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**AGNIESZKA NITSZKE, Ph.D.**

**PERCEPTION OF THE VISEGRAD  
GROUP AND THE THREE SEAS  
INITIATIVE IN THE GERMAN  
POLITICAL SPHERE**

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### Introduction

Federal Republic of Germany was an advocate of Polish democratic transition on the verge of 80s and 90s of 20<sup>th</sup> century. German diplomacy actively supported the process of Europeanization of Poland and other post-communist countries. These activities were carried out in a multi-vector manner, including by creating regional initiatives and involving countries from the Central and Eastern Europe. One of such forums was the Weimar Triangle, a German-French-Polish diplomatic initiative. Its task was to promote Polish interests not only in France and Germany, but mostly within the European Communities and NATO. Another example of the integration process linking former Eastern bloc countries with the West, but without Germany's participation, was the Central European Initiative. However, both for Western and Central European countries it was important to create a regional integrative initiative, which would bring together countries undergoing systemic, economic and social transformations, and in turn allow them to fill the gap after the dissolution of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) and the Warsaw Pact (WTO) and re-arrange political and economic relations in the region. Support from Germany for the creation of the Visegrad Triangle was not only symbolic, but also political. Germany, as the largest country in terms of demographics, with the largest economy, has a special negotiating and decision-making

position in the European Union/Community. German support for Visegrad Group was evident for many years. The situation changed when Poland and other V4 countries joined the European Union, because after that the EU became the natural cooperation forum. Next change in German-Visegrad relations took place after 2015. One of the triggers that contributed to the cooling of the relations was the migration crisis and the proposals for solving it submitted by Germany and by the European Commission, which turned out to be difficult for the V4 to

## Expert centers

German political think tanks are some of the best ones in the world<sup>1</sup>. Expert centers in Germany have a different status; some of them are fully independent, others act as sources of expertise for political parties. Regardless of their formal nature, they constitute a valuable source of knowledge on current social and economic topics or in the field of international relations. Their analyses and expertise are used by parties and political decision-makers, and they are often a source of information for the media, and thus indirectly for the broadly understood public opinion. For these reasons, it is worth analyzing the level of interest in cooperation between Central European countries and the content of the materials devoted to it.

Federal Agency for civic Education (*Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, BPB*) is unusual both in political and institutional terms. It is an organizational unit operating under of the Federal Ministry of the Interior, but with full autonomy the field of its activities. The decree on BPB of January 24, 2001 states in Art. 6, that the agency's politically balanced attitude is guaranteed by a 22-person council consisting of members of the Bundestag<sup>2</sup>.

accept. In the following years, the visions of cooperation of the V4 countries and Germany continued to drift away from one another, which was reflected by Poland announcing the foundation of *the Three Seas Initiative (3SI)*. In this study, I will look for an answer to the question, whether V4 and 3SI are important to Germany and whether they are present in the German political sphere – in the analyses of the expert centers, in particular party foundations, and in the comments of German diplomacy.

The BPB website contains over 100 materials on Visegrad Group and only a few on Three Seas Initiative, which may be due to its shorter duration. In 2015, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the V4, a special issue of the journal "Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte" was published, devoted to cooperation of the Visegrad Group. Various areas of cooperation and the situation in individual countries were analyzed. The conclusions indicated that a lot was achieved, especially in the field of European integration. It was emphasized that the political transformation was not fully successful, because in each of the Visegrad countries there are strong populist movements, which affects involvement of these countries in the European integration, which is sometimes treated instrumentally as a source of material benefits, not a community of values<sup>3</sup>.

On the occasion of the next round jubilee (30th anniversary of the V4), an analysis of the genesis and evolution of the cooperation was published. The publication indicated that in the first years the V4 countries focused on achieving the common goal of Euro-Atlantic integration. When both of these goals, accession to NATO and the EU, were

<sup>1</sup> The reference here is primarily the ranking of the best think tanks affiliated with the political parties included in the *2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report (GGTT)*, in which five out of 39 qualified think tanks are German party foundations, and moreover, a special position regardless of the classification, of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation which was awarded the title of "Center of Excellence" in this category. J.G. McGann, "2020 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report" (2021). TTCSP Global Go To Think Tank Index Reports. 18, [https://repository.upenn.edu/think\\_tanks/18](https://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/18) (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>2</sup> *Erlass über die Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (BpB) vom 24. Januar 2001*, [https://www.bpb.de/die\\_bpb/2DUQ26,0,0,Erlass\\_%FCber\\_die\\_Bundeszentrale\\_f%FCr\\_politische\\_Bildung.html](https://www.bpb.de/die_bpb/2DUQ26,0,0,Erlass_%FCber_die_Bundeszentrale_f%FCr_politische_Bildung.html) (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>3</sup> *Visegrád-Staaten*, „Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte” 2015, no. 47–48, <https://www.bpb.de/apuz/215171/visegrad-staaten> (access: 12/10/2021).

achieved, V4 countries looked for new fields of cooperation. The mentioned positive effects included The Visegrad Fund and the initiative to establish the V4 Battle Group. Recent years of Visegrad Group's activities are rated much worse. Attention is drawn to the divergent interests, especially positive attitude of Hungary towards cooperation with Russia, which does not correlate with the Polish national interest. Another problem is the cooperation under the EU. In 2020 the Poland and Hungary threatened to veto the Multiannual Financial Framework, while Slovakia and Czech Republic, although originally also skeptical about the establishment of the 'money for the rule of law' mechanism, ultimately did not take any action to support Poland and Hungary. The only area in which Visegrad countries took an unequivocal position was the refugee crisis of 2015, when all of them expressed opposition to the mechanisms proposed by the European Commission. The analysis noted that there is one more common point, namely populist governments in all V4 countries, while in Poland and Hungary the governments also showcase authoritarian tendencies<sup>4</sup>. The divisions in V4 were the subject of another analysis, published by BPB in 2017 under the meaningful title *When does two plus two not equal four? Visegrad Group and the future of Europe*<sup>5</sup>. In the analysis, the Visegrad Group is presented as a "two plus two" model, where the Czech Republic and Slovakia distance themselves from Polish and Hungarian initiatives in the European arena. The analysis indicates that in Poland and Hungary, European policy is a hostage of the internal policy, which is surprising because the societies in both countries are pro-European. According to the authors of the study, the differences between the V4 members are also noticeable in relation to Russia. Within the EU, Hungary and Slovakia are for lifting sanctions, Poland is strongly in favor of keeping them, while the Czech Republic is ambivalent. The attitude of individual countries to the leading role of

Germany in the EU is important in context of intra-EU relations and the possibility of pursuing one's own national interest. This role is accepted by Hungary and the Czech Republic and challenged by two other countries. Another issue that draws different opinions within the V4 is the flagship project of Polish diplomacy, the Three Seas Initiative. The Czech Republic and Slovakia consider it harmful to the unity of Europe, and also treat it as an attempt by Poland to assume leadership in Central and Eastern Europe.

The most important issue that united the V4, the opposition to the relocation of refugees in 2015, is presented as what ruined their image in Europe. The point is not the opposition itself, but the lack of a constructive proposal to solve the problem. In the conclusions, the authors emphasize the fact that the focus on internal problems led to the loss of Poland's strong position and marginalization in the EU, which contributed to the weakening of its voice under the EU forum.

One of the issues of the series "Polen Analysen" was devoted to the Three Seas Initiative. It presents the assumptions and evaluation of the achievements of the Initiative to date. The Eurosceptic nature of the idea of cooperation of 12 countries of the region is underlined, as well as an attempt to create a counterweight to Western Europe, and in the most far-reaching scenario – a "plan B" for European integration<sup>6</sup>. Trimarium is treated as an original project of President Andrzej Duda, with the strong support of the Law and Justice government, referring to Polish historical concepts (Intermarium from the interwar period, or even further – Jagiellonian Poland), which today are incomprehensible to many. Attention is drawn to the cautious attitude of some of the countries participating in the project. Not all are willing to recognize the leadership of Poland, and some fear that they will be associated with the radical Eurosceptic course set by

<sup>4</sup> Vor 30 Jahren: Gründung der Visegrád-Gruppe, 10.02.2021, <https://www.bpb.de/politik/hintergrund-aktuell/326805/visegrad> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>5</sup> A. Fuksiewicz, A. Łada, *Analyse: Wann sind zwei plus zwei nicht vier? Die Visegrád-Gruppe und die Zukunft Europas*, 4.07.2017, <https://www.bpb.de/251734/analyse-wann-sind-zwei-plus-zwei-nicht-vier-die-visegrad-gruppe-und-die-zukunft-europas> (access: 12/10/2021). Analyses about Poland (ger. *Die Polen-Analysen*) are published jointly by German-Poland Institute in Darmstadt, Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen and German Association for East European Studies. The analyses are published by BPB as a licensed edition.

<sup>6</sup> R. Riedel, *Analyse: Das "Intermarium" und die "Drei-Meere-Initiative" als Elemente des euroskeptischen Diskurses in Polen*, „Polen-Analysen“ 2020, no. 249, <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/polen/analysen/303998/das-konzept-des-intermarium-und-der-drei-meere-initiative-21-01-2020> (access: 12/10/2021).

the Polish government<sup>7</sup>. President Donald Trump's support was seen as an attempt to balance German influence in Central and Eastern Europe<sup>8</sup>.

Contrary to Poland, in Germany, professionalization of politics is considered a matter of great importance. The manifestations of this approach are very strong and influential political foundations affiliated with political parties.

The Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, KAS) is a one of the most important party-affiliated think tanks in the world. Analyses and the studies prepared by KAS are not only a source of information for its affiliated party, Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich-Demokratische Union, CDU), but are also noted by German and foreign news agencies. In the analyses devoted to the V4, attention is drawn to the significance of relations of Germany with the V4 countries, which are an important trade partner, more important than China or Russia. Because of that, the V4 is a point of interest for German diplomacy<sup>9</sup>. The analysis points out common goals and positions that include the opposition to the relocation of refugees in 2015 or (a more positive example) support for European aspirations of the Western Balkans. However, much more space was devoted to the issues dividing the Visegrad countries. The biggest problem seems to be the attitude towards Russia and the close relationship between the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and the Russian President Vladimir Putin, which is difficult for Poland to accept. Another issue is the institutionalized and ever closer relations of Hungary and China, which also is perceived by the V4 countries as a potential source of conflicts. Currently one of the most important events in the European arena is the conference about the future of

Europe. This could have been a great opportunity for the V4 countries to show unity in relation to the proposed development of European integration. However, as the author points out, it is basically impossible, because the Czech Republic and Slovakia are in favor of tightening cooperation, whereas Poland and Hungary present different attitudes, focusing on "return to Europe of sovereign states". Another difference becomes apparent in axiology. Poland and Hungary want a return to traditional Christian values. Visegrad countries are aware that they are often more divided than connected, and that these dividing lines are transferred to the EU forum, therefore they sometimes undertake initiatives to improve the image of the V4 in Europe<sup>10</sup>. V4 is defined as an "occasional alliance", which not only means that it does not have an institutionalized structure, but more so – that it does not have a long-term strategy and program, and makes decisions *ad hoc*<sup>11</sup>. In November, in the KAS office in Berlin, the presentation of the report entitled *Trends of Visegrad European Policy 2021* took place. It appears that for the respondents in the V4 countries, Germany is the most important non-Visegrad partner, although in recent years in Hungary and Poland the perception of Germany has changed *in minus*<sup>12</sup>.

The second party-affiliated expert center in terms of in size and influence is the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (*Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, FES) associated with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD). Traditionally, the issue that received the most attention in FES analyses is the opposition to the relocation of refugees in 2015. It was noted that this was the moment when German media started talking about the V4, which made the citizens of this country learn about this initiative. Other materials indicate a different

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> S. Póciennik, *Analyse: Besser geht's nicht? Die deutsch-polnischen Wirtschaftsbeziehungen nach 1990*, „Polen-Analysen“ 2020, no. 253, <https://www.bpb.de/suche/?suchwort=drei-meere-initiative&titel=0&volltext=1&jahr=0&autor=0&lizenz=1&suchen=Suchen&bereiche=&format=&paginator=1#paginator> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>9</sup> A. Beribes, *The Misunderstood? The Visegrád States and the Conference on the Future of Europe*, "Facts and Findings" 2021, No. 439, p. 3, [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/210630\\_A%26A\\_Visegrad\\_EN.pdf/e31256ce-52f2-3383-ccd5-77f2fe52f41f?version=1.0&t=1625129495748](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/210630_A%26A_Visegrad_EN.pdf/e31256ce-52f2-3383-ccd5-77f2fe52f41f?version=1.0&t=1625129495748) (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>10</sup> It was one of the goals of the Czech presidency in V4 (July 1, 2019 - June 30, 2020), Ibidem, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Trends of Visegrad European Policy 2021*. Preview of the debate on November 8, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/de/veranstaltungen/detail/-/content/trends-of-visegrad-european-policy-2021> (access: October 12, 2021).

understanding of sovereignty than in Western countries, which is incompatible with the progressing integration<sup>13</sup>. The Three Seas Initiative appears in the studies of the FES in the context of the possibilities of German diplomacy. The initially skeptical reception of this process changed after Foreign Affairs Minister Heiko Maas and Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier attended the Three Seas Initiative summit, which allowed Germany to have "insight" on the issues the Initiative deals with<sup>14</sup>. The Three Seas is presented as a project of international promotion of Poland. Poland is "too small to be big" in the EU, and at the same time has the feeling that it is "too big to be small", and that is why it is looking for new formats of cooperation. It is also indicated that the Initiative is being developed in place of old initiatives that, from the perspective of the current Polish government, have lost their importance, such as the Weimar Triangle<sup>15</sup>.

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom associated with the Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei, FDP) analyzes the geopolitical V4 context in their materials. Central Europe is an ideological term historically associated with anti-Western, anti-liberal and anti-democratic values<sup>16</sup>. However, for many years nothing indicated that nowadays V4 countries would implement this old scenario, until 2015, when, united by their reluctance to accept refugees, they set on an anti-Western course. It indicates that individual Visegrad countries do not follow this path to the same extent. Positions of Poland and Hungary are the most alarming. Like other think tanks, in its publications, FNS emphasizes the differences that divide V4 member

states, but also draws attention to other elements, such as the national-Catholic character of Poland in opposition to secular Czech Republic, conflicts between Hungary and Slovakia and great-Hungarian ambitions threatening the sovereignty of Slovakia<sup>17</sup>. Interestingly, in the analysis it is noted that V4 countries do not want to be second-class members of the EU and are against the plans of a Europe of different speeds, but at the same time they implement this model themselves (Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary remain outside the Euro zone). Interestingly, the FNS presents the conflict between the V4 and Western Europe in relation to the migration crisis differently than other foundations, indicating that Visegrad countries cannot be forced to take actions for which there is no consent not only of the political elites, but above all of the societies. In this situation, it was necessary to propose another way of the V4 countries to help resolve the crisis<sup>18</sup>.

In most of the FNS analyses from recent years, the authors focus on the V4's opposition to the EU's migration policy – not only in relation to the events from 2015, but also more recent happenings related to the new EU pact on migration. It is noted that Poland and Hungary are exercising more and more anti-European rhetoric as well as politics. The conclusions point out that the EU's response to these actions is insufficient (flexible solidarity) and recommend that the Union should not succumb to blackmail<sup>19</sup>.

One of the most interesting FNS analyses was prepared by Renata Alt, a member of the Bundestag from Slovakia, who argues that the V4 "demonstra-

<sup>13</sup> A. Hrytsenko, *The Price and Value of Sovereignty in the Era of Globalization*, "UA: Ukraine Analytica" 2021, Issue 2 (24), p. 6, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ukraine/12961/2021-24.pdf> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>14</sup> R. Krumm, S. Weiß, *Initiative statt Stillstand. Warum sich eine geeinte EU sicherheitspolitisch engagieren sollte*, FES Regional Office for Cooperation and Peace in Europe (FES ROCPE) Wien 2020, p. 5, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/wien/16312.pdf> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>15</sup> H.-J. Spanger, *Polen und die Stärkung der Ostflanke*, [in:] *Atlantische Zukünfte. Eine vergleichende Analyse nationaler Debatten über die Reform der NATO*, M. Dembinski, C. Fehl (Hrsg.), Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V., Bonn 2021, p. 67, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/18395.pdf> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>16</sup> D. Doering, *Liegt "Mitteleuropa" wirklich in Europa?*, 22.01.2018, <https://www.freiheit.org/de/mitteleuropa-und-baltische-staaten/liegt-mitteleuropa-wirklich-europa> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>19</sup> N. Maráková, T. Skorić, D. Doering, *Pragmatismus oder Zeichen der Schwäche? Visegrad-Länder reagieren zurückhaltend auf den Flüchtlingspakt*, 1.10.2020, <https://www.freiheit.org/de/mitteleuropa-und-baltische-laender/pragmatismus-oder-zeichen-der-schwaeche-visegrad-laender> (access: 12/10/2021).



tively distances itself from European values and institutions"<sup>20</sup>. In her opinion, the Group is not homogeneous and there is more that divides V4 member states than what unites them. The author comes up with a proposal for German diplomacy, which should be a link between the V4 and Western Europe, but should avoid paternalism.

Hanns Seidel Foundation, affiliated with Christian Social Union (Christlich-Soziale Union, CSU) presents a different approach to the V4 issue. In the report from the meeting of Elmar Brok, a CDU politician and MEP, and Tomáš Valášek, director of Carnegie Europe, which took place in 2017, the V4 is not denied subjectivity in the European arena and the right to fight for their own interests, but during the meeting the speakers indicated that they should do it in accordance with the applicable law (treaties). Brok stressed that Germany should take care of good relations with the V4, because this is a guarantee of good relations with the EU's eastern partners. Valášek spoke in a similar tone, stressing the coordinating role of the V4, both in the internal cooperation between the Group's members, as well as in relations with partners in the East<sup>21</sup>.

Another important think tank analyzing the V4, considering the results of the September elections to the Bundestag, is the Heinrich Böll Foundation (*Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, HBS) affiliated with the Green Party, which will co-create the future German government. HBS analyses focus on two issues: the refugee crisis and EU migration policy, as well as the rule of law and democracy in the V4 countries. Regarding the first issue, it is noted that the Western European countries did not take into account the concerns of the V4 in regard to the relocation

system. This contributed to the hardening of positions of Visegrad countries on this matter<sup>22</sup>, which was and is visible in their attitude to the EU pact on migration. According to the HBS expert, this is because positions of the V4 countries still have not been taken seriously enough<sup>23</sup>. More space is devoted to the second issue, i.e. the rule of law and the departure from democracy of the V4 countries. Criticism of governments in Visegrad countries is not one-sided. Attention is drawn to the process of drifting away from the values and principles of liberal democracy, but it is emphasized that Western Europe should not triumph. In recent years the term Visegrad has become synonymous with a lack of solidarity, parochialism and nationalist policy<sup>24</sup> for Western Europe, but the same trends that brought populists and Eurosceptics to power in the V4 are evident in the Western Europe.

The German Left (*die Linke*) is associated with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (*Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung* RLS). This think tank pays little attention to the V4. In casual references, it refers to the Group's sympathy for former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with whom the ruling elite of V4 share an aversion to liberal democracy<sup>25</sup>.

The Desiderius-Erasmus-Foundation (*Deriderius Erasmus Stiftung*, DES), affiliated with with Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD), focuses entirely on internal policy and does not take up the subject of V4 or 3SI at all<sup>26</sup>. This subject is discussed on the website of the party itself. The AfD, contrary to critical comments presented by mainstream parties' think tanks, supports the V4 countries on the migration issue. In the commentary to the proposal of the EU pact on migration,

<sup>20</sup> R. Alt, *Auf Augenhöhe: Dialog mit Mitteleuropa stärken*, 14.11.2018, <https://www.freiheit.org/de/deutschland/auf-augenhoehe-dialog-mit-mittleuropa-staerken> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>21</sup> A. Ostlender, *Visegrád und die EU. Zerfall oder Koalitionsbildung?*, 20.06.2017, <https://www.hss.de/news/detail/zerfall-oder-koalitionsbildung-news772/?searchQuery=visegrad%20gruppe> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>22</sup> E. van de Rakt, *Nach dem EU-Sondergipfel: Zwischen Beschwichtigung und Kampfrhetorik*, 30.09.2015, <https://www.boell.de/de/2015/09/30/nach-dem-eu-sondergipfel-zwischen-beschwichtigung-und-kampfrhetorik> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>23</sup> D. Kipp, *Das Warten auf eine Europäische Lösung*, 20.12.2020, <https://www.boell.de/de/2020/12/20/das-warten-auf-eine-europaeische-loesung> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>24</sup> E. van de Rakt, *Trendsetter Orbán?*, 17.05.2018, <https://www.boell.de/de/wird-Orban-zum-Trendsetter> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>25</sup> T. Cohen, *Israel vor den Wahlen: Die Hegemonie des rechten Lagers*, März 2019, <https://www.rosalux.de/publikation/id/40128/israel-vor-den-wahlen-die-hegemonie-des-rechten-lagers?cHash=d84a3ac902bee803f6517a399338a7e2> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>26</sup> The DES official website, <https://erasmus-stiftung.de/> (access: 12/10/2021).

Beatrix von Storch, the party's deputy spokesperson, praises the Visegrad countries<sup>27</sup> for their consistent opposition to the EU's migration and asylum policy, while in 2016 in Dubrovnik the then vice-pre-

sident of the party, Alexander Gauland, welcomed the V4's demand to strengthen national parliaments<sup>28</sup>.

## Diplomacy

The foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany is the responsibility of the federal government and, within it, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Aswärtiges Amt*). The Federal Chancellor and his administrative base – the Office of the Federal Chancellor (*Bundeskanzleramt*) also has competence in this area. To a lesser extent, mainly in the field of representative functions, the foreign policy is carried out by the federal president. The opinions and statements of members of the government and the president are official positions of the country and are therefore closely followed and analyzed by national and foreign entities.

Germany is looking for strategic partnerships especially in its immediate neighborhood, and countries of Central and Eastern Europe has been treated as the most important political and economic partners for many years. For this reason, the V4 countries are traditionally in the orbit of interest of German diplomacy. Poland has long been considered the leader of the region and the most important partner of the Republic, but due to the growing anti-German and anti-EU rhetoric in Poland, Germany is increasingly more often choosing the Czech Republic or Slovakia in terms of countries that are willing to cooperate within the EU and have no problems with compliance with the rules and values of the EU<sup>29</sup> And

although the Minister of Foreign Affairs Heiko Maas assures: "We do not differentiate Europe according to the indications of the compass; for us, diversity is not an obstacle to unity in general"<sup>30</sup>, it is Slovakia that is considered a key partner is for Germany and the builder of bridges in the heart of Europe<sup>31</sup>.

In 2018, the Secretary of State of the German Foreign Ministry Andreas Michaelis, in a speech devoted to international challenges, referred to the cooperation with the Visegrad countries. He stressed that it is important for Germany and Europe that Poland and countries of the Group re-join the cooperation within the EU, where they cannot be treated as second-class members, but also must respect the principles, and above all – the rule of law<sup>32</sup>. Niels Annen, Secretary of State in the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed similar attitude and emphasized the importance of the V4 in ensuring security on the eastern flank of the EU<sup>33</sup>.

In 2019, the meeting of Michaelis and the director general of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs František Ružička took place. During the meeting, Slovakia was introduced as the leader of the region due to the Bratislava's democratic course, which encourages Germany to tighten cooperation. Slovakia is treated as a bridge between Germany and the V4<sup>34</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> *Beatrix von Storch: Visegrad-Staaten als Vorbilder gegen Asyl- und Migrationsdiktat der EU*, 25.09.2020, <https://www.afd.de/beatrix-von-storch-visegrad-staaten-als-vorbilder-gegen-asyl-und-migrationsdiktat-der-eu/> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>28</sup> *Gauland: Die EU muss reformiert werden*, 9.09.2016, <https://www.afd.de/gauland-die-eu-muss-reformiert-werden/> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>29</sup> *Prag: Europäische Sternstunde in der deutschen Botschaft*, 30.09.2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/tschechischerepublik-node/maas-prag-botschaftsfluechtlinge/2251088> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>30</sup> *Slowakei: Schlüsselpartner und Brückenbauer im Kern Europas*, 27.11.2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/slowakei-node/maas-lajcak/2164398> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem: Slowakische Europa-Staatssekretär in Berlin*, 29.01.2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/slowakei-node/roth-slowakei-korcok/1349512> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>32</sup> *Für ein starkes Europa, das überzeugt. Rede von Staatssekretär Andreas Michaelis vor Mitgliedern der International Crisis Group in Berlin*, 14.04.2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/michaelis-international-crisis-group/1991442> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>33</sup> *Rede von Staatsminister Niels Annen beim Festakt 70 Jahre Gesellschaft für Außenpolitik: „Die Welt im Umbruch: Außenpolitische Herausforderungen für Deutschland und Europa“*, 12.06.2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/annen-gesellschaft-fuer-aussenpolitik/2106142> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>34</sup> *Deutsch-slowakische Konsultationen der Staatssekretäre*, 14.01.2019, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/slowakei-node/michaelis-ruzicka-konsultationen/2177064> (access: 12/10/2021).



In March 2020, during the Czech presidency, V4 hosted a meeting of minister Heiko Maas and the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries. Strengthening of the dialogue and cooperation in this format was announced in order to make a significant contribution to a united Europe and contribute to a greater unity and efficiency of the Union, both internally and in the global context. Support for the independence and territorial integrity of Ukraine was emphasized<sup>35</sup>. In a comment posted on the website of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Minister Maas described the meeting as successful and courteous and did not point to any problems<sup>36</sup>.

In recent years, German diplomacy has wanted to combine two formats that worked in the 90s and complemented each other. During meetings of the ministers of Foreign Affairs of Poland, Germany and France in Dubrovnik in 2016 a proposal to organize the Weimar Triangle meetings with ministers of Foreign Affairs of the V4 countries was laid on the table<sup>37</sup>.

From the perspective of German diplomacy, 3SI is not assessed as critically as it is in the analyses of expert centers. The German Foreign Ministry sees the potential in cooperation of 12 countries and expresses its interest in joining it<sup>38</sup>. It is emphasized that Germany meets the geographical criterion because it has access to the Baltic Sea, and it also points to some historical similarities with most countries of the Three Seas Initiative, namely the fact that the former GDR belonged to the Eastern Bloc and worked closely with states of the region under Comecon or the Warsaw Pact, while five East Ger-

man federal states had to undergo a similar political and economic transformation as other post-communist countries<sup>39</sup>.

Germany also promised to expand the cooperation with 3SI, especially in the area of infrastructural and energy security projects, including financial support for energy projects, mainly regarding renewable energy sources<sup>40</sup>. Germany sees 3SI as an opportunity for German companies to conduct their activities in these areas.

The participation of German politicians in the events organized by the V4 or the 3SI is often courteous, and their declarations or statements for the media after the meetings are brief and subdued. However, some of them are worth mentioning.

Chancellor Angela Merkel attended several V4 meetings. In 2011, Merkel, on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the V4, said, in the context of the genesis of the Group and the history of its states, that democracy and human rights cannot be taken for granted. The meeting in 2016 was largely technical and was an opportunity to exchange views on the EU summit in Bratislava. During the meeting in 2019 Merkel said Germany was profiting from the cooperation with the V4. The matter of preventing excessive migrations to Europe was also discussed<sup>41</sup>.

One of the most important speeches in the context of the role of Germany in Central and Eastern Europe is the address of Secretary Michaelis During 4th summit of 3SI in Ljubljana in 2019. Michaelis reiterated the earlier declaration of Germany concerning

<sup>35</sup> *Gemeinsame Erklärung der Außenminister der Visegrád-Gruppe und Deutschlands*, 13.03.2020, Pressemitteilung, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/visegrad-erklaerung/2318430> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>36</sup> *Außenminister Heiko Maas zur Videokonferenz mit den vier Außenministern der Visegrád-Gruppe*, 13.03.2020, Pressemitteilung, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/maas-visegrad/2318428> (access: 12.09.2021).

<sup>37</sup> *Gemeinsame Erklärung der Außenminister des Weimarer Dreiecks Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Deutschland), Jean-Marc Ayrault (Frankreich), Witold Waszczykowski (Polen) zur Zukunft Europas*, 28.08.2016, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/160828-gemeinsame-erklaerung-weimarer-dreieck/282922> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>38</sup> *Rede von Außenminister Maas in der Haushaltsdebatte im Deutschen Bundestag*, 21.11.2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/maas-haushaltsdebatte-bundestag/2163106> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>39</sup> „Bukarest, Berlin, Brüssel – gemeinsam für ein souveränes, starkes Europa“. *Rede von Außenminister Heiko Maas anlässlich der rumänischen Botschafterkonferenz*, 27.08.2018, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/-/2130236> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>40</sup> *Gemeinsame Erklärung der USA und Deutschlands zur Unterstützung der Ukraine, der europäischen Energiesicherheit und unserer Klimaziele*, 21.07.2021, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/gemeinsame-erklaerung-usa-und-deutschland/2472074> (access: 12/10/2021).

<sup>41</sup> *Merkel bei Visegrád-Gruppe Zukunft Europas gemeinsam voranbringen*, 7.02.2019, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/zukunft-europas-gemeinsam-voranbringen-1577330> (access: 12/10/2021).

the willingness to become involved in cooperation with the Three Seas Initiative and become a full participant of the Initiative in the future. For German com-

panies, 3SI is a very attractive project as it opens up new investment markets<sup>42</sup>.

## Summary and Recommendations

**For Germany, Central and Eastern Europe is one of the most important economic and political partners.**

The post-war division of Germany and the unification that took place in 1990 allow the country to understand the economic, social and political context this region and the effort of transformation towards democracy and market economy better than other Western European countries. The instruments and institutions created in the 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fulfilled their role and allowed the countries of Central Europe to achieve their strategic goals – memberships in NATO and the EU. Then it became natural to articulate one's national and regional interests on the EU level. The interest in the Visegrad Group in Germany increased again in 2015 in connection with the migration crisis and proposals for a refugee relocation system, which was objected to by the V4 countries. Comments and analyses present in the German political space concern this issue in particular, which in most cases is presented unilaterally as a lack of European solidarity. Another issue that appears just as often is the criticism of the lack of unity of the V4 in recent years and the divisions between the members. The narrative does not take into account the V4's support of Ukraine in its conflict with Russia. The group is often presented as a club of "populists" and "Eurosceptics". Because of that, German politicians and diplomats find the bilateral cooperation format more convenient, and Slovakia becomes a leader here, as a country closest to European values and principles.

Significant differences in perception appear in the case of the Three Seas Initiative. For German political foundations it is an insignificant format, and if

this topic is discussed at all, it is in negative context. The Initiative is seen as a carrier of centrifugal tendencies in the EU and an attempt to create an Eurosceptic counterbalance to Western Europe. German politicians and diplomats, who see potential in the Initiative and take steps to include Germany in this format, have different opinion on the 3SI.

As a result, currently the cooperation with the V4 as a whole has become a burden and German diplomacy is not interested in its further development, apart from courteous visits and statements. The project Germany wants to get involved in is the 3SI, perceived as future-proof, less image-laden, less political and more economic. Moreover, US support for the Initiative, especially by new president Joe Biden is also significant, as transatlantic cooperation has always been a top priority of German politics. This is both an opportunity and a potential threat for 3SI, since full participation of Germany may increase the importance of this cooperation and facilitate fundraising for infrastructural projects, but on the other hand, there is a threat of Germany dominating the format, especially that the country has close relations with most 3SI member states.

In conclusion, the involvement of Polish diplomacy in presenting positive aspects of Visegrad cooperation is insufficient, compared to recent activities of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. Their actions bring results and in turn greater visibility of positive publications devoted to these countries, including in the context of the Visegrad Group.

<sup>42</sup> *Dokumentation: Rede von Staatssekretär Andreas Michaelis (Auswärtiges Amt der Bundesrepublik Deutschland) auf dem 4. Gipfeltreffen der Drei-Meere-Initiative, Ljubljana (Slowenien)*, 6. Juni 2019, 23.01.2020, <https://www.bpb.de/internationales/europa/polen/analysen/304004/dokumentation-rede-von-staatssekretaer-andreas-michaelis-auswaertiges-amt-der-bundesrepublik-deutschland-auf-dem-4-gipfeltreffen-der-drei-meere-initiative-ljubljana-slowenien-6-juni-2019> (access: 12/10/2021).

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## **Agnieszka Nitzke, Ph.D.**

Assistant Professor at the Jagiellonian University, Faculty of International and Political Studies, Institute of Political Science and International Relations. Academic interests: European integration and European policies including immigration and asylum policy; EU Institutions and their competences, Political parties and their role in decision-making process; Political foundations and their impact on political life. Author of a monograph on the federal principle in German-speaking countries (Switzerland, Germany and Austria), 2013, and System of EU Agencies, 2017; as well as several articles on above topics; editor and co-editor of six joint publications. 2016-2019 she was a team member of Jean Monnet Chair for Prof. J. Węc on topic: European Union in Crisis: What's Wrong and How to Fix It. She is also a member of Team Europe Poland, a European Commission think-tank gathering experts in the area of European integration. Since 2019 she is a co-executor in grant dedicated to study of Polish party think-tanks.





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