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Pető, Andrea

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Prof. Andrea Pető

The Future of V4: Where Have All the Progressive Ideas Gone and When Will They Come Back?

The "Visegrad Four" has recently become a problematic concept, a regional cooperation, which is causing concern and raising eyebrows in Brussels. The well-performing students of the 1989 post-communist transition have become rebellious. How did a very innocent regional cooperation which was the product of the collapse of communism and momentary non-interest of the traditional geopolitical big players in the region, namely Russia and Germany, become so important?

Visegrad has become famous for issues one does not wish to be famous for: the lack of consistent strategy and non-cooperation.

This type of regional cooperation is very specific as it has a flexible system of fixed and written rules of cooperation, as well as rotating presidency and headquarters. The cooperation is fostered by the International Visegrad Fund and founded by government representatives. These cultural projects are expected to strengthen the cooperation. Even though there are only four member states, there is deep animosity among its members partly as a result of historical events that took place 70 or even 90 years ago. Still Visegrad has recently emerged as a new geopolitical centre, partly because it is originally a cultural cooperation and the change of identity in terms of politics paved the way for a stronger and more effective cooperation.

Even though the analysis of these recent developments is rather shallow and follows forecastable patterns, this unexpected emergence of a new effective cooperation is a major paradigm change in Europe. The total population of these four countries is 64 million, greater than that of France and close to that of the UK, and amounts to the 22nd largest economy in the world[1]. Following the logic of market capitalism there

is no need for another competitor in the already fragmented European market, but the in-between status of these in-between regions must be maintained economically (providing cheap labour), culturally (not investing in joint cultural projects) and politically (forming an alternative union: "Austerlitz 3" by Austria, Slovakia and the Czech Republic).

V4 countries argue that they have to find their own path to prosperity, and this should not be based on catching up with "the West" of Europe. This new geopolitical vision needs innovative analysis which moves beyond showcasing the V4 (or at least two of the four countries) as a bad example of democratic political practice and strategic thinking. How can countries whose economic growth is largely dependent on EU structural funds be in a position to criticize the EU as a bureaucratic and non-democratic unit? In order to answer these questions memory politics and a new form of governance needs to be addressed before outlining some of the hurdles progressive forces have to overcome in the near future.

History as Family Silverware

After the collapse of communism, the Visegrad Four was formed in a geopolitical vacuum aimed at promoting certain values according to the following founding statement: *The diverse and rich cultures of these nations also embody the fundamental values of the achievements of European thought. The mutual spiritual, cultural and economic influences exerted over a long period of time, resulting from the fact of proximity, could support cooperation based on natural historical development*[2].

Their joint aims in 1991 were: full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom; elimination of all existing social, economic and spiritual aspects of the totalitarian system; construction of a parliamentary democracy; a modern State of Law; respect for human rights and freedoms; creation

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1   Andrea Schmidt, Friends forever? The Role of the Visegrad Group and European Integration, Politics in Central Europe Vol. 12, Issue 3 2016, pp. 113–140.

2   See: The Visegrad Group official website, http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2

of a modern free-market economy; and full participation in the European political and economic systems, as well as in the systems of security and legislation[3].

However, these aims have fundamentally changed over recent years which have also resulted in political changes. To understand these political changes, two concepts must be used: *in-betweenness*[4] and *mnemonic security*[5].

The past 25 years have shown that full integration of V4 countries in European political and economic systems produces mixed results. The illusion concerning the integration of the in-between states, namely the merger of New Europe with "Old Europe" to form one Europe, quickly evaporated with the occurrence of the triple crises in 2008. The financial, refugee and security crises were game changers that questioned previous political alliances and strategies. There are substantial differences between the outlooks of the different political forces in the four countries as far as economic issues are concerned, e.g. the future of the Eurozone in terms of the key political issue, namely their levels of criticism as far as European integration is concerned. However, there is one issue they have in common that puts them on a level playing field: their consensual anti-migration position. Some politicians, including Prime Minister Orbán, are open, straightforward and combatant with regard to rejecting the migrant quota as a solution, while the Czech government quietly supports such a policy. With this open opposition to Brussels and the desire to return decision-making processes to the member states from European institutions, Visegrad countries have gained international attention. The international attention politicians can capitalise in their local contexts and fights.

By now a substantial amount of literature has emerged discussing trends and developments concerning this new Visegrad reality. Most of the literature holds these states accountable for diversion from European liberal norms. Since 2010 in Hungary, an easily detectable process has been conducted as far as dismantling the democratic state is concerned, Poland followed suit in 2016 after the PiS victory. The process is referred to as different names, namely cultural counter-revolution, mafia state, illiberal state, anti-democratic, populist and neoconservative, but the heart of the matter is the fundamental question of Central Europe concerning whether or not this in-between region possesses specificities which would qualify it as a separate region.

In order to understand the Visegrad 4 phenomenon the concept of in-betweenness needs to be applied. The feeling of being caught between two worlds and not supported by either is deeply rooted and dates back to the Ottoman, Russian or Soviet occupations through to the revolutions of 1956 and up until the Prague Spring. The post-1989 period is also characterized by the feeling of being in-between which led to the formation of the Visegrad Four. 2008 was also a defining year in this regard as well.

The new world order works with what is referred to as "mnemonic security", as well as the control of hegemonic forms of remembrance. The translation of history and its application and thus their identity-shaping effect, are becoming a geopolitical factor. After 1989, fuelled by anti-communist sentiment within the former Eastern Bloc countries and the retributions that took place during the Soviet occupation, anti-communism became the foundation along with the revision of the progressive political tradition on national and international levels.

Before the enlargement of the EU in 2004 the new member states, including the V4 countries together with the Baltic States, successfully lobbied for acceptance of the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism. This Memorial Day, which was expected to counterbalance the Holocaust Memorial Day, created a built-in fracture in the memory culture of Europe. At the same time made the collaboration of the national elites with Nazi Germany and Soviet Union invisible. As the crimes committed by the communist countries had been invisible on the European level, now particularism was inserted in a system which was based on universalism. This memory frame of "repressive erasure"[6] is based on exclusion. This is the theoretical frame of different memory strategies based on national victimhood, which blames Nazi Germany and the Soviets for all the traumas of the 20th century. This memory frame also strengthens their cooperation based on mnemonic security and disregards the conflicts and rivalries which have been present there. This process reconceptualises the original mission statement and makes it difficult for progressive political forces to articulate their demands in this hegemonic frame.

Since the time when Orbán's government began to establish this new system, there have been many explanations that viewed Central Europe as the less-developed mirror image of Western Europe. Commentators believed that such a trend could never happen in "developed" democracies, but then came Brexit and the election victory of Trump, which surprised those people who failed to see how divided the societies of these countries are. The crisis has shown us that Europe (and the US) has a dark history as well. A dark history that could be kept at bay through the interconnection of the human rights discourse and free-market capitalism – or so was thought after 1945. But after 2008 it became obvious

3   See: The Visegrad Group official website, http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2

4   Szűcs Jenő, Parti, Júlianna, "The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An outline", Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae Vol. 29 Issue 2/4, 1983, pp. 131–184.

5   Maria Mälksoo, 'Memory must be defended': Beyond the politics of mnemonical security, Security Dialogue Vol. 46, Issue 3, 2015, pp. 221–237.

6   Paul Connerton, Seven Types of Forgetting, Memory Studies Vol. 1, Issue 1, 2008, pp. 60–61.

that colonialism, the holocaust, genocides, displacements and discrimination are as much parts of European history as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The mechanisms that were aimed at keeping these trends at bay are failing. Nowhere else is this failure more obvious than in the countries with decades of experience with lived communism.

Memory politics plays a key role in this process, which is visible in the many ways in which different states are silent with regard to the techniques of discrimination that are inherent parts of their history in modernity[7]. The fight for mnemonic security, which in the case of the V4 countries means anti-communism, brought these countries together, but kept them distant from the progressive political tradition. In order to do challenge this, progressive forces need to handle the politics of emotions wisely and strategically while at the same time critically interrogate history of communism.

New Form of Governance: The Polypore State

This reconceptualization of progressive politics has not been easy over the past 25 years and it will not be any easier in the coming years. Duncan Light, whilst analyzing post-communist identities, pointed out that they are driven *by the desire to construct new post-communist identities, characterized by a democratic, pluralist, capitalist and largely westward-looking orientation*[8]. This desire, however, has changed due to the failure of neoliberalization of V4 countries. Evaluation of the communist period increasingly draws on pre-1945 concepts in V4 countries. In this context, it can be argued that communist historiography was revisionist historiography and in post-communist Eastern Europe it is of the utmost political importance to analyse how this history-writing works as its anti-modernist variant is gaining momentum in the form of anti-modernist revisionism in history writing especially in the case of the history of emancipatory politics[9]. The memories of communism and the more than hundred years old leftist tradition have been omitted, forgotten and denied.

The re-emergence of anti-modernism as a reaction to neoliberalism in post-communist Eastern Europe also appropriated history in order to achieve its aims, namely to create a viable, liveable and desirable alternative.

The fact that the current governments of Hungary and Poland are in the process of building a different kind of state inside the EU points to the failure of norm building. This is the reason why, in cooperation with Weronika Grzebalska, the term "polypore state" was created based on our work on Hungary and Poland as far as the description of illiberal trends in the EU is concerned which in fact is not only confined to these countries even though they produce the best examples within the EU. This newly created polypore-like formation resides at places where the structure of the tree – or in our case the state – is injured; and from there it starts constructing its own, parallel structure[10]. It is of utmost political importance to understand this form of state and start thinking about different new forms of resistance as old forms do not work in this new context.

This parallel state structure functions in three ways: by mirroring the function of the state, feeding a discourse (through the use of other's resources and ideas), and changing the values that govern society. An example of mirroring is women's organisations whose number has significantly grown over the last few years. This growth is in part due to the creation of a parallel NGO-system consisting of conservative women's organizations and GONGOs (government-organized non-governmental organizations) that follow all kinds of small agendas, such as the labour rights of women or the reintegration of young mothers into the labour force; but there are even organizations that combat domestic violence. It is important to mention the latter as the ratification of the Istanbul Convention will bring in new funds to Hungary, and the government plans to channel this money into the GONGO-system, where loyalty to the state is of upmost importance.

The second function of the polypore state is most visible in the current security discourse: all the talk about "George Soros", the "migrants" and "gender" is about increasing the feeling of insecurity so that the state can step in and position itself as the saviour of the people.

The third function is the so-called "familiarity" – in this system women do not exist anymore, they become part of the family, and even the state is seen as a family; it functions in exactly the same way as a big family. Historical revisionism plays a similarly prominent role in terms of global transformation as does the transposition of emphasis from women to families – e.g. in some countries, such as Hungary and Poland, the CEDAW reports of the United Nations mention families instead of women; and women only appear as parts of the family. This again is an example of how the

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7   Andrea Pető, Revisionist histories, 'future memories': far-right memorialization practices in Hungary, European Politics and Society Vol. 1, 2017, pp. 41–51.

8   Duncan Light, Gazing on Communism: Heritage Tourism and Post-Communist Identities in Germany, Hungary and Romania, Tourism Geographies Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2000 pp. 157–176.

9   Andrea Pető, Revisionist histories, 'future memories': far-right memorialization practices in Hungary, European Politics and Society Vol. 1, 2017, pp. 41–51.

10   Andrea Pető, Hungary's Illiberal Polypore State, European Politics and Society Newsletter 21, Winter 2017, pp. 18–21; Andrea Pető, Weronika Grzebalska, How Hungary and Poland have silenced women and stifled human rights, The Huffington Post, 16.10.2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/the-conversation-global/how-hungary-and-poland-ha_b_12486148.html

polypore state supersedes the existing institutional mechanisms and uses them to achieve its own goals.

The polypore state actually appropriates issues, e.g. the fight against international capitalism, protecting small-home owners against banks, etc., making it very challenging for progressive forces to readopt that agenda and be vocal about these issues.

Challenging the Polypore State

Any kind of resistance to the polypore state should emerge from a space. In this section a possible space is discussed, namely the NGOs, and a possible issue, gender equality to be precise, considered to illustrate the possible forms of resistance.

In post-democracy[11] new political programmes emerging from the re-articulation of the relationship between the state and citizens are constructing new spaces[12]. These new spaces are placing democratic actors in an opposing binary position to the establishment, which has a major impact on their performance. Any kind of alternative or resistance is difficult to maintain as the polypore state questions this binary constructing its own NGO sphere, namely the GONGOs, which represent the appropriated agenda of the secular, human rights-based organizations on both the national and international levels. The polypore states have started to establish a pseudo-NGO movement that enjoys mass support by means of state funding, with livelihoods provided by opaque interest groups and with populism-based party communication.

The NGO sector in the countries of the Visegrad Four, which had previously acted as a watchdog and a voice for human rights values in accordance with the principles of liberal democracy, has been fundamentally transformed and now struggles to respond effectively to the government's fundamental structural positions which have broad support in society. Due to a lack of funding and being criminalized in the framework of securitisation of the polypore state what remained for them is the international arena which predominantly consists of different institutions in Brussels. While seemingly active on the international level these NGOs are imprisoned in the national context, as they appear to be the most powerful lobby groups if supported by the special circumstances of their national context. A structural critique of neoliberal globalization has had little effect on the domestic political agenda. The strengthening of racist and nationalist movements offering anti-modernism as a real alternative to neoliberal democracy and the market economy, coupled with the failure of attempts to adapt the Third-Way social democratic model, led to marginalization of democratic values. Therefore, the donor-dependent NGO sphere, which is also stigmatized by the security discourse as a foreign agent even though most of its issues are now represented by GONGOs, is an unlikely space from where resistance will emerge. It would be a mistake to question people's identification with, and support for, such NGOs or to explain the process in terms of lavish state funding alone. The issues they represent are often material issues, but the language they use is different to that of the progressive movement. Nowhere else is this more obvious than in the case of women's issues.

The outlook for women's organisations does not look any more promising either. Social movements have developed in a specific manner. As has been stated on numerous occasions, the country's NGO sector is weak and vulnerable in terms of both public support and funding[13]. As far as the leftist and liberal women's movements are concerned, the question does not only address the manner in which they can represent international norms (such as gender equality), but also how they evaluate and react to the fact that their political influence has not grown in the post-1989 period, even though gender inequality has increased to unprecedented levels in all fields.

As far as gender analysis is concerned, the concept of "New Woman" was labelled by Rita Felski in her work *The Gender of Modernity* as rendering women "prisoners of progress" (Felski, 1995 pp. 11–33). In the rhetoric of the progressive women's movements, women represent the new beginning, whereby the future is conceived as a normative project that develops linearly. The historical metanarrative about the past of women is hierarchical and exclusive, while aiming to forge a counter-identity. The discourse of the women's movement is strategic and emotionally charged. Its language creates collective subjectivity along with shared rituals, symbols of meanings and stories. The main intervention should be to create a re-enchanted language[14].

Gender equality started with work: once women stepped out of their role of unpaid caretakers, they started demanding payment for the work they were doing equal to that of men. Now, by focusing on the tendencies, it will be seen that robots take on exactly the same jobs that women do. While at the same time there is also a trend for romanticising the care work done by women through the ideology of female difference – these two together will deter women from entering the labour market resulting in women losing the material basis of the emancipatory ideology.

11   Colin Crouch, Post-Democracy, Polity Press, Cambridge-Malden 2004.

12   Andrea Pető, Zoltán Vasali, Political Space: Half Empty? The Case of Hungary, SPACE-Socio-Political Alternatives in Central Europe. eds. Katarzyna Sobolewska-Myślik, Dominika Kasparowicz. Warsaw, ELIP11SA, 2014, pp. 60–75.

13   Ferenc Miszlivetz, A demokrácia és a civil társadalom átalakítása a globális térben [Democracy and the Transformation of Civil Society in the Global Space], Civil Szemle Vol. 10, Issue 1, 2012, pp. 63–82, http://www.civilszemle.hu/downloads/cikkek/2012/30szam_2012_1_Miszlivetz_063-082.pdf

14   Andrea Pető, Gender equality as re-enchantment: political mobilisation in the times of "neo-patriarchal neo-liberalism" and possibilities of bipartisan dialogue, Woman Up 2: A Transatlantic Gender Dialogue. : A Transatlantic Gender Dialogue eds. Judit Tánczos, Maari Põim. Brussels, FEPS, 2015, pp. 138–145.

In the meantime, a fundamentalist ideology supports the polypore state, according to which the task of women – who are considered as unequal to men – is to stay at home and care for the family. Only afterwards might she be allowed to work part-time. An important political fight evolves around the question of whether it is possible to quantify care. Possible questions concerning the so-called care crisis which are of particular importance to our future include who is going to give birth, bring up the children, and care for the sick and elderly. The "women's policies" of the national right-wing political parties all focus on the normative cult of motherhood and familialism. In their political language, these parties refer to "family policy" rather than "women's politics", whereby the social role of women is normative motherhood. The liberal-leftist critique of the normative cult of motherhood places the emphasis on women's individual human rights and the right to choose motherhood. This option includes the right to reject maternity – which in conservative discourse is regarded as "national" sabotage[15].

The conservative women's movement, with its focus on the primacy of the family and its denial of freedom of choice and structural discrimination, has found a rival in the field of women's politics. Far-right fundamentalist gender politics, also based on the politics of care and placing the family at the centre, seeks in the long run to absorb the political space for conservative women's politics, while uniting all these political forces under the rhetoric of hostility to communist oppression[16]. The rhetoric of progress, namely the concept of a "New Woman", is being appropriated by anti-modernist political forces. This rhetoric of victorious neoconservative politics after 1989 has left the emancipatory leftists in a defensive position, as their rhetoric is a defensive and negative one. Having failed to critique the basis of neoliberal politics, it remains the prisoner of progress and helpless to familialism supported by welfare benefits.

There are many points where conversations could be had and a shared language formed, but at the moment this does not seem likely, as everyone who joins the discussion does so as if it concerned antagonistic questions; in other words, they all want to convince others that they possess the only right answer. Gender equality is a good entry point as one of the long lasting legacies of the statist feminist period is the consensual value of gender equality. Independently from the fact that in habitual practices that is not necessarily present, that can be a good starting point for rethinking progressive politics.

Locality is usually not conceptualized as a major space for rethinking politics, even though it is the basis of representational politics. Progressive intellectuals, like Cas Mudde among others, are still prisoners of the aufklarist/enlightenment paradigm which states that intellectuals should "spill down" their ideas to the society and develop class consciousness[17]. Mudde is right that political parties are not up to the task of creating a new identity politics, as they are products and representatives of an old-identity politics regime. However, the resistance to the polypore state can only come from localized contexts, namely localized issues by local actors which are framed globally. The issue of corruption (constitutive part of the polypore state) or gender equality, even though it is a structural and global phenomenon, can mobilize resistance only around a local issue. The future will tell us whether reinventing locality in the age of identity politics in the V4 context, together with new movements outside the context of NGOs, can change political parties into institutions of representation.●

The dualism of the neoliberal neopatriarchy and the polypore state – which both suggest cruel solutions to today's problems – could be resolved through the formation of new coalitions and the eradication of false dichotomies.

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15   Andrea Pető, Anti-Modernist Political Thoughts on Motherhood in Europe in a Historical Perspective, Reframing Demographic Change in Europe. Perspectives on Gender and Welfare State Transformations, eds. Heike Kahlert and Waltraud Ernst. Berlin: Focus Gender. Band 11. LIT Verlag, 2010, pp. 189–201.

16   Weronika Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts, Andrea Pető, Gender as symbolic glue: how 'gender' became an umbrella term for the rejection of the (neo)liberal order, Political Critique, 13.01.2017; Eszter Kováts, Maari Põim (eds.), Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe, Brussels, FEPS, FES, 2015.

17   Cas Mudde, Nothing left? In search of (a new) social democracy, 21.11.2013, http://www.opendemocracy.net/can-europe-make-it/cas-mudde/nothing-left-in-search-of-new-social-democracy (accessed on 4.01.2014)