



The Future of Europe: What Role for Visegrad Cooperation?

Potential of the V4 countries to contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe in relation to the climate agenda and the involvement of the Western Balkan countries

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Summary

- The Conference on the Future of Europe is a major pan-European democratic exercise holding the potential to be open, inclusive, and transparent, though for the Visegrad region to benefit from it, its stakeholders must overcome its limits and focus on designing new partnerships.

- Also, the active role of the V₄ civil society is somewhat limited as the V₄ region lacks the long-term culture of healthy democratic debate. At the same time, civil society participation in the V₄ countries (mainly in Poland and Hungary) dropped the most out of the EU countries in the last 10 years.

- The CoFoE mainly pays attention to the EU, and not Europe as such or to the Western Balkans, a region of geopolitical importance to the V₄ states. The Visegrad states can play a proactive role in drawing the Western Balkan states into the CoFoE and act as a bridge between this region and the EU, especially in the context of the highly topical and multi-faceted climate agenda.

- As the V₄ states themselves are rather climate-lukewarm and lack an overarching long-term political strategy for decarbonisation, there is the potential for collaboration among more climate ambitious stakeholders (municipalities, academia, private sector etc.) from the V₄ region, for instance with stakeholders from the Nordic states, and the Western Balkan states, that are active in areas of common interest, such as just transition, forestry, transport, and institutional leadership (and ownership).



Recommendations

→ Relevant actors in the V₄ region should follow the process of the CoFoE more and provide space for discussion around topics of joint interest such as just transition, forestry, transport, and leadership. The discussion holds the potential to collaboratively develop practical solutions to climate change in transnational affairs.

→ Competent actors in the V₄ region can imitate several components of the CoFoE, such as the European Citizens' Panel including its focus on representativeness, and organize debates on the most key and interesting topics tailored to the regions' citizens. These events can then enhance citizens' understanding of the issues. More debates can be organized also within the V₄ region and in partnership with representatives of other regions, EU and non-EU, esp. the Western Balkan states.

→ V₄ actors, including the CSOs, can push for the CoFoE to come to specific conclusions and address topics that are important from their perspective, such as the inclusion of the Western Balkan states, just transition, the ending of fossil fuel subsidies in the EU and abroad etc. As several Recovery and Resilience Plans are given the green light by the European Commission, it is in the interests of media, municipalities, businesses as well as the CSOs and governments to oversee the actual implementation of the plans to ensure that funds directed towards meeting climate objectives are not misused and that they are employed in the most effective, transparent, and just manner.



Introduction

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) was set up by the European Parliament, the European Commission and the EU Council, for European citizens to discuss the key challenges and future priorities of the EU and how to approach them. After a delay caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the CoFoE was officially launched on Europe Day, March 9, 2021, with a rather broad agenda. Its 9 topics¹ cover a range of issues from European democracy and social, economic and cultural issues to climate change and the environment, and the role of the EU in the world.

These latter two categories were also, largely, the subject of an international expert conference titled “The Future of Europe: What Role for Visegrad Cooperation?”, which took place on June 15, 2021. This online conference dealt with the role of the Visegrad states within the CoFoE – namely their potential for cooperation with other EU regions and their role in drawing the Western Balkan states into the conference, as well as with international cooperation and the sharing of good practices regarding the climate agenda.

The online conference was the final outcome of the project “Connecting V₄ and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions” which focused on building inter-regional bridges across the EU by connecting V₄ and other regional expert networks and thus researching the potential for future EU coalitions. The project activities were organized by the Association for International Affairs (AMO) in cooperation with the Res Publica Foundation / Visegrad Insight, the Centre for Euro-Atlantic Integration and Democracy and the Slovak Foreign Policy Association with the support of the International Visegrad Fund.

This policy brief is built around the two panels of the final international conference and summarizes key points raised by the speakers as well as the main conclusions. The first part of the brief focuses on challenges linked to the CoFoE in relation to the rather limited extent to which the Visegrad Group’s civil society organisations are able to participate in domestic consultation processes. Also, the role of the V₄ states in relation to the Western Balkan states is further discussed in the context of the CoFoE. The second part of the brief addresses the topic of climate change and how adaptation and mitigation in selected areas can lead to or strengthen cooperation not only within the EU, and especially with the Nordic countries, but also in regards to the Western Balkan states. Based on the discussion, the thematic areas that hold the potential for cooperation include just transition, forestry, transport, and (institutional and political) leadership.

1. Conference on the Future of Europe – or of the “European Union”?

While the CoFoE is presented as “a unique and timely opportunity for European citizens to debate on Europe’s challenges and priorities,”² its structure creates several shortcomings that make it difficult to fulfill this goal.

One of the potential dangers that was discussed during the online conference was the risk that the national governments who are among the organizers of events within the CoFoE could use this opportunity to push their own political agenda. This fear is particularly relevant regarding the Visegrad group, as concerns

¹ Climate change and the environment; Health; A stronger economy, social justice and jobs; EU in the world; Values and rights, rule of law, security; Digital transformation; European democracy; Migration; Education, culture, youth and sport; and “other ideas” - “Topics - Conference on the Future of Europe,” <https://futureu.europa.eu/processes?locale=en>.

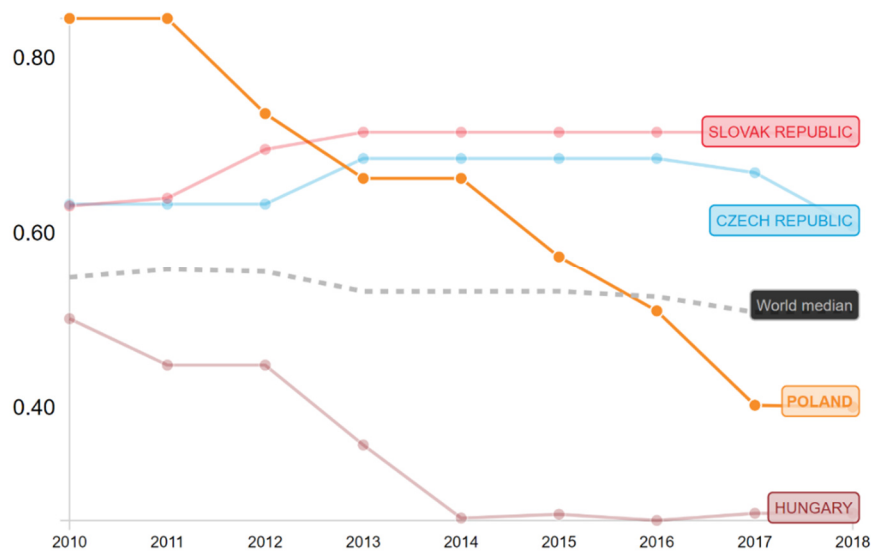
² “What is the Conference on the Future of Europe?” Conference on the Future of Europe, <https://futureu.europa.eu/pages/about>.



over compliance with the rule of law in Poland and especially in Hungary have been rising in recent years.

The key factor in limiting the risk of the CoFoE being “hijacked” by national governments and via their government-organized non-governmental organizations for their own agendas is the broad participation of civil society organizations (CSO) in the process. Yet at the same time, the trends for involving civil society in policy consultations in Poland and Hungary are alarming and create yet another challenge for a meaningful and successful CoFoE. For instance, the index of CSO participatory environment³ shows that since 2010, the CSO participation in consultations on policies relevant to their members dropped overall in the European Union - and especially in the V₄. The biggest fall happened in Poland - while in 2010, it was among the EU countries with the highest level of participatory democracy, its index has halved in the last ten years. Hungary was already in last place in the EU in 2010 and by 2019 it had fallen to an all-time low.

CSO participatory environment



Source: CSO participatory environment - TCdata360 (worldbank.org)

The political environment that inhibits participation puts great pressure on CSOs in the V₄ states which need to find constructive ways in which to get engaged in the conference. The questions being debated within the CoFoE framework, for instance those within the topic of “European democracy”, are also key problems about which the CSOs in Central Europe have a lot to say from their own experience.

One of the areas where the V₄ CSOs could play an important role is that of cooperation with the Western Balkan countries. While the CoFoE should discuss “the future of Europe”, it has also been criticised that the prospective future EU members were not invited to participate, not even as observers.⁴ As was pointed out during the online debate, “the conference as such is called ‘Conference on the Future of Europe’,

³ “CSO participatory environment - TCdata360 (worldbank.org),”

https://tcdata360.worldbank.org/indicators/hcbb51fod?country=BRA&indicator=41856&viz=line_chart&years=1975,2018.

⁴ While during the Convention on the Future of Europe (2001-2003), representatives of the governments and national parliaments of the accession candidate countries were involved in the process. Thanks to that, the countries (including the four Visegrad countries) had a chance to learn about issues important to the European Union and strengthen their understanding of the European processes.



not the future of the European Union”, yet some European countries were not invited to join the debate on the future of the continent.

Leaving the Western Balkans - the official or potential EU candidate countries - out of the CoFoE not only sends a negative message, but it's also a missed opportunity for the EU to engage its European partners in conversations about topics relevant for our common future. For the Visegrad Group specifically, this situation brings an opportunity to work on a positive V₄ agenda and to get involved in drawing the Western Balkan countries nearer to the debates.

Acting together, the four countries could have a role in this process and encourage the move towards enlargement on the EU level, bringing the Western Balkans agenda into the spotlight. The suggestions raised during the online expert conference include that “like-minded countries in the EU supportive towards the enlargement should be gathered together, e.g. through an informal group of ‘friends of enlargement’”⁵ in which the V₄ states could play a major role as bridge-builders. For that, the four states would have to cooperate closely in the upcoming months, articulate their common position in the process and have a real regional approach. The V₄ could also cooperate with other regions and regional platforms in different formats - they could get more involved in the Berlin Process (an initiative to strengthen regional cooperation in the Western Balkans and the process of their integration into the EU, in which the V₄ group is represented only by Poland), the Slavkov Triangle (a regional cooperation platform of the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Austria) or the Salzburg Forum (a partnership of Central European countries focused on internal security and related cross-border cooperation, in which all the V₄ countries participate; the Western Balkan countries are involved in the Group of Friends of the Forum).

The V₄ states have already expressed their willingness to be active in this regard in the Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group Countries on the Western Balkans: “Taking into consideration the common European future of the current EU Member States and the Western Balkans, the V₄ ministers expressed their support for including the Western Balkan partners in the framework of the Conference on the Future of Europe. They underlined the need for effective communication on the benefits of the enlargement process for the candidate countries and its citizens as well as for countering disinformation.”⁶

Moreover, the current Hungarian V₄ presidency lists the CoFoE and cooperation with partners in the Western Balkans among its priorities.⁷ Together with Austria, the four Visegrad countries have also asked the European institutions to involve the Western Balkans in the Conference in a common non-paper.⁸ Nevertheless, their efforts have not yet been successful.

Even if the Western Balkan countries are not able to participate in the official part of the CoFoE, the V₄ countries could still play a role in presenting the

⁵ Tomáš Strážay. Connecting V₄ and other regional expert networks & researching potential for future EU coalitions: V₄, Croatia, Slovenia & the EU enlargement in the Western Balkans. Praha: Asociace pro mezinárodní otázky (AMO), 2021. https://www.amo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/AMO_V4__Croatia_Slovenia.pdf.

⁶ “Joint Statement of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Visegrad Group Countries on the Western Balkans,” The Visegrad Group, Rogalin, June 28, 2021, <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2021/joint-statement-of-the-210629>.

⁷ “The exchange of experiences on addressing the multiple security challenges and threats that the Western Balkan region is facing (e.g., migration) is a priority – in this context sharing best practices related to integrated border management is crucial. Building on national practices, the V₄ will address the issue of involving the countries of the region in the events of the Conference on the Future of the EU.” “Programme of the Presidency,” The Hungarian Presidency 2021/22 of the Visegrad Group, https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/asset/view/139043/Programme_of_the_HU_V4_Presidency_2021-22.pdf.

⁸ “Visegrád Four and Austria request including Western Balkans in the Conference on the Future of Europe,” European Western Balkans, June 3, 2021, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2021/06/03/visegrad-four-and-austria-request-including-western-balkans-in-the-conference-on-the-future-of-europe/>.

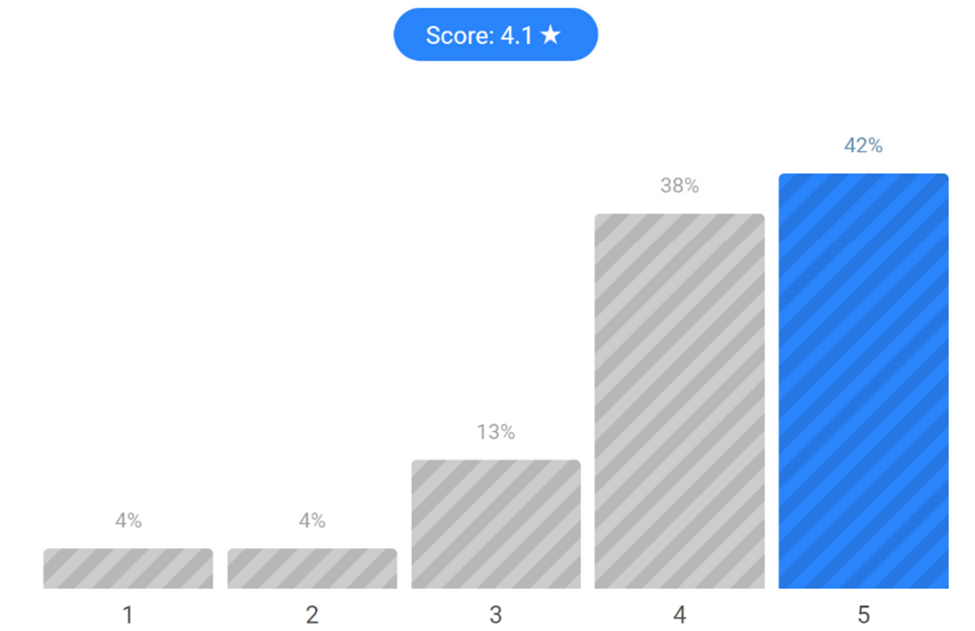


voices of the region on different platforms. Individual member states could provide their assistance to the civil society organizations in the Western Balkans, involve them in the process and support the production of analyses of their countries on the different issues connected with the CoFoE. The V₄ could either support them directly, or help them to find support from the different EU institutions or European political parties. A good example of such cooperation could be the panel “What can the Western Balkans do for the EU?” organised as part of the Prespa Forum Dialogue, which took place on 2 July 2021 as the first in a series of public and civic contributions from the region to the CoFoE. The panel was supported by the German Council on Foreign Relations and the EEAS StratCom Western Balkans Task Force. The V₄ could use this example and create similar initiatives.⁹

The suggestion that the V₄ states should play a role in bringing the Western Balkan states into the CoFoE was also strongly supported by the majority of the participants of the online conference, who expressed their opinion in this poll:

Poll 1

Should the V₄ play a role in bringing the Western Balkan states to the Conference on the Future of the EU? (1 – not at all, 5 – definitely)



Source: Conference “The Future of Europe: What Role for Visegrad Cooperation?”, 15 June 2021.

⁹ EEAS Strategic Communications, “The Western Balkans contribute to the Conference on the Future of Europe,” European External Action Service, July 1, 2021, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/101115/western-balkans-contribute-conference-future-europe_en.



2. The V4's (Inner) Climate-Compass towards Climate Neutrality

As the topics of climate change, adaptation and mitigation are becoming dominant in the EU legislature, as well as in the CoFoE, the second panel of the online debate was dedicated to regional cooperation within the EU in this field. The V4's contribution to the EU's climate ambitions was, even before the pandemic, and still is rather lukewarm. In fact, anti-climate change narratives were identified as “a scapegoat for Central European populists who have been using the topic's inherent long-term nature to buttress their voters' support”¹⁰ and thus for their own political goals instead of using the topic's potential to strengthen social cohesion, communicate the power of new green growth or new jobs, and the overall positive narrative of the EU's leadership role as a climate champion. In relation to strengthening global resilience abroad, the V4 states have also been quite hesitant to contribute to the Green Climate Fund via which mitigation and adaptation capacities of developing countries are built.¹¹

On the other hand, the EU as such did not drop the subject of climate change, or its urgency, even during the waves of the pandemic. Hoping to make use of synergies, the EU's recovery plan aimed “to lay foundations for a sustainable and climate-neutral Europe”.¹² By combining the post-Covid recovery with the green transition, EU Member States were pushed, for instance, to prepare and communicate their National Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRP) in order to receive funding from the 672.5 bn Euro Recovery and Resilience Facility. Although the RRP's are being analysed by the European Commission at the moment, the Green Recovery Tracker tool¹³ indicates the contribution of national Covid-19 recovery efforts towards a climate neutral EU.

Based on the Tracker which provides a critical analysis of the RRP's of 18 EU Member States, many states may have difficulties reaching the minimum of 37% for climate investments and reforms, a benchmark set by the European Commission. Whereas the average of the V4 states was found to be around only 30%, the analysed countries with the estimated highest green share were Finland (42%) and Belgium (41%). In relation to sectoral analysis, the sector to which most funds were dedicated from all the V4 states was mobility, especially the modernisation of railway infrastructure.

Despite the aforementioned analysis, in mid-July the European Commission endorsed the first recovery disbursements for several countries including Slovakia and Czechia. In the Commission's view, the countries surpassed the relevant benchmarks with Czechia allocating 42% of funds to support climate objectives, and Slovakia allocating 43%. The RRP's of the V4 states did not get away without criticism from regional CSOs.¹⁴ What is more, it has to be pointed out that there is a conflict

¹⁰ Romana Březovská, Michal Bokša. “Goulash of Climate (In)Action: Populism in Central Europe,” Visegrad Insight, August 3, 2020, <https://visegradinsight.eu/goulash-of-climate-inaction-v4/>.

¹¹ “Status of Pledges (IRM and GCF-1) – Green Climate Fund,” <https://www.greenclimate.fund/document/status-pledges-all-cycles>.

¹² European Parliament News, “The EU's Covid-19 recovery plan will prioritise climate,” European Parliament, June 24, 2021, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20200429STO78172/the-eu-s-covid-19-recovery-plan-will-prioritise-climate>.

¹³ “Tracking the contribution of national covid-19 recovery efforts towards a climate neutral EU – Green Recovery Tracker,” <https://www.greenrecoverytracker.org/>.

¹⁴ On Slovakia, for instance, Juraj Melichar. “Devil in the climate details as Slovakia finalizes plan for EU recovery funds,” Bankwatch, March 30, 2021, <https://bankwatch.org/blog/devil-in-the-climate-details-as-slovakia-finalises-plan-for-eu-recovery-fund>.

On Hungary, for instance,

Teodóra Donsz-Kovács, Alexa Botár. “Hungary's recovery plan – not green, just, or resilient,” Bankwatch, June 2, 2021, <https://bankwatch.org/blog/hungary-s-recovery-plan-not-green-just-or-resilient>.



of interest of the Czech Prime Minister, recognised by the European Commission, which can prevent the Czech Republic from receiving the requested funds. Specifically, in relation to Prime Minister's Babiš' conflict of interest, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, stated that there is "a requirement to provide and collect information about the people behind the entities that receive funding. These milestones must be met before the first large sum is paid in mid-2022."¹⁵ Talks are also ongoing in regards to possible misuse of funds by the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán.¹⁶

Putting the national recovery plans into the context of the Fit for 55 package, the President of the European Commission, stated that via the European Green Deal and the package, "Europe walks the talk on climate policies through innovation, investment and social compensation".¹⁷ The President also stressed in a press conference following the presentation of the package that the EU "can rely on the most precious renewable resource in the world - and this is our ideas, our ingenuity, our innovative power of our people".¹⁸ However, when comparing the funds allocated to green research and innovation via the RRP, there is a visible gap, "an innovation gap", between the amounts of spending allocated to green research and innovation policies by Central and Eastern European Member States and by the EU-15 Member States (predominantly Western European countries that joined the EU before 2004). The analysis of E3G¹⁹ further suggests that aggregate innovation performance is the highest in Sweden, Finland and Denmark, whereas Slovakia and the Czech Republic are doing only relatively well in innovation efficiency. Thus what may be a key ingredient is funding as the E3G analysis suggests that "bridging the funding gap between Central/Eastern and Western Europe would have a significant impact on EU R&I performance". The funding opportunities that the EU offers via the Recovery and Resilience Facility do not, though, seem planned to be well spent - Czechia and Slovakia do not seem to directly gear any funds towards green research and innovation. In Poland's RRP, less than 4% is clearly tied to green research and innovation. Hungary was not assessed in the report.

Another report that could shed light on the stance of the V4 is the Sustainable Development Report 2021 which was released in June 2021 and assesses the progress of all 193 UN Member States in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Based on the report's methodology, the ranking was spearheaded by Finland, Sweden and Denmark. The V4 States were all in the top 25.²⁰ Looking at the scores of individual V4 countries, it is interesting to note which goals seem unattainable and where "major challenges remain" in achieving the goal:

Czechia - Zero Hunger, Climate Action, Partnership for the Goals

Hungary - Zero Hunger, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, and Climate Action

Poland - Affordable and Clean Energy, Climate Action, Life Below Water, Partnership for the Goals

Slovakia - Zero Hunger, Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, and Climate Action.

¹⁵ "Brussels approves Czech national recovery plan but warns about Babiš' conflict of interest," Intellinews, July 20, 2021, <https://www.intellinews.com/brussels-approves-czech-national-recovery-plan-but-warns-about-babis-conflict-of-interest-216089/>.

¹⁶ Paola Tamma. "Brussels holds up Hungary's recovery plan...but for how long?," Politico, July 7, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/brussels-holds-up-hungarys-recovery-plan-but-for-how-long/>.

¹⁷ European Commission Press Release, "European Green Deal: Commission proposes transformation of EU economy and society to meet climate ambitions," European Commission, July 14, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3541.

¹⁸ "Statement by President von der Leyen on delivering the European Green Deal," European Commission, July 16, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_21_3701.

¹⁹ Eleonora Moro, Pieter de Pous. Next Generation EU? Research and Innovation in Central and Eastern European Recovery Plans. Brussels : E3G, 2021. <https://9tj40250153byww26jdkaox-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/RI-in-CEE-GRT-analysis.pdf>.

²⁰ The Czech Republic ranked 12th, Poland 15th, Slovakia 19th and Hungary 25th.



The V₄ countries were also ranked relatively high in the spillover performance – the country's action having positive or negative effects on other countries' abilities to achieve the SDGs.²¹ In comparison to the standard SDG ranking, the spillover index tracked countries' impacts abroad meaning that “highly” ranked countries are in fact quite significantly undermining other countries' progress in sustainable development. Negative effects were linked mainly to the exports of hazardous pesticides (CZ), CO₂ emissions embedded in imports (CZ, SK, PL, HU), international concessional public finances including ODA (CZ, SK, PL, HU) and financial secrecy score (CZ, PL).

As the SDG rankings show, the lack of ambition in climate action extends beyond state borders affecting the global context with the imports of CO₂ emissions and in not providing sufficient official development assistance to developing countries vulnerable to climate change impacts.

Based on the stated information on the RRP and SDG rankings, it is clear that although the European Commission is trying via its climate and energy legislation to pave the way also for the rest of the world towards a climate neutral future, the attitudes of individual Member States vary. In the V₄ region, the dependency on fossil fuels is conspicuous, yet what is even more profound is the ignorance of scientific understanding, the lack of a positive narrative by political leaders needed to stress the urgency of tackling climate change, and the lack of leadership as such to create an overarching (institutional) strategy that would provide tangible milestones credible to different actors – citizens, the private sector, municipalities, international partners, and others. The position of the V₄ region as a climate laggard is also evident in the Climate Change Performance Index 2021,²² which evaluates 57 countries and the EU, entities which together are responsible for 90% of greenhouse gas emissions. Whereas the EU was ranked 16 (high performance), and the Slovak Republic ranked 31 (medium performance), the Czech Republic was ranked 47th, Poland 48th, and Hungary 50th (all very low performance). The only other EU Member State ranked lower was Slovenia (51st). Categories that were taken into account were GHG emissions (40% weighting), renewable energy (20% weighting), energy use (20% weighting), and climate policy (20% weighting).

3. Overcoming inner barriers and being fit for more

When talking about obstacles that limit the ability of the V₄ states to decarbonise effectively while at the same time taking into consideration the impacts the process will have on the society and economy, several areas emerge as being especially difficult to transform into a green low emission sector. Among the most evident sectors are the energy sector and also transportation. Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are also among the world's largest car manufacturers per capita. In fact, Slovakia with its population of 5.45 million is the world's top manufacturer of cars per capita – in 2019, more than 1 100 000 cars were made there, which corresponds to 220 cars/1000 inhabitants.²³ In both countries, the automotive sector is the backbone of the states' industries and industrial exports. However, due to the reliance on the manufacturing sector, out of OECD countries Slovakia has the largest share of jobs at risk of automation. Czech Republic and Poland are also above the OECD

²¹ “Spillover Rankings – Sustainable Development Report,” <https://dashboards.sdgindex.org/rankings/spillovers>.

²² Jan Burck, Ursula Hagen, Niklas Hohne, Leonardo Nascimento, Christoph Bals. Climate Change Performance Index 2021. Bonn: Germanwatch, 2020. <https://ccpi.org/download/the-climate-change-performance-index-2021/>.

²³ SME Ekonomika, “Rekordné číslo. Slovensko ostáva lídrom vo výrobe áut na obyvateľa,” SME, January 20, 2020, <https://ekonomika.sme.sk/c/22299052/slovensko-ostava-lidrom-v-produkcii-automobilov-na-obyvatela.html>.



average, while Norway, Finland, and Sweden have the lowest percentage of jobs at risk. What's more, Poland and the Slovak Republic rank very low in providing job-related training to workers, the Czech Republic being slightly above the OECD average. Denmark, Norway and Finland provide the most training.²⁴

Besides the energy intensive industries and overall heavy dependence on fossil fuels, the countries of the V₄ are often identified as those that lack an overarching strategy on how to decarbonise in an efficient and just way. By being inconsistent and blocking the EU climate neutrality goal and by emphasising the place for nuclear energy in the energy mix, the V₄ continues to be seen as an actor demanding special treatment. One of the possible exceptions may seemingly be Hungary which set a 2050 climate neutrality goal in 2019,²⁵ yet many point to the misleading "Christian conservative green policy"²⁶ and Viktor Orbán's practice of prioritising business over climate action.²⁷

As a result of the impacts of climate change becoming more and more visible, climate action momentum being pushed forward also in a legislative context by the EU and because communication of the climate agenda is beyond the control of the rather populist V₄ political representation, there are a number of initiatives in the V₄ states that demonstrate the will to challenge their national unambitious rhetoric and behaviour.

Just to mention a few, it is important to note, for instance, the initiative of the four capital cities which sent an open letter to the EU asking for support in tackling climate change and the pandemic. The mayors point to the fact that the capitals of the V₄ "have very limited access to structural and cohesion funds of the EU", and thus suggest the possibility of targeted funding for cities. The strengthened partnership is essential as the cities are finding themselves to be in a situation where "the [Czech] national government is taking our investment funds away from us",²⁸ whereas the capitals are ready to help build a "healthy, green and resilient Europe".²⁹

The V₄ citizens are also becoming increasingly more aware of the need to tackle climate change and support the aim of a climate-neutral Europe by 2050, as the 2021 Eurobarometer Survey shows despite the economic and pandemic hardship.³⁰ Responses reflecting the stances of the V₄ population slightly vary, but overall they agree that

- reducing fossil fuel imports can increase energy security and benefit the EU economically (CZ - 57%, HU - 76 %, SK - 74%, PL - 72%; EU average - 72 %);
- more public financial support should be given to the transition to clean energies (CZ - 74%, HU - 89 %, SK - 83 %, PL - 80%; EU average - 84%);
- governments in the EU are mainly responsible for tackling climate change (CZ - 56 %, HU - 43 %, SK - 58 %, PL - 50 %) as well as businesses and industry

²⁴ OECD. Putting faces to the jobs at risk of automation. Paris : OECD, 2018.

<https://www.oecd.org/employment/Automation-policy-brief-2018.pdf>.

Data for Hungary is not available.

²⁵ Sam Morgan. "Hungary backs 2050 climate neutrality goal, bringing EU total to 22," Euractiv, June 19, 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy-environment/news/hungary-says-no-climate-neutrality-without-nuclear-but-backs-eu-target/>.

²⁶ Judit Varga. "Time for a Christian Conservative Green policy," Politico, January 27, 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/christian-conservative-green-policy/>.

²⁷ AFP. "Hungary's Orbán faces growing heat over climate change," France24, September 11, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20191011-hungary-s-orban-faces-growing-heat-over-climate-change>.

²⁸ "Mayors of V₄ capitals: Recovery from the pandemic must be green. We're asking the EU for partnership," Praha.eu, July 8, 2020, [https://www.praha.eu/jnp/en/important_notice/mayors_of_v4_capitals_recovery_from_the\\$5465-export.html](https://www.praha.eu/jnp/en/important_notice/mayors_of_v4_capitals_recovery_from_the$5465-export.html).

²⁹ V₄ Mayors. "Cities should play a key role in green recovery," Praha.eu, June 16, 2020, https://www.praha.eu/file/3142805/V4_mayors_open_letter.pdf.

³⁰ European Commission, "Citizen Support for Climate Action," European Commission, July 5, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/clima/citizens/support_en.



(CZ - 54% HU - 52%, SK - 61%), except in Poland where the EU (37 %) is seen as the second key actor after the national government;

- taking action on climate change will lead to innovation and increased competitiveness of EU companies (CZ - 63%, HU - 77%, SK - 80%, PL - 78 %, EU average - 79%).

National surveys also show an emerging trend in acknowledging climate change's critical role. For instance, data from Hungary suggest that "82 % of Hungarians agree that climate change is one of the most important issues and that everyone should be much more concerned about it".³¹ In the Czech Republic, 83 % agree that the EU should be a climate-neutral entity, though 51 % fear the economic impacts of decarbonisation.³² Concerning organized climate-action, one of the citizen-led Slovak initiatives calls for legally binding climate neutrality by 2040,³³ while in the Czech Republic³⁴ and Poland³⁵ several ministries are being sued for not taking the climate action they committed themselves to by, for instance, ratifying the Paris Agreement, and for breaching human rights and violating individual rights. Paradoxically, and simultaneously, the Czech Republic is suing Poland at the European Court of Justice over the extension of the Turow open-pit brown coal mine.³⁶

The need for climate action is further to a certain degree supported by the private sector, for instance the car manufacturer ŠKODA within the Volkswagen Group aims to be climate neutral by 2050 and is waiting for EU legislation to be adopted to make strategic decisions. After the publication of the Fit for 55 package, ŠKODA publicly continued to share a positive narrative about the green transformation stressing that the European car manufacturers will be at the forefront of innovating electric vehicles as they are today with combustion engines.³⁷ Similarly, ČEZ Group (the Czech semi-public utility company), officially supports the transition towards clean energy. These companies are also creating partnerships with the non-governmental sector and municipalities aiming to develop low-emission and climate-resilient infrastructure.

4. With whom, how, and about what? New partnerships in the decarbonisation era

³¹ "Vast majority of Hungarians think that we should be more concerned with climate change," DemNet, October 17, 2019, <https://demnet.hu/en/hungarians-are-concerned-about-climate-change/>.

³² "Češi nevidí v evropské klimatické politice hrozbu zdražování. Obecně s návrhy řešení souhlasí, ale obávají se dopadů na průmysl," STEM, July 13, 2021, <https://www.stem.cz/cesi-nevidi-v-evropske-klimaticke-politice-hrozbu-zdravovani-obecne-s-navrh-y-reseni-souhlas-i-ale-obavaji-se-dopadu-na-prumysl/>

³³ "#klímaťapotrebuje – Klíma ťa potrebuje," <https://www.klimatapotrebuje.sk/>.

³⁴ "Klimatická žaloba ČR – Klimatická žaloba," <https://www.klimazaloba.cz/>.

³⁵ Maeve Campbell, "Polish people take their government to court as climate impacts worsen," Euronews.green, June 10, 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/green/2021/06/10/polish-people-take-their-government-to-court-as-climate-impacts-worsen>.

³⁶ "European Commission joins Czech case against Poland's Turow coal," Reuters, June 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/european-commission-joins-czech-case-against-polands-turow-coal-mine-2021-06-09/>.

³⁷ Martin Jahn, "Nová emisní norma by zdražila auta typu Fabie tak, že by byla neprodejná, říká Jahn," interview by Daniela Písařovicová, Aktuálně.cz, July 14, 2021, <https://video.aktualne.cz/dvtv/nova-emisni-norma-by-zdrzil-a-uta-typu-fabie-tak-ze-by-byla/r~3beefcooe48411eba824ac1f6b220ee8/>.

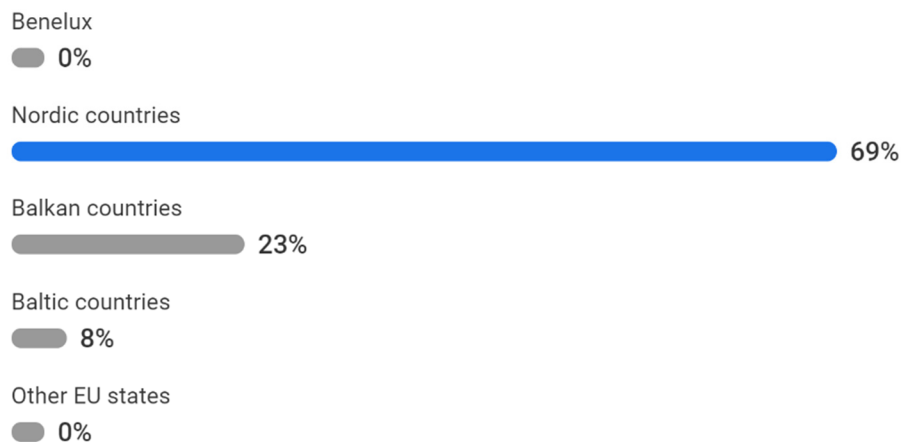


With the European Green Deal, the Climate Law, and the Fit for 55 package having been presented to the Member States, the goal of climate-neutrality is already agreed upon while the road ahead is still being somewhat planned. How can the V₄ region contribute to the sustainable decarbonisation of the EU, create constructive partnerships, and share lessons learned with the Balkan states?

Based on June's conference on V₄ partnership, there was consensus that the Visegrad countries should cooperate the most with the Nordic states in order to successfully implement climate projects (see chart):

Poll 2

With which of the following partner-regions could the Visegrad countries cooperate more in order to successfully implement climate projects?



Source: Conference “The Future of Europe: What Role for Visegrad Cooperation?”, 15 June 2021.

When discussing the main challenges that the Visegrad region faces in tackling the climate crisis, the following was mentioned by participants: political irresponsibility, lack of political will, money, structure of economy, unconstructive mindset, corruption, decision processes, business lobby, interestingly also “negotiating habits”, and an economy dependent on coal. Further, the “ingredients” that would help strengthen the V₄ in tackling climate change and the health crisis simultaneously included: developing common EU values, more political courage, moral strength, learning best practices, sharing lessons learned, and EU financial support.

Based on the expert discussion, it was stressed by panelists from Latvia, Croatia, and the Czech Republic that although the European Green Deal provides a political framework for the EU as such, what is lacking in their region is an overarching long-term strategy built on the leadership of politicians and the much needed ownership of all stakeholders. In this regard, several areas were identified in which the Visegrad regions could collaborate more with the Nordic countries to not only implement climate policies, but also strengthen capabilities and improve their knowledge base, and be an inspirational partner to others. What's more, these areas are also those which are relevant to the Nordic countries in terms of their own bumpy road towards decarbonisation: just transition, forests, transport, and institutional leadership.



JUST TRANSITION

The need to ensure that economies decarbonise while at the same time the uneven distribution of costs and impacts associated with climate change are addressed and regions impacted the most are supported “in finding new livelihoods and managing the social, economic and environmental legacies of industrial change”³⁸ is a challenge for many EU regions. In this regard, several V4 regions are impacted (3 in Czechia, 2 in Hungary and Slovakia, 9 in Poland) as well as several regions, for instance, in the Nordic region (1 in Denmark, 7 in Finland, 2 in Sweden).

In order to share experience, it is important to look at existing initiatives that are focusing on just transition and on learning-by-doing practices. For instance, the OECD Rural Study on Mining Regions and Cities Case of Västerbotten and Norrbotten in Sweden³⁹ has identified fourteen regions of similar characteristics that are undergoing transformation and that may serve as an inspiration to each other. One of these regions is, for instance, the Karlovy Vary region in Czechia. In this case, mining partnership schemes such as the Association of Regions of the Czech Republic can be an inspiration for Swedish and other counterparts. In light of decarbonisation, outmigration or a low entrepreneurship culture, concrete recommendations were provided to help make the Swedish regions leaders in sustainability. These recommendations are relevant not only to the Swedish regions, but also to other regions undergoing transformation, and where, for instance, enhancing the innovation ecosystem or fomenting internal and external cooperation can increase regional well-being. What's more, the complex just transition process creates space for collaboration on several levels – between governments, cities, civil society representatives, academia, private sector etc.

FORESTRY

The climate crisis is intrinsically linked to the biodiversity crisis. Building on the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, the topic of land use, land use change, and especially forestry is also of shared interest to many states as forests and wooded areas cover over 43.5 % of the EU's land space. Concerning the Nordic countries and the V4 region,⁴⁰ in 2019 forests covered 79% of Finland, 72% of Sweden and also 45% of Slovakia, 35.6% of Czechia, 34% of Poland and 24% of Hungary. The role of carbon sinks is key,⁴¹ but due to climate change impacts and related bark beetle crises, Czech forests have turned from carbon sinks to sources of CO₂.

According to the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030, the role of forests is key in decarbonisation as it is planned that forests will remove 310 million tonnes of CO_{2eq} net by 2030 (overall EU target for net removals) while their multifunctionality is recognised as well. The Forest Strategy further provides space for cooperation as forest protection, restoration and sustainable forest management is linked to governance, sustainability and legality of value chains, biodiversity and livelihoods of local populations (bio-economy, bioenergy, ecotourism etc.). The Strategy aims to approach forest conservation in a holistic way, thus providing an overview of various methods on how to enhance EU forests' health and overall resilience. Among the many possibilities is, for instance, the promotion of a network of forest-dominant rural areas and municipalities to give voice to forest rural areas and to ensure their

³⁸ “A just transition – Stockholm Environment Institute,” <https://www.sei.org/featured/just-transition/>.

³⁹ OECD Rural Studies. Mining Regions and Cities Case of Västerbotten and Norrbotten, Sweden, Paris: OECD Publishing, <https://doi.org/10.1787/802087e2-en>.

⁴⁰ “Discover Europe's forests – Forest Information System for Europe,” <https://forest.eea.europa.eu/>.

⁴¹ Eurostat, “Over 40 % of the EU covered with forests,” European Commission, March 21, 2018, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/edn-20180321-1>.



representation in key initiatives (Rural Observatory,⁴² ENRD Portal⁴³) as well as facilitating specific assessments of needs of EU forest areas. Forest stakeholders are encouraged to join the Pact for Skills that aims to incentivise private and public stakeholders to take concrete (climate) action. More technical tools are also put forward, such as the carbon farming initiatives, echo-schemes on agroforestry or payment schemes for ecosystem services for forest owners and managers. One such scheme that can serve as an inspiration to other Member States is the Finnish METSO programme⁴⁴ - an initiative focusing on voluntary forest protection by landowners.

TRANSPORT

Unlike other sectors in the EU's economy, transport emits an increasing amount of greenhouse gases, almost 25% of total EU emissions. As the data shows, the transition to a greener and smarter mobility will be complicated, but at the same time, its aim is to design accessible and affordable transport and logistics solutions to all Europeans, connecting rural and remote regions. The Fit for 55 package points to many proposals directed towards the revision of CO₂ standards for cars and vans, sustainable maritime fuels, recharging and refuelling infrastructure etc.⁴⁵ It is, however, important to note that rail (and waterborne) transport have the lowest emissions per kilometer and unit transported, are the best choice for personal travel in terms of emissions, and therefore deserve special attention also in the context of possible partnerships.⁴⁶

In light of the need to develop low-carbon transport systems, there is potential, for instance, in expanding the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) corridors and extending the capacities for intermodal traffic. An example of a successful railway connection among different parts of Europe is the Rail Baltic project of the North Sea-Baltic corridor. The railway connects Helsinki and Warsaw, and allows further connection with other states.⁴⁷ The expansion of the railway system towards the Western Balkans and other regions can ensure stronger integration and bring new dynamism to regional cooperation. The “connectivity agenda” can further drive economic growth and new green jobs⁴⁸ as well as support the leadership of various countries, such as Bulgaria in realizing the Alpine - Western Balkan corridor.⁴⁹ It is therefore important to, for instance, initiate the restoration of international railways.

⁴² “European Observatory of Rural Innovation and Development – European Commission,” <https://cordis.europa.eu/article/id/3061-european-observatory-of-rural-innovation-and-development>.

⁴³ “European Network for Rural Development – European Commission,” <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/>.

⁴⁴ “Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland (METSO) – Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland,” <https://mmm.fi/en/forests/biodiversity-and-protection/metso-programme>.

⁴⁵ “Questions and Answers: Sustainable transport, infrastructure and fuels – European Commission,” https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_21_3525.

⁴⁶ EEA. Rail and waterborne – best for low-carbon motorised transport. Copenhagen: EEA, 2021. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/rail-and-waterborne-transport>.

⁴⁷ “North Sea – Baltic – European Commission,” https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/infrastructure/north-sea-baltic_en.

⁴⁸ “International Relations: Western Balkans – European Commission,” https://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/international/enlargement/westernbalkans_en.

⁴⁹ Majorie van Leijen. “Bulgaria takes the lead in realizing Alpine-Western Balkan corridor,” Railfreight, August 1, 2018, <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2018/08/01/bulgaria-takes-the-lead-in-realising-alpine-western-balkans-corridor/>.



LEADERSHIP

In order to put in practice a comprehensive and interconnected set of proposals or any efficient decarbonising policy or tool, it is important to have a critical, yet intangible, component – leadership. In terms of international cooperation, the Nordic council can be understood as an example of an actor that is lacking in both the V₄ region and also in the Western Balkans. Whereas the Visegrad Group tries to reflect “the efforts of the countries of the Central European region to work together in a number of fields of common interest within the all-European integration”,⁵⁰ it does not provide the necessary leadership needed in tackling the climate crisis. In fact, it is the Nordic Council that has the ambition to make the Nordic region the world’s most sustainable and integrated region by 2030. In order to do so, “the Nordic civil society network is being established to make the voice of civil society better heard in efforts towards achieving this vision”.⁵¹ In this regard, the V₄ Group does not have the ambition to lead the change. On the contrary, it is stated in the V₄ Presidency Programme of Hungary (July 1, 2021 - June 30, 2022) that “it is the shared goal of the Visegrad countries to be among those who benefit from the global economic and political changes”.⁵² Benefitting from change is not the same as leading the change. There is therefore a large potential for the V₄ region to have higher ambition, to see itself in another light and as the actual agent of change. What’s more, a positive - and so far missing - approach based on ownership of one’s decarbonisation agenda, and learning from the experience of the Nordic Council may serve as an inspiration for states in the Western Balkans and other regions in being open and welcoming towards civil society and new ways of thinking.

5. Contributing to the debate on the Conference on the Future of Europe as the V₄

With climate change here to stay and as it is having multi-faceted impacts, the climate crisis presents an opportunity for countries to cooperate transnationally and globally, and enhance each other’s capability to not only decrease more emissions, but also to be more climate-resilient. What role is the V₄ currently playing in this challenge and how can it evolve in a constructive manner? What role does it have in building back better, greener, bolder? And more interestingly, building on experience, what actors in the V₄ are perhaps more relevant than the state leaders?

The string of climate lawsuits against many EU governments, and of the V₄ especially, together with raising demand for climate change demonstrated by official surveys show that EU citizens understand the need for a green transformation. The CoFoE is a unique bottom-up exercise in which the ambitious public can share its views on how the EU should approach its future. Although the Visegrad countries are no strangers to economic transformation, the citizens are not used to publicly and freely expressing their opinions as the tradition of public debates is not very long-established in the region. However, there are several ways the Visegrad countries can contribute to the success of the CoFoE in light of current and future partnerships.

⁵⁰ “About the Visegrad Group – Visegradgroup,” <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/about>.

⁵¹ “Nordic civil society network to support development of Nordic Region as a sustainable and integrated region,” Nordic Co-operation, June 30, 2021, <https://www.norden.org/en/news/nordic-civil-society-network-support-development-nordic-region-sustainable-and-integrated>.

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Hungary. V₄ Recharging Europe – Programme of the Presidency. Budapest: MFA of Hungary, 2021.

https://v4.mfa.gov.hu/asset/view/139043/Programme_of_the_HU_V4_Presidency_2021-22.pdf.



Firstly, the CoFoE should receive more attention from all actors – the governments, media, CSOs, municipalities etc. Once these actors have joined the discussion on the future of the continent, they may bring in topics that are important to them also in terms of possible cooperation, such as just transition, forestry, transport, and leadership. Next, competent actors can imitate the European Citizens' Panel for instance, including its focus on representativeness, and organize debates on the topics that are most key as well as interesting to the regions' populations. The aim of the debates would be to enhance citizens' understanding of the issues and more debates can further be organised within the V₄ region and in partnership with other regions' representatives (EU, non-EU, especially the Western Balkan states).

In terms of concrete contributions, the unique experience of the V₄ region can enrich the CoFoE by bringing into the discussion views reflective of Central European history, narratives etc. The multilingual platform also provides space for various, yet like-minded, actors to support each others' ideas and so bring attention to them. Last but not least, the V₄ can push for the CoFoE to come to specific conclusions and address topics that are important from their perspective, such as the inclusion of the Western Balkan states, just transition, the end of fossil fuel subsidies etc. The more specific the conclusions are, the bigger potential they will hold in terms of real change, as, for instance, EU climate policies and the CoFoE can be mutually supportive.

Conclusion

The CoFoE is a unique experiment demanding not only participation from citizens, but also leadership from political representatives. The Visegrad states are not as experienced in organising citizens' assemblies and participating in them, as for instance, France, Ireland or the UK, however, the region as such shares historical experience that cannot be disregarded when discussing the EU's future. Moreover, several topics that are relevant to the Visegrad region in the context of decarbonisation, such as just transition, transport, forestry, and leadership, are germane also to other EU regions. This fact opens up space for partnerships, experience sharing, deeper integration, and the strengthening of common values.


In light of the Visegrad countries' ambition to integrate the Western Balkan states into the EU, it is necessary for the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia to step up their game in climate change also within their borders, and thus to strengthen the EU's unity, and so its leadership role on the global level. After all, most V₄ states have been members of the EU now for over 17 years and should support the culture of dialogue and determined intention to cooperate. Looking at common interests and developing new ones is also key and may lead to improvements in various fields, such as the development of rural areas where the speed of implementation of beneficial policies is seen as unconvincing by many and the functioning of the EU as far-fetched and complicated. It is also in these areas where the implementation of just transition will be crucial.

If the political representation understands climate change as a process that may also lead to positive change and the CoFoE as a tool also for cultivating debating skills, more lessons can be learned from regions that have a long history of sustainability and that have not been afraid to embrace their leadership role in this field. The V₄ region can further act as a bridge by playing its part in the EU, strengthening ownership of a fossil-fuel detox and also by sharing best practices with the green transformation with other countries, such as those not yet in the EU.





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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Panel I.: EU in 2021: Potential for regional cooperation, or cacophony of interests?

Dániel Bartha, Equilibrium Institute

Corina Stratulat, European Policy Centre

Wojciech Przybylski, Res Publica Foundation

Tomáš Strážay, Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association

Panel II.: The post-covid EU recovery: Solving the climate and covid crises together

Ana-Maria Boromisa, The Institute for Development and International Relations

Mats Engström, Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies

Tomáš Jungwirth, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

Aleksandra Palkova, The Latvian Institute of International Affairs

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