foundation/ Visegrad Insight and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association with the support of the International Visegrad Fund.

This policy brief is built around the June expert roundtable discussions and summarizes key points raised by the participants and the main conclusions. To assess the current state of V<sub>4</sub>-Benelux cooperation and its possibilities and challenges, it firstly looks at the relevance of coalition building in the EU. The next chapter is dedicated directly to V<sub>4</sub>-Benelux relations, their history and mutual perceptions. The possibilities for future cooperation (among others inter-regional cooperation or relations in the energy field) are discussed subsequently. Finally, the positions of both the regional groupings in the negotiations of the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework and the Next Generation EU instrument are assessed, followed by a conclusion.

## Rationale for inter-regional cooperation in the European Union

Given the character of the European integration project, coordination and cooperation between national authorities and institutions have always been essential for the member states to be able to successfully pursue their priorities. At the same time, informal relations and negotiations are crucial for coalition building.

Although the national interests of the V<sub>4</sub> countries differ, mutual support and cooperation belong among the most effective ways to strengthen their voices and gain attention and influence not only in Brussels negotiations, but also in coalition building within the EU.<sup>1</sup> Being a member of a coalition enables them to cooperate more effectively with bigger players – e.g. membership of the Visegrad group helped the Czech Republic and Slovakia to gain the attention of Germany and France in cases when they believed that they do not receive the attention they deserve, as ECFR's data reflect.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly for the Benelux countries, close cooperation strengthens their capacity to pursue their interests and to forge the necessary compromises between European countries. The countries try to actively engage with other Member States, including

<sup>1</sup> Nič, M. The Visegrad Group in the EU: 2016 as a turning-point? *European View* 15, 281–290 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-016-0422-6>.

<sup>2</sup> Janning, J., Möller, A. Untapped potential: How new alliances can strengthen the EU. European Council on Foreign Relations, 2019. [https://ecfr.eu/publication/untapped\\_potential\\_how\\_new\\_alliances\\_can\\_strengthen\\_the\\_eu/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/untapped_potential_how_new_alliances_can_strengthen_the_eu/).



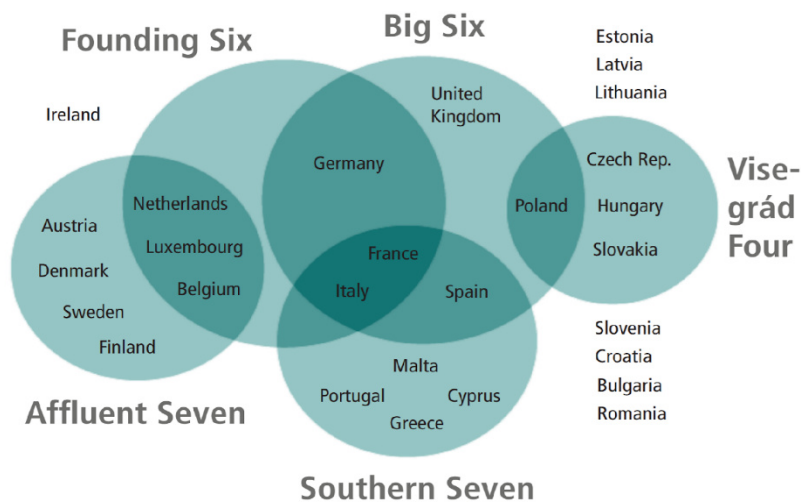
the Visegrad countries, the Nordics or the Baltic states to develop joint initiatives that have concrete impact on EU decision-making.<sup>3</sup> Notably the Netherlands invests in a range of other coalitions, which can play the role of a bridge between them and the other Benelux countries.

Nonetheless, the regional coalitions face increasing structural challenges, such as the decreasing of the relative weight of each member state after every EU enlargement. The implementation of the Lisbon Treaty has also extended the use of the ordinary legislative procedure based on qualified majority voting, and new majority voting rules have been introduced. By the new rules, which lower the threshold for adoption by the Council, the V4's ability to create a blocking minority has been diminished.

The blocking minority must include at least four Council members representing more than 35% of the EU population,<sup>4</sup> which gives more weight to populous member states. The V4 comprises only about 14.23% of the EU population (even though it includes Poland – one of the five biggest EU countries), while Benelux, only 6.6%.<sup>5</sup> Both regional groupings therefore need to gain the support of one larger nation or several other states to be able to create a blocking minority. Even if the V4 and Benelux states supported each other and voted together, they would have to get support at least from e.g. Germany or multiple smaller states.

Some of the EU member states often have the feeling that they should establish contacts only with countries with whom they fully agree. Nevertheless, it remains important to maintain an ability to create a variety of coalitions even despite many dividing lines between the regions, and not to make the divisions permanent. To promote common interests, the regional cooperation of V4 and Benelux turns out to be not only beneficial, but it may even become almost a necessity.

The regional cooperation of the V4 and Benelux can bring an improvement of understanding of each other's position and also shared expertise, and can also serve as a testing environment of ideas and negotiation positions to provide common argumentation. Moreover, a more structured cooperation and mutually negotiated position would also be valuable in reaching out to other potential partners.



Source: EU Coalition Explorer 2018.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Rijksoverheid. 2020. Joint Declaration Benelux Summit, <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/diplomatieke-verklaringen/2020/10/07/joint-declaration-benelux-summit>.

<sup>4</sup> The Council of the EU. Qualified majority, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/voting-system/qualified-majority/>.

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat. Population on 1 January 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&language=en&pcode=tps00001&tableSelectio n=1&footnotes=yes&labeling=labels&plugin=1>.

<sup>6</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations. 2018. EU Coalition Explorer 2018, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/ECFR269\\_EU\\_COALITION\\_EXPLORER\\_2018\\_V1.10.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/ECFR269_EU_COALITION_EXPLORER_2018_V1.10.pdf).



# V4 and Benelux: Different regions, different perspectives?

## History of the V4 – Benelux cooperation

The interest in mutual cooperation of the two regional blocs started shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the establishment of the then “Visegrad Three” alliance (with the Czech Republic and Slovakia still united in one state), when the Benelux countries and the USA were the first to welcome this initiative.<sup>7</sup> The first meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V<sub>3</sub> with their Benelux counterparts took place on 27 September 1991. After a period of relative lack of interest in Visegrad cooperation from the V<sub>4</sub> states themselves, their relations intensified after 1998. Sharing the goal of swift integration into the Schengen system, the EU and NATO, the V<sub>4</sub> states were actively looking for partners for dialogue on the V<sub>4</sub>+ level and interest in cooperation with the Benelux countries rose again.<sup>8</sup>

The Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs of all seven countries started working together at an informal meeting in Luxembourg in December 2001. Similarly to the debates that we experience nowadays, the participants discussed the future of Europe and the role of national parliaments.<sup>9</sup> The follow-up meetings established the first areas of cooperation, particularly sharing the experiences of the Benelux countries before entering the Schengen system and their cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

Even after the accession of the V<sub>4</sub> states to the EU, the Visegrad and Benelux countries listed a number of topics and possible fields of cooperation, exchange of information and best practices. In addition to the Schengen issues, they agreed e.g. on exchanging information on regional development or implementation of EU regulations.<sup>10</sup>

Although the cooperation seemed to have started promisingly, mutual meetings of the highest political representatives took place more sporadically thereafter, and started to appear more frequently again only in recent years. For example in 2019, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of both groupings resumed their tradition and met in Brussels, and the V<sub>4</sub> and Benelux Parliament Chairmen discussed future developments within the EU in Bratislava. The cooperation with Benelux is currently one of the most structured regional consultations of the V<sub>4</sub>.<sup>11</sup>

While Benelux has a relatively strong institutionalised structure including the General Secretariat, the V<sub>4</sub> states are represented only by the Presidency which changes every year. The V<sub>4</sub> cooperation is mainly political and the ties are cultivated by informal contacts and a high number of mutual meetings, including the V<sub>4</sub> meetings prior to EU summits.<sup>12</sup> This enables the partnership to remain flexible and for the states to benefit from it mainly in the areas which they find useful at the time. Despite the low level of institutionalisation, cooperation is very intense on an “informal” level, which includes regular meetings of representatives at different levels, expert dialogues etc. Taking into consideration the many differences between the V<sub>4</sub> countries, it is an effective method for V<sub>4</sub> cooperation – although it might complicate relations with other regional organizations. Unlike others (e. g. the

<sup>7</sup> Jeszensky, G. The Origins and Enactment of the „Visegrad Idea“, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/jeszenszky-geza-the>.

<sup>8</sup> Bauerová, H. 2018. The V<sub>4</sub> and European Integration. *Politics in Central Europe*, Vol. 14, no. 2., pp. 121–139.

<sup>9</sup> Visegrad Group. 2001. Summit Meeting between Benelux and the Visegrad Group Luxembourg (5 December 2001), <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2001/summit-meeting-between>.

<sup>10</sup> Visegrad Group. 2005. Fields of Cooperation between the Visegrad Group Countries and the Benelux, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2005/fields-of-cooperation>.

<sup>11</sup> Visegrad Group, Calendar of selected events, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar>.

<sup>12</sup> The only formalised V<sub>4</sub> institution is the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) founded in 2000.



Secretariat of the Baltic Assembly or the Nordic Council's Presidium and permanent committees), the Visegrad doesn't have any "single phone number to call". Nevertheless, the current informal dialogue seems to be appreciated both by the V4 and Benelux countries.

Although relations with Benelux in the V4+ format remain among the priorities of the recent V4 Presidencies,<sup>13</sup> the Benelux countries do not feature among the partners that the V4 governments would generally contact most on European policy matters.<sup>14</sup>

## Mutual perspectives

The Benelux has evolved into a successful "regional brand" with ambitions to influence integration and attract interest from other countries and regions. Cooperation and engagement with other Member States, including the Visegrad states, is listed among the Benelux priorities „in order to develop joint initiatives that shape EU-decision making and achieve results.”<sup>15</sup>

As discussed during the online debate, the Netherlands especially has been actively looking for ways of engaging with new partnerships and increasing its influence outside the Benelux. Due to Brexit, the country has been trying to establish a stronger role in the EU, inter alia by investing in bilateral relations and strengthening its embassies. As a balance to the German-French axis, it also seeks stronger partnerships in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, the Netherlands has intensified contacts with all the V4 governments in the last three years. Since the United Kingdom was both an important partner for the Netherlands and the Visegrad countries, and the states also share a reluctance to accept the leadership of larger EU countries, there is a potential for deepening contacts.

Generally, the V4 countries are an important economic partner for the Netherlands, as well as for Belgium. In Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic, Belgium ranks among the top 10 foreign investors. Belgium also places importance on political cooperation and consultations with EU Member States of a similar size, which applies to the Czech Republic as well as to Hungary. Furthermore, it uses the expertise of the Visegrad states for analysing the situation of the Eastern EU neighbours and Russia.<sup>16</sup> The Netherlands looks for cooperation with the Visegrad countries especially in the agenda of the internal market, removing barriers, digital economy, foreign policy or increasing security cooperation.

An important example of successful cooperation is the Visegrad+ Eastern Partnership Program (V4EaP) which was initiated by the V4 governments in 2011 and co-funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Since the inception of the program, the Netherlands has co-financed projects in total worth exceeding €3 million (74 grant projects) and is the biggest external contributor in the history of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). The IVF could potentially serve as a platform for the more active involvement of the other two Benelux countries.

However, the V4 countries are often still seen as "new" EU member states and unconstructive partners labelled as "free-riders". The Visegrad countries themselves contributed to this perception by their strong opposition to migration

<sup>13</sup> Including the Czech Presidency 2019-2020

([https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign\\_relations/visegrad\\_group/index.html](https://www.mzv.cz/jnp/en/foreign_relations/visegrad_group/index.html)).

<sup>14</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations. 2018. EU Coalition Explorer 2018, p.34, [https://www.ecfr.eu/page/ECFR269\\_EU\\_COALITION\\_EXPLORER\\_2018\\_V1.10.pdf](https://www.ecfr.eu/page/ECFR269_EU_COALITION_EXPLORER_2018_V1.10.pdf). Similarly Janebová, P., Végh, Z. 2019. Trends of Visegrad Foreign Policy, <http://www.amo.cz/en/trendy-visegradskych-zahranicnich-politik/trends-of-visegrad-foreign-policy-2/>.

<sup>15</sup> Benelux. 2019. Benelux Prime Ministers' Summit, Luxembourg, 2 April 2019, Joint Declaration, [https://maee.gouvernement.lu/content/dam/gouv\\_maee/directions/d2/pr%C3%A9sidence-benelux/Joint-declaration.pdf](https://maee.gouvernement.lu/content/dam/gouv_maee/directions/d2/pr%C3%A9sidence-benelux/Joint-declaration.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Kingdom of Belgium. *Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Central Europe*, [https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/world\\_regions/central\\_europe](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/world_regions/central_europe).



solidarity or the climate initiatives. Belgium belonged to one of the most outspoken critics of the anti-migration policy of the Visegrad countries.

Moreover, the Netherlands perceives the agenda of rule of law and European values in general very sensitively, which does not contribute to the image of Poland and Hungary as respectful partners.

Hungary and Poland were also named as the two countries “that have disappointed the Belgian and Dutch government most over the past two years” by the respondents of the EU Coalition Explorer survey.<sup>17</sup>

Until very recently,<sup>18</sup> the V4 countries and the Netherlands also occupied opposite positions on EU enlargement toward the Western Balkans – while the prime ministers of the V4 countries emphasized their support for accession of the Western Balkan countries to the European Union,<sup>19</sup> the Dutch Parliament voted against the opening of accession negotiations.

Nevertheless, the Benelux – and especially the Netherlands since 2000 – takes a pragmatic view towards coalition building and seeks varying majorities and coalition partners on thematic topics. For example, the countries perceive the limits of cooperation with the V4 in the climatic agendas, and in this field, they look for more cooperation with France and Germany. On the other hand, in spite of the current government’s rule of law and democracy record, Hungary is still an active partner for Benelux countries in many fields, among others in tackling the remaining obstacles to free movement within the EU, as both as both Benelux and Hungary, indeed all the V4 countries, belong to the most open EU economies.

Deeper cooperation with the Benelux countries could soften the edges of the Visegrad and even lead to deepening the discussion about core values and the rule of law. This approach was also promoted by the Czech V4 Presidency, which was handed over to Poland at the end of June 2020.

## Current challenges and opportunities

When the unprecedented pandemic of Covid-19 hit Europe, neither the V4 states nor Benelux proved to be ready to face the unexpected challenges. Mainly in the early phases of the pandemic, the reaction of every state was very individualistic and the regions did not find common ground for the coordination of their emergency response. For example, Poland was criticized for complicating the return of travellers from its airports to neighbouring countries. While in general, the V4 countries managed to cope with the “first wave” of the pandemic better than Benelux, which offered the potential for mutual inspiration and exchange of best practice, both the Czech Republic and Belgium belong to the countries most affected by the “second wave” in autumn 2020.

On the other hand, the pandemic has revealed new possibilities and fields for cooperation. More effective than inter-state cooperation could be bottom-up efforts. As discussed in the debate, regional institutions have a strong potential to create successful integration and cooperation. One example could be the “Pact of Free Cities” signed by the mayors of the V4 capitals in December 2019, which among other things aims at supporting more ambitious climate targets. Similarly in Benelux, a lot of interest in climate change comes up from the regional level, which could be a basis for fostering subnational cooperation.

Public and private organisations, regions, local stakeholders, experts and researchers from different regions are an important aspect of the V4-Benelux cooperation. At this level, the representatives mainly see the importance of the EU

<sup>17</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations. 2020. EU Coalition Explorer, <https://www.ecfr.eu/eucoalitionexplorer>.

<sup>18</sup> The European Council endorsed the decision to open accession negotiations with the Republic of North Macedonia and Republic of Albania in March 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Government of the Czech Republic. 2019. *V4 Statement on the Western Balkans*, <https://www.vlada.cz/scripts/detail.php?id=176116&tmplid=51>.



and of regional cooperation, which is not always visible at the political level, where the EU is often used as a scapegoat to blame certain issues on. Creating and sustaining bottom-up movement and cooperation can also have the potential to transform into lasting partnerships at a high level.

One of the reasons why the V<sub>4</sub> countries started to develop a relationship with Benelux in 2001 was to gain inspiration for their own regional integration. Vice versa, the V<sub>4</sub> states could also be inspiring to the Benelux countries, to whom they can offer their expertise in specific areas. As mentioned, the V<sub>4</sub> has e.g. more connections with the Western Balkan and the Eastern Partnership countries and can provide expertise and knowledge about these regions. Common projects in the EU neighbourhood or projects related to development aid might be another field of possible cooperation between Benelux and V<sub>4</sub>, since the Dutch government has already supported several projects connected with these regions.

The V<sub>4</sub> and Benelux also both stress the necessity to support the digital economy and innovations and emphasize the full and effective implementation of Single Market Rules. Beyond that, their common goal is **“to enhance common responsibility to build a strong, effective, competitive and secure Europe, based on the values of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and freedoms, as well as the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality”**.<sup>20</sup> Despite this declaration, the “values of democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights and freedoms” remain the most controversial and divisive topics of their dialogue and cooperation.

## Energy cooperation

Energy policy and the just transition of the energy sector towards a climate-neutral economy is one of the most sensitive and politically difficult topics. Despite the differences between the groupings highlighted by the Green Deal, it can be a way to boost cooperation and economic recovery. Although Poland belongs among the main critics of the Green Deal and of the EU Climate Law, it realizes the potential of the new EU instruments for financing the energy sector’s transition towards a climate-neutral economy. Energy policy and achieving a just transition of the energy sector belong also to the main priorities of the current Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group.<sup>21</sup>

To overcome the lack of political will of the V<sub>4</sub> countries, there is also potential in the V<sub>4</sub>+ format. For example, the Visegrad+ for Renewable Energy platform was established last year. The key renewable energy associations and climate policy think-tanks from the four Visegrad countries and Austria signed a Memorandum of Understanding, in which Austria offers its expertise and first-hand experience with the transition to clean energy.<sup>22</sup> The platform could be the basis for wider cooperation with other countries, including Benelux.

Again, this example shows the importance of the bottom-up approach, which can be applied in similar initiatives and learning platforms with the Benelux countries as well.

## MFF and Next Generation EU negotiations

During the negotiations about the Commission’s MFF and Next Generation EU instrument proposal, the countries didn’t share similar attitudes even among the

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<sup>20</sup> Joint Statement of the Ministers of the Benelux Union and the Visegrad Group. 8. 12. 2019. <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/official-statements/joint-statement-v4>.

<sup>21</sup> Visegrad Group. 2020. 2020/2021 Polish Presidency, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/2020-2021-polish>.

<sup>22</sup> E3G. 2019. Visegrad+ for renewable energy, <https://www.e3g.org/news/visegrad-for-renewable-energy/>.



regional groupings. While all of the Visegrad countries belonged to the “Friends of Cohesion” group, Poland (supposed to be one of the main beneficiaries) declared its support for the proposal, whereas the Czech Republic was one of its main critics. There was a significant difference between the positions of the Benelux countries as well: whereas Belgium and Luxembourg have at least politically welcomed the proposal, the Dutch Prime Minister became the face of its opposition.

However, it is possible to find positions shared by the countries from different regions. For example, both the Czech Republic and the Netherlands criticised the size of the recovery fund.

One of the main dividing lines in the negotiations was the suggested conditionality between the rule of law and access to the funds. While the Netherlands and the other net payers required the introduction of an effective mechanism, Hungary and Poland strongly disagreed and threatened to veto the entire agreement. During the negotiations, disputes arose especially between the Hungarian and Dutch Prime Ministers (e.g. Viktor Orbán claiming that “Mark Rutte hates him”).<sup>23</sup> The EU leaders finally found a compromise by including mention of “a regime of conditionality to protect the budget”<sup>24</sup> during their summit in July 2020, and the concrete agreement on the mechanism of linking funding to rule of law was reached in trialogue at the beginning of November. Nevertheless, both Polish and Hungarian Prime Ministers continue to threaten to veto the EU budget and coronavirus recovery package over it, as parts of the agreement still need to be unanimously confirmed in the Council and ratified in all the national parliaments. But by doing so, they would seriously jeopardize their domestic economies as well, as both countries are among the largest recipients of the European budget.

The process of the MFF and NGEU negotiations confirmed that regardless the seriousness of the issue, member states cannot automatically count on the support of their allies from regional groupings. While the rule of law remains one of the main priorities for Hungary and Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia did not support their demands in the negotiation process and focused mainly on the economic part of the negotiations. Similarly, only Poland and the Czech Republic shared a demand to erase the condition to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 to access some parts of the Recovery Fund, and yet managed to successfully achieve it.

## Recommendations and conclusions

The online discussion of experts from the V4 and Benelux countries demonstrated the cooperation possibilities of these two regional groupings. The participants shared the mutual understanding that the regional priorities and approaches to cooperation will be different – but that these differences can be overcome in questions of practice and concrete cases.

Despite deepening EU integration and regional cooperation, individual member states remain the most important actors, as the coronavirus pandemic proved. Both the V4 and Benelux tend to be heterogeneous groups supporting each other only when it is beneficial for the priorities of the national governments. The Benelux countries had not even attempted to coordinate their positions towards the MFF negotiations – which suggests that the coordination of positions on the EU level is not in their main focus.

While it could limit the prospects for a more structured cooperation between the two groupings, this heterogeneity also creates possibilities for new partnerships across the regional groups. Particularly the Czech and Dutch approaches

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<sup>23</sup> Lili Bayer, Hans von der Burchard. 20. 7. 2020. Politico. Viktor Orbán: I don't know why Mark Rutte hates me and Hungary. <https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-i-dont-know-why-mark-rutte-hates-me-and-hungary/>.

<sup>24</sup> European Council. 2020. Special meeting of the European Council (17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 July 2020) - conclusions. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/45109/210720-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>.



to European integration seem to be quite similar, although the states have many structural differences – however, they share emphasis on subsidiarity, the free market, budgetary discipline, cooperation and following of rules.

For example the debate in the Netherlands, which is a net payer, could also serve as an inspiration for the Czech Republic and other countries that will turn from being net beneficiaries into payers in the foreseeable future.

Although some of the options for mutual cooperation remain complicated due to fundamentally different positions regarding the rule of law, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Benelux Union and the Visegrad Group continue to meet and to exchange their points of view.

The coronacrisis could inspire both regions to find new areas of cooperation and to deepen the exchange of their experiences. As emphasized during the discussion, another way to overcome the regional differences and find more durable forms of cooperation is the bottom-up approach and strengthening of expert cooperation – which was also one of the goals of the June debates.



## Association for International Affairs (AMO)

AMO is a non-governmental not-for-profit Prague-based organization founded in 1997. Its main aim is to promote research and education in the field of international relations. AMO facilitates the expression and realization of ideas, thoughts, and projects in order to increase education, mutual understanding, and tolerance among people.



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