



The View at 25

Visegrád's Silver Anniversary

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INTRODUCTION

25 years since the Visegrád Group's inception, Central Europe is now front and center on the European and transatlantic policy agenda. While questions of EU cohesion, frontline security and Union enlargement loom large, the V4 shines as a beacon of success in regional cooperation. What does the next 25 years hold for the Visegrád Group and how will they shape European policy? To answer these questions, "The view at 25: Visegrád's silver anniversary" offers perspectives and analysis from leading minds in all four member states. Special recognition is owed to the report authors, **Martin Michelot** (Europeum Institute for European Policy), **Attila Pomlénny** (International Centre for Democratic Transition), **Tomas Strazay** (Slovak Foreign Policy Association) and **Anna Visvizi** (Institute of East-Central Europe).

-Peter Doran

The V4 at 25: Now what?

Anna Visvizi

Historically speaking, the composition of the Visegrád Group (V4)—a forum of cooperation linking the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia—contains a certain paradox. Despite their geographic proximity, these countries' sense of geopolitical belonging, political loyalties and, therefore, definitions of national goals and objectives have varied considerably over the centuries. Likewise, until today, significant differences are discernible throughout the V4 countries—not only at the level of policy orientation and strategic objectives, but also in terms of mentality and the inter-subjective set of meanings, values and principles through which these countries interpret reality. To understand the V4's evolution and prospects on its 25th anniversary, we must take into account the historically determined nuances that have shaped the V4's member states.

The V4 at the EU forum: Between individual and collective agency

The V4, as a forum of regional cooperation, relies on a low degree of institutionalization as well as sectoral cooperation and a continuous transfer of organizational knowledge through successive generations of experts at ministerial levels in member states—and hence a degree of immunity to politics. Over the years, the V4 has evolved, while the practice of rotating V4 presidencies has allowed its members to influence that evolution in line with their respective national strategic goals and objectives. Membership in the European Union, besides offering diverse opportunities to V4 members, has also meant adjusting to the EU's regulatory framework, which excludes the formation of institutionalized, membership-exclusive sub-groupings of cooperation at the EU forum. As a result, any discussion on the V4's role in the EU must account for regulatory limits and the resulting operational limitations to the V4 seeking to use a singular agency, i.e. attributable only to the V4, rather than to each of its member states. This means the V4 cannot act as a flexible coalition to build consensus around individual issues; therefore every issue must be renegotiated case by case. It also means that coalition-building is part of the V4's functioning at the EU level, and that it should use every opportunity to attract additional supporters to those issue-oriented *ad hoc* coalitions.

Over the years, V4 member states—either individually or as a coalition—have succeeded in influencing policymaking at the EU level. The case of the Nice Treaty talks and the success of Poland—not yet an EU member—to secure, along with Spain, 27 votes in the Council, is one of them. Moreover, Poland, along with the V4's other three members, has successfully negotiated a conclusion to the 2014-20 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF)—the legal instrument that sets seven-year ceilings on revenues and expenditures for each specific area of the EU budget. Within this framework, the V4—the key beneficiary of structural funds—and other countries in the coalition have defended the case for spending more on cohesion policy despite pressures from other EU members to cut the overall budget in a time of crisis.

Appearances and personalities matter

As ever, images and appearances matter, even at the EU. Although they're still referred to as "new member states" since joining the union in 2004, officials from V4 countries have held many influential posts in Brussels. The most obvious examples are two Poles: Donald Tusk, president of the European Council (2014-16) and Jerzy Buzek, president of the European Parliament (2009-12). Others include EU commissioners who supervised key areas of EU policymaking: Janusz Lewandowski (budget and financial programming); Danuta Huebner (regional policy) and Elżbieta Bieńkowska (internal market and services). All earned well-deserved appreciation for their professionalism and achievements.

At a different level of policymaking, Poland has skillfully managed its image on the national and regional levels. Specifically, in response to some EU members' concerns about Poland's possible abuse of the principle of the free movement of services, Warsaw launched a very effective marketing campaign that revolved around a "Polish plumber" who was uninterested in working in France—thereby ridiculing citizens' concerns and attempts to instrumentalize them for political purposes.

From a different vantage point, the way V4 countries handled their EU rotating presidencies serves as a good example of Poland's successful socialization in EU structures (following the Lisbon Treaty, a new format for cooperation between the country holding the rotating EU presidency and the new post of president of the European Council had to be hammered out). Similar cases could be made for the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. Notably, the V4 and its representatives have proved their ability to employ the established unwritten social practices that has been evolving in the EEC/EU since the 1950s to portray themselves as committed to the idea of strengthening the European integration process. In several member states, EU membership has been the focus of political rivalry at home to the detriment of those countries' engagement at the EU level. Yet this has not been the case with Poland. As such it might have been one of the decisive factors that at one point enabled the V4—and Poland specifically—to be the policymaker. The Minsk agreement attests to that. Certainly, there is an underside to the story of the V4 at the EU level.

The eurozone crisis and its aftermath

The eurozone crisis and the economic reforms it necessitated made the V4's increasingly diversified position *vis-à-vis* deeper integration within the EU all the more striking. Of the four countries, only Slovakia has adopted the euro. Poland and Hungary are signatories to the Fiscal Stability Treaty, while the Czech Republic is not. Overall, the V4 has been absent from the core of eurozone policy coordination and economic governance reforms. And yet, the prospect of Brexit renders the Czech Republic the truly lonely outlier. One must ask: to what extent does the V4's absence (apart from Slovakia) in the eurozone affect its ability to be involved in the policymaking process? What opportunities exist to improve the scope of their involvement? Finally, have V4 members exploited the opportunity to build coalitions to strengthen Slovakia's position in the eurozone in order to defend V4 interests and objectives?

The V4's varying to Russia's annexation of Crimea, the war in Ukraine, the imposition and maintenance of sanctions against Moscow and—from a different angle—reactions to the EU emergency relocation scheme, contributed to the image of the V4 as a group of mavericks. Apart from the risks and threats they represent, the challenges looming on the horizon create windows of opportunities for the V4 to effectively engage in the EU policy-making process.

So what now: Turning challenges into opportunities

Should it happen, Brexit and its corollaries will create similar challenges for all V4 members. These range from uncertainty over the legal status of V4 nationals employed in the UK to possible future pressures on home-country labor markets should today's emigrants return. Other challenges include a decrease in remittances and the uncertain status of students coming from V4 countries. These factors alone lend themselves to building a strong case for the establishment of a broader coalition of Central and Eastern European countries to deal with EU Chief Negotiator Michel Barnier and his team.

Beijing's 16+1 initiative represents another challenge for the V4. If appropriately tackled, it might represent a real chance for the V4 to influence EU enlargement policy—specifically *vis-à-vis* the western Balkans—and EU trade and investment policy, especially in the context of granting China market-economy status and the legal implications for trade and investment that entails. Without denying the benefits of FDI inflows and economic cooperation, the V4's enthusiasm for growing Chinese involvement in the region should consider: (i) lessons that can be drawn from China's engagement with sub-Saharan Africa and the FOCAC format; (ii) that China's policy objectives in the allegedly win-win and no-strings-attached strategy are a function of China's interest first; (iii) that China will not reciprocate the diplomatic clout the EU seems to be offering China today; (iv), that Russia remains Beijing's strategic partner; and (v) that in sub-Saharan Africa—to the detriment of several stakeholders—China has emulated the idea that it can promote economic growth and development while disrespecting the rule of law, fundamental freedoms and civil liberties.

Certainly, China's engagement with Central and Eastern European nations unfolds within the framework of its relations with the EU. However, as we speak, EU members are divided on a free-trade agreement with China and on its market-economy status. As the 16+1 format—so reminiscent of FOCAC—includes EU candidate countries Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, V4 members face a fundamental political, economic and security challenge. It is here where the V4's role in strengthening the nexus between NATO's eastern and southern flanks should point; a serious discussion should follow.

Returning to Visegrád's Roots

Tomas Strazay

It has been five years since a member of the Visegrád Group, known as the V4, has held the presidency of the European Union. Yet the ability of Slovakia—the smallest of the four Visegrád countries—to pursue a regional agenda at the EU level is limited. This is because Slovakia will spend most of its six-month rotating presidency on an agenda that was prepared in advance and which is filled with pre-scheduled meetings and other technical issues. In addition, the presiding country is discouraged from showing preference to any regional grouping within the EU; it must act as an honest broker that strives for European solutions. Even if Slovakia would have had more space for autonomous initiatives, the V4's ability to shape EU policies would be limited by its coalition-building potential and by its current image within the bloc.

The V4's perception in the EU has changed over time. In the early 1990s, Hungary, Poland and the former Czechoslovakia enjoyed reputations as the most stable, developed countries of the former Soviet bloc. But today, the rest of Europe sees the V4 mainly as a powerful bloc opposed to the EU's quota plan for the redistribution of refugees. Some older EU members have also accused the V4 members of lacking solidarity by profiting from their EU membership without bearing any responsibility. But this perspective is too narrow, since there certainly exist areas in which the V4 has pursued a positive agenda. The Treaty of Nice elevated the V4's status in the EU, making the combined numbers of their votes in EU institutions equal to that of France and Germany together. The Lisbon Treaty changed this favorable position, forcing the V4 countries to look more frequently for coalition partners. Natural candidates for the V4+ format are newer EU member states from the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, such as Croatia. But in time, the V4 will need more populous, older EU member states as coalition partners.

Quite naturally, the EU's cohesion policy of the EU focuses on the V4 countries since all four are net beneficiaries of the EU budget. Preparing for the next financial perspective of 2020-26 is therefore in their joint interest. An informal "club" of friends of this cohesion policy could not exist without the V4's active participation. Considering today's uncertainty in the EU, no one can, however, predict what this cohesion policy will look like after 2020.

The V4 countries have the potential to positively shape the EU's enlargement policy by actively supporting EU membership for Western Balkan countries. Thanks to its support of an open-door policy in both EU and NATO, the V4 countries enjoy a high level of confidence in the Western Balkans. Their transformation (though more economic than political) is also attracting attention in Southeastern Europe. The V4's only standing institution, the International Visegrád Fund, was the inspiration for a similar initiative, the Western Balkan Fund. Slovakia has also made EU enlargement one of its priorities for the current presidency. The main task—for Brussels as well as Bratislava—is to convince EU member states already suffering from "enlargement fatigue" that such a policy pays off, even after Brexit. In the Western Balkans, the V4 could promote European project and unity, while guaranteeing an open-door policy.

Another priority for the V4 is relations with its neighbors to the east. Despite the rhetoric of some of its politicians, the V4 has always been united in its opposition to Russia's annexation of Crimea and aggression towards Ukraine. In this regard, it should continue supporting reforms and technical assistance for Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Under certain conditions, the V4 could also help lead efforts to redefine relations between the EU and Belarus.

The V4's geographic position on the eastern edge of both the EU and NATO gives its member states an important role in security and defense. As transit countries for oil and gas exports to the EU, they form a key part of any future Energy Union, though the bloc must put more emphasis on diversifying suppliers. The V4 is also crucial in transport infrastructure; for instance, the proposed Via Carpathia linking the Baltics with Romania and Bulgaria will be the easternmost North-South corridor in the EU.

All V4 governments share the goal of making the EU economically stronger and more competitive through sustained growth. Yet V4 members could strengthen their position as credible EU partners by putting more emphasis on protecting the single market and the four freedoms. It's in their natural interest to avoid center-periphery division and the fragmentation of Europe. Despite differing opinions on the urgency of reforming the EU treaty, the V4 countries can enrich the debate over the EU's future by elaborating on common issues despite varying levels of integration. As the only V4 member which is also in the eurozone, Slovakia should encourage the other three to join as well—yet this is not likely to happen anytime soon.

The V4's currently weak institutionalization allows its members to concentrate more on areas of joint interest while avoiding those in which they cannot agree. The weight of the V4 will increase after Brexit, at least mathematically, so the Visegrád Group cannot afford to be excluded from the processes of redefining the EU.

Undoubtedly, the EU—and NATO membership itself—provides V4 countries with an important tool for cooperation. Though the practices of EU institutions occasionally get criticized in V4 capitals, none of the four V4 countries could exist outside the EU. Visegrád was designed not as a single-purpose instrument, but rather as a long-term project. After 25 years of existence, it would perhaps be worthwhile to go back to its roots and recycle some of the principles on which this regional initiative was built. This concerns the principle of solidarity, which should not only be applied on the regional level. Also the slogan "return to Europe", so powerful in the 1990s, has certain validity today. To put it simple: V4's reasonable future is *in the EU*, and its mission is to bring added value *for the EU* and together *with the EU* aim of stabilizing Southern and Eastern Europe.

The V4 and political realities

Attila Pomlényi

A list of the declared objectives of the Polish presidency of the Visegrád Group leaves little left to the imagination. Its key aim for the next year is to coordinate communications among the group's four member nations in order to give the V4 more influence within the EU and NATO. Just as a common heritage brought the group into existence during an international power vacuum, contemporary geopolitical developments once again bond the four nations together. While the V4 strives to remain flexible and "un-institutional" as it now is, global changes are forcing the group to adjust. It must now ensure that political agreements yield concrete action and tangible results—including the appointment of joint V4 coordinators to oversee common projects. Once a body that fostered dialogue only among its members, the V4 has evolved into an international political tool that not only can coordinate regional integration but serve as an amplifier of central European voices.

With painful memories of the Soviet collapse lingering, the region focuses on political coalitions, foreign policy, security, economic development and internal cohesion even as the traditional West seems less anchored. While the V4 still supports a strong EU, continuous integration and prosperity, it proposes a more nationally tailored approach. The Polish presidency suggests using institutional synergies (cooperation among different levels and formats of cooperation in Europe), as well as functional synergies (establishing a coalition of countries in order to resolve specific matters) to a larger extent.

The V4 loudly opposed the EU's plan to redistribute refugees. This highlighted the EU's weakness in handling issues that have greatly different circumstances and effects within its member states—a domestic situation that until then had not received sufficient international attention. The Visegrád coalition is unique in the sense that it should be able to provide political balance to some degree within the EU. Its nationalist-like gathering of statesmen could have more legitimacy than the EU's technocracy in Brussels, which seems too distant from the population. The political division is no longer between the left and right, but between a left-leaning technocracy and a right-wing nationalism—with its implications of populism and rage.

The discourse of opposition becomes even louder as Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban hopes to start a referendum avalanche within the V4 regarding the quota system. His V4 counterparts may want to act alike to generate further popular support. The V4 and the EU, consequently, will once again move a step further away, fracturing public opinion—regardless of the outcome of any referendum. As the technocrats in Brussels should understand by now, populist opposition is, in fact, fueling nationalist sentiment. Therefore, their choices should follow a path that would take away the fuel from this populist discourse. With Central Europe's political and social integration now obviously on a different path, the V4's newly growing voice can serve as valid measure of regional discontent and frustration. As foreign powers penetrate national institutions and laws, the foundation for populist agendas based on emotion gains ground in opposition.

One of the V4's tangible developments is the establishment of the Visegrád Battle Group and the DAV4 Expert Group—a Visegrád-level advisory group consisting of think-tankers and senior officials. Such security cooperation entails joint military exercises, coordinated defense procurement, joint defense development and education—all aimed at sharing information and harmonizing activities with the EU and NATO. Linking regional defense cooperation more tightly with developments at the NATO and EU levels carry political implications as well.

One particular issue, the Suwalki Gap, requires immediate attention. This land corridor between Poland and Lithuania, or rather between Belarus and Kaliningrad—a highly militarized exclave of Russia—has become the focus of V4 and NATO attention. In a recent joint declaration of V4 defense ministers, they “agree that the NATO forward presence on the Eastern flank, including in Poland to address challenges related to the Suwalki Gap, is essential for strengthening the security of the entire region...”¹

As Poland, the self-declared and widely accepted leader of the V4 Security Cooperation grouping, lead the other three in supporting its national security agenda, conflicts of interest have begun to arise. While Poland hopes to deter any Russian aggression on its common border, NATO wants to avoid aggravating the Russians by planting troops in such proximity. Military institutional interests outweigh national interests. As the defense alliance among V4 states grows, so does their will to influence NATO decision-making. Moreover, as populist governments will gladly use any decision taken against them as a political tool, any rejection of their national interests may come in handy as well.

Strengthening cooperation and dialogue among the V4 nations can mitigate the growing gap between the EU and Central Europe. The more powerful their voice, the more likely the EU will introduce support mechanisms, legislation and bureaucratic measures that not only cater to “liberal democratic institutionalism” but also to the so-called “illiberal democracy” of individual member states—thereby preserving EU stability and prosperity.

It is no less urgent for the EU to acknowledge differences of opinion and take measures to preserve its own democracy. If institutionalists do not respond to the ever-changing nature of international politics, they risk a moral inconsistency that will cost far more in the long run. In this respect, the V4's role is to build internal cohesion and trust by recognizing that national differences exist. This could serve as a model in dealing with those who dislike EU-level mechanisms. Supporting regional solidarity can enhance positive and constructive dialogue within the EU despite the growing divisive mood.

After 25 years, Visegrád approaches adulthood: A Czech perspective

Martin Michelot

The V4 seems to have appeared on Europe's consciousness in 2015—a year that may very well be remembered as the regional grouping's coming of age. The foreign press struggled to understand why the V4 fiercely opposed the adoption of obligatory relocation quotas, while furious politicians in Italy, France and Germany railed about the lack of solidarity—disproved Central Europe's image as the good soldier of European integration. Nicolas Sarkozy had already expressed mistrust back in 2009, when he warned the V4 heads of state against making a habit of meeting regularly before European Council meetings.² In 2015, faced with the combination of a migration crisis which it had forcefully confronted and a NATO agenda skewed towards the East, the V4 found itself—for the first time—in the position of driving rather than passively taking in the European agenda.

The Czech Republic (CR) played a key role in this process—more as an honest broker than as an agenda-setter—in great part due to the V4's rotating presidency which it held from July 2015 to July 2016. In effect, the CR drove the group's transition toward its new role of agenda-setter by mitigating the vehemence with which certain countries expressed themselves on the EU's response to the migration crisis.³ It also formed the basis for a regional position on two reforms central to the EU's future: those of the Schengen system and its asylum process, both of which have been the objects of numerous coordination meetings among relevant ministries. Poland and Slovakia, as the respective holders of the V4 and EU Council rotating presidencies, are building on these agendas that symbolize a concrete V4 contribution to the EU's future. Preventing the V4's fragmentation in 2015 and 2016 (“trust” was the motto of the presidency) has likely facilitated Slovakia's similar task in Brussels, given the V4's perceived newfound power of nuisance in the European realm.

Brexit highlights this idea of fragmentation. In fact, how the V4 can help avoid similar outcomes while advancing its own ideas on EU unity will constitute the group's next step toward influencing future European orientations. The UK's pending departure from the club, meanwhile, forces the V4 to come out of the woods, since Brexit deprives it of an ally that shared many of its priorities—such as completing the single market, removing trade barriers through TTIP and supporting NATO, with which the V4 sees eye-to-eye on the necessity of reinforcing the role of national parliaments in the EU decision-making process. This future agenda may well lay bare some divisions persisting within the group, led by tensions linked to the exercise of political power in Poland and Hungary. It may also exacerbate Slovakia's influence, given its status as the only V4 nation in the eurozone. This means it will sit—alongside the major European players—at many crucial meetings likely to determine the future of European integration.

Nevertheless, the V4's three non-euro states fear they could once more be treated as a peripheral region, which makes Slovakia's role even more crucial in anchoring the V4 to the eurozone engine.⁴ At the same time, the Czechs will use their privileged economic links with Germany to deepen the cooperation that was strained by the deep differences that arose when German Chancellor Angela Merkel opened the country's doors to more than a million asylum seekers. Germany's relationship with the V4 will certainly influence domestic politics, as Czech politicians face the challenge of supporting ties with Berlin while preserving the bloc's new influence. They can do so, first and foremost, by underlining how a healthy relationship with Germany is key to the CR's continued economic prosperity, but also by ensuring that the Czechs will still have a voice in the important debates of Brussels.⁵ Tensions may well develop in Prague between pro-EU forces and those who see in the aftermath of the refugee crisis a vindication of regional positions—a division that has become even more pronounced since Austria took a step towards those positions.⁶ This feeling of vindication holds true for the bloc's main political actors and further fuels thinking that the V4 now has the legitimacy to help guide the EU on such issues.⁷ In this context, there will be pressure on the CR and Slovakia to continue to act as honest brokers and keep the lines of discussion on issues important to the V4 open with Germany. These countries will be crucial in building the necessary coalitions for the EU to move forward without the UK—if it ever has to.

Such thinking implies that the four Visegrád countries see eye-to-eye on the most important issues. This may be true when it comes to the refugee influx, but it doesn't necessarily hold true for other policy debates. In fact, the V4 represents more of an ad hoc construct, a tool used to reinforce regional positions when they exist rather than one in which differences are smoothed out and a regional position created on every issue. Therefore, one should not assume that the V4 will push its weight around, or even worse, become a blocking coalition—except on a few specific issues where it hopes to protect converging interests: namely, safeguarding the free movement of goods, capital, services and people; completing the single market, and laying down the basis for future EU asylum policies. On other issues, V4 members will continue to defend their individual interests, as seen with the Ukraine-Russia crisis, where national preferences were clearly expressed.⁸

Yet this has not undermined the V4's ability to work together on security issues. One example is the deal under which in 2017, each V4 country will send 150-member troop contingents on three-month rotations to the Baltic states. This decision—made before NATO's Warsaw Summit—complements other measures to reinforce NATO's deterrence, especially implementation of the National Force Integration Units (upcoming for Slovakia and Hungary, refused by the CR) and reinforcement of Multinational Corps Northeast in Szczecin. Given their relative size, the CR, Slovakia and Hungary remain strong contributors to the overall defense effort, with notable Czech efforts to support the EU-led mission in Mali, as well as Czech and Hungarian training of Iraqi and Kurdish forces. The V4's unity is also seen with its NATO-first approach, even if the CR—by openly proclaiming it is not part of the so-called “eastern flank”—plays on a different, perhaps more balanced field, with a more intent focus on EU-NATO cooperation and the balance between East and South.⁹

On the EU front, the V4 is drawing lessons learned from the first operational standby of the bloc's EU battlegroup (January-June 2016, under Polish command). The battlegroup is the shining symbol of V4 defense cooperation—one that could have resounded even louder had it been deployed in the Central African Republic, as France had requested in March 2016.¹⁰ However, the mission fell prey to the combination of an uncertain legal and operational framework, some reluctance to engage in a mission that was only tangentially related to terrorism and hard to sell to a domestic audience, and poor communication by the French side. The V4 battlegroup is set to be deployed again in late 2019, though officials are still discussing the exact nature of national contributions. In parallel, Slovakia's EU presidency will generate concrete ideas on how the Athena mechanism—which handles the financing of common costs associated with EU military operations—could be rethought in order to increase the sense of collective ownership of defense issues within the EU. The current French-German-Italian push for a “European Defense Union” may run against some entrenched V4 interests, and in this framework, it is interesting to hear Czech Prime Minister Bohuslav Sobotka declare that “we can't do without a common European army in the long term.”¹¹ Other regional officials don't necessarily share that view, one which will further position the CR as a key player in the delicate game of balancing the interests of the two institutions. This also reflects one way the CR can foster a rapprochement with Germany and France while moving away—ever so slightly but not without notice—from the V4's established line on this highly symbolic agenda. If deeper EU defense integration were to take place, the V4 would likely go through a period of soul-searching, related to its privileged relationship with the United States, to the investments the V4 has made in NATO's collective defense structures, and to any impact this could have on the smaller countries' modernization and planning processes.

It is unclear how security issues will affect the V4's ability to influence the EU's socioeconomic agenda, but it is clear that Central Europe will hold strong cards in its hands if it can only manage to shake off any discussion about its purported peripheral status and hitch itself to the wagon of the two-speed Europe likely to arise once the UK is fully out. However, such influence will only be possible on issues for which the V4 can serve as a resonance chamber, and for which regional agreement exists. Observers will continue to doubt whether Poland and Hungary want regional influence in Brussels given how they treat EU rules—which may well further intensify tensions with the Czechs and Slovaks. This also means that on most issues, the V4 will remain content not to act as a spoiler, an image it is keen to dispel. On key issues, the V4 will be a force to be reckoned with, accompanied at home by politicians who will hone in on the message of limiting the supposed nefarious influence of out-of-touch Brussels.

Endnotes

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Center for European Policy Analysis
1225 19th Street NW, Suite 450
Washington, DC 20036
E-mail: info@cepa.org
www.cepa.org



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