

## INTRODUCTION

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**K**nown as the Visegrad Group, or V4, the alliance of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia was formed in 1993, with all countries accessing the European Union nearly a decade later, in 2004. In recent years, these four countries have become an area of increasing political concern and analysis, as their leaders have moved towards a more Eurosceptic stance, widening the so-called east-west divide in the EU. The V4 countries, particularly Poland and Hungary, have largely shifted to self-described “illiberal democracies” that mark a turn away from political liberalism, with some countries consolidating extraordinary government prerogatives and limiting constitutional provisions that once nurtured an environment promoting the rule of law and a free and open society. These countries’ disillusionment over the handling of recent crises, most notably the refugee crisis, has created a backlash in which the V4 is challenging the decisions made in Brussels while at the same time still benefiting greatly from EU membership, particularly through structural and cohesion funds.

The political stance of Poland’s Law and Justice Party (PiS) and Hungary’s Fidesz, led by Viktor Orbán, should not be considered an overnight phenomenon, but one that has developed and taken hold over the past decade with deep roots of discontent. Their governments have, however, used the refugee crisis to their advantage to fuel the antagonism between state sovereignty and a shared EU vision. Strong nationalistic undercurrents have led the V4 to argue that securing borders must be the utmost priority and that the arrival of refugees is too much of a strain on welfare systems. At the same time, within these illiberal democracies, there are continued crackdowns on democratic processes – the consolidation of laws placing more power in the hands of a few politicians, the limitations of the press in reporting any views opposing the dominant political parties, and the declarations that civil society groups that promote government accountability and transparency are enemies of the state. And while the move towards illiberal democracies in the V4 countries has found public support, there also exists strong opposition within the population towards extreme measures that have limited civil liberties and promoted an anti-EU discourse.

The east-west divide currently poses myriad questions on the way forward for the EU. With no signs of a permanent solution being found to the refugee crisis and with the continued rise and strength of the V4's illiberal democracies, reflections move on to larger discussions of whether this divide will continue to grow or if there are opportunities for reconciliation between Brussels and the governments of the V4. Are illiberal democracies here to stay and, if so, can the EU coexist with the normative challenge they represent? Will the consequences of illiberal democracies contribute further to EU disintegration, or is it possible that these countries will in time elect governments more supportive of the EU, thus facilitating a joint resolution to the current crises?

This publication is the collection of papers that were presented at the expert workshop "Illiberal Democracies, the Visegrad Group and Future Prospects for the EU" that took place at CIDOB in Barcelona on July 11<sup>th</sup>, 2016 and which was jointly organised with the Madrid office of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung with support from the Europe for Citizens programme of the European Commission. The contributions analyse the events that have given rise to illiberal democracies in the EU and that have severely impacted the relations between the V4 countries and Brussels.

The first chapter by Marek A. Cichocki provides an overview that critically examines the complexity of the great divide that has polarised the relationship between the V4 and EU and what it means for the European Union at large, specifically in regard to further integration. He argues that recent "polymorphic" crises, such as the migration wave, have led to the accumulation of difficulties in Europe's democratic societies and that the perceived rise of illiberal democracies is not really a deviation from the European norm, but rather an alternative response to these crises. And while this drift into illiberal forms of democracy may signal a departure from the norm, it needs to be looked at in a broader context, in which the populations in these countries believe more in European values than has been thought, often with pro-European attitudes and values scoring higher in polls.

In the second chapter, Zsuzsanna Csornai, Nikolett Garai and Máté Szalai explore the V4's migration policy in more depth as a way to further elucidate the conflicting narratives and relationships between these central European countries and their European counterparts. Using the main schools of International Relations and foreign policy analysis, the authors discuss how divergent policies emerged between the V4 and the rest of the EU, concluding that the neorealist perspective is better suited to explain the current divide from a geopolitical perspective. According to the authors, the national framing of the refugee crisis as a security issue can be partly explained by the V4's vast external land borders.

The remaining four papers in the collection have a specific country focus that examines the history and evolution of the events that have given rise to the current state of illiberal democracies. András Bíró-Nagy explores the social background in Hungary that led to the rise of current Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the Fidesz party in 2010 after twenty-five years of socioeconomic changes that did not bring the highly anticipated prosperity. As a result, general distrust in political

institutions began to wane, and there was a decline in democratic principles and citizen engagement. And while Orbán has publicly stated his beliefs that liberalism is corrupt and serves only the elite few, Fidesz's policies have moved to consolidate power in the hands of the very few while attempting to create measures that limit any opposition. This has been seen in changes to the limiting of the powers of the Constitutional Court and the removal of the offices of the ombudsman under the new Fundamental Law. These changes have proved challenging to relations with EU institutions, but Hungarian support among the population remains pro-European despite Fidesz's hold on power.

The next two papers focus on the illiberal democracies and the political landscape in Poland. Jarosław Kuisz examines the refugee crisis as one example of the erosion of the rule of law and the increase in the government's grip on authoritarian power by the Law and Justice (PiS) party. After PiS's majority win in the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections, the party started enacting a series of reforms aimed at members of the judiciary and the media, garnering rebukes from EU institutions and the US. Once the refugee crisis began, the rise of anti-immigration political parties in Poland facilitated the emergence of a discourse based on the rejection of the EU's refugee quotas, which the PiS used to blame EU policies for Poland's disillusionment with the European integration project.

Katarzyna Szymielewicz's paper outlines how the rule of law came under attack in Poland after November 2015 and considers whether the country has entered a new era of "radical democracy". The PiS's changes to the Constitutional Tribunal have sparked concern within the European Commission and led the Venice Commission's advisory board to issue opinions on the deteriorating legal mechanisms. These manoeuvres, in addition to new surveillance laws, the accessing of data on citizens without judicial oversight, and the campaigns to discredit civil society in the media have raised tensions with the European Commission, but also with independent organisations and grass-roots movements within Poland. In this context, PiS has promoted the idea that sovereignty should take priority over the rule of law.

To conclude the series, Michal Vit's paper provides an analysis of the rise of nationalism in central Europe with a particular focus on the Czech Republic and the immigration crisis as a way of highlighting the interaction with EU institutions. 2004 marked the Czech Republic's "Return to Europe" and entry into the EU, so it was a time of transition as the country moved to align itself with the EU institutions. However, the Czech Republic, along with the other V4 countries, struggled with the acceptance of transnationalism within the European context. The country formed its own national identity that continued to evolve after the economic and refugee crisis, which, in turn, drove a deeper wedge between it and the EU, given the lack of a shared narrative.

The contributions in this monograph offer expert analysis of how these seemingly recent shifts to illiberal democracies have actually been part of a much longer transition, with the divide growing between the east and west of the EU for over a decade. The refugee crisis is the most recent of many events that points to the downward turn of EU-V4 relations. And while the V4 still gain from being members of the EU in terms of social

and economic development, questions arise of how these countries will continue to play a constructive role in the EU if the division between Brussels and the V4 widens. At a time when the EU witnesses the rise of nationalist movements that erode the logic behind “ever closer union”, and with Brexit looming large, reconciliation between Brussels and the V4 becomes a prerequisite for efficient crisis resolution in the EU.