Money to Rule Them All, In Federation Bind Them: Comparative Study on Post-Pandemic Recovery Policy and Discourse in the V4

Authors:
Silke Maes, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy
Michal Vašečka, Bratislava Policy Institute
Vít Havelka, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

Design:
Filip Sidó, EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy

"Bruised but not broken: reviving the appeal of the EU in the minds of V4 citizens."

This project reacts to the upcoming 2024 European Parliament elections and focuses on researching and addressing the most contentious topics within the European Union, mainly focusing on its newer member states – V4 countries. These countries have been experiencing some forms of democratic backsliding, such as low participation in elections, tendencies towards Euroscepticism, high levels of distrust in authorities, or a resurgence of populism. Overall, these signals suggest a detachment from the European project.

Therefore, understanding the needs, concerns, and fears of V4 citizens is essential. It is also timely – Europe now stands on the verge of numerous transitions – chief among which is the green transformation intended to combat climate change.

The goal of the project is to gauge citizens' attitudes and preferences towards four broad policy domains that played a pivotal role in the European Union's quest to adapt to a new policy environment in the recent past: decarbonisation policies, migration, the COVID-19 pandemic, and debates over the rule of law.

During the project's first phase, we have conducted qualitative and quantitative research into citizens´attitudes to the four core topics of the project. Furthermore, we have looked into the V4 governments´ approaches to the topics via analyses of policy and discourse in the V4 countries. The project's second phase will build on the realised research and engage with various stakeholders and policy-makers to share the findings and prepare communication- and engagement strategies before the 2024 European Parliament elections. Finally, we will disseminate the results and knowledge via public discussions, workshops, podcasts, and media outputs to the public.

The project is carried out by leading think-tank and research institutions in each of the V4 countries: EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy in Czechia; Bratislava Policy Institute in Slovakia; 21 Research Center in Hungary; The Projekt: Polska Foundation in Poland; and is supported by the European Union.

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Summary

Introduction to NGEU policy in the Visegrad Group

The COVID-19 virus, which rapidly spread through Europe in the spring of 2020, caused **one of the largest health and economic crises in the history of EU integration** and had far-reaching effects on all aspects of society. The economic downturn handicapped the V4 countries, revealing vulnerabilities[1] and forcing painful cuts when stimulus was needed most. As authorities across the EU grappled with the scale of the crisis, the support for a common response grew, eventually leading to the establishment of the Next Generation EU recovery fund, the flagship initiative of the EU post-pandemic recovery.

The recovery fund, approved along with the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), will almost double the EU's budget to €1 824 Billion for 2021-2027 (European Council 2023). To finance the package, the member states agreed, for the first time in history, to jointly borrow from the financial market. In addition, the national plans financed by NGEU are adjusted to the EU's long-term economic priorities, focusing on investments in the green and digital transitions. The establishment of NGEU is, thus, a historical event which will have a **lasting impact on the EU integration process**. This analysis will show how the V4 states reacted to this instrument and shed light on how they might react to future proposals leading to - de facto - greater federalization of the EU.

The publication examines how Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary positioned themselves in the NGEU debate and analyzes the **similarities and differences** in their policies and discourses. It summarizes and compares national policy reports on the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary that were also produced as part of the RevivEU project. For the political discourse on the NGEU topic, we analyzed the **time frame** from April to the beginning of August 2020, encompassing both the moment when the Commission first presented the idea of NGEU and its final approval at the EUCO on 21 July. The policy analysis covers a larger timeframe, also including the developments in 2021 and 2022, when the national recovery plans were prepared and approved.

Finally, for the investigated period, **changes in government** have to be considered for Czechia and Slovakia. In Czechia, the right-wing coalition led by Petr Fiala's ODS succeeded Babis' government in 2021. In Slovakia, the government of Igor Matovič (OĽaNO) was succeeded in 2020 by his party member Eduard Heger and subsequently replaced by the caretaker government of Ľudovít Ódor in 2022. In contrast, the same leading parties have been in office in Hungary and Poland since 2010 and 2015, respectively.

In what follows, a comparative analysis of the climate discourses and policies will be made. **Seven relevant themes** have been identified and will serve as a basis for the comparison.

1. Focus on the money

All V4 countries considered the NGEU, to some extent, as a way to save domestic resources in the post-pandemic recovery and as an opportunity to invest in the economy without further burdening the state budget. During the negotiations about both NGEU and the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, all V4 states tried to maximize their allocation of funds (see Table 1). This manifested, amongst others, in the states' focus on money for cohesion during the negotiation process and their preference for direct grants over loans in the form of Invest EU.

Enthusiasm was undoubtedly the highest in **Slovakia.** Despite inter-party conflicts, there was broad support for NGEU. In the context of the country's rising debt and the prospect of activating the so-called debt brake -severely limiting the possibilities of investment from the state budget- NGEU represented a particularly good opportunity to draw funds for further investments. As such, the fund was considered by many politicians as the solution to all problems and a way to modernize the economy and ensure parity with the core EU member states.

Also in **Hungary,** both the government and opposition considered NGEU as a means of obtaining additional funding for some sectors of the economy. During the negotiations, the government tried to further maximize the net benefits from the recovery fund. Together with other net beneficiaries, it did so by advocating for a stronger link of the package with the MFF, which - contrary to the RRF - is largely based on the level of economic development. Moreover, because the MFF was more favorable than the RFF, it was also in Hungary's interest to ensure that NGEU was temporary (de la Porte a Jensen 2021).

Poland held a similar view, resulting in a strategy that tried to maximize the funds for the country. The government also viewed positively the decision to use the collective borrowing power of the EU. Finally, while favoring the establishment of the fund, the Polish government also warned that it could not come at the expense of previously allocated funds to central Europe.

Lastly, the position of the **Czech Republic** was more ambivalent, resulting from its unique economic position. Currently, the country is at 93% of the EU average GDP, and in the near future, it could have a balanced position in the EU budget or even become a net contributor. Consequently, the Czechs tried striking a balance between acquiring as much funding in the national allocation as possible while also considering that a larger EU budget might mean more Czech contributions in the future. Czechia, therefore, positioned itself "somewhere in the middle" during the budget negotiations and concentrated on those chapters – such as cohesion policy – where the country was set to obtain the highest national allocations. Should the Czech Republic converge with the EU average GDP in the near future, it can be expected the country will oppose a further increase of the EU budget, moving even closer towards the position of the frugal states, with which the country already shares similar views regarding internal market policies and free trade.

Table 1: Recovery and Resilience Plan approved by the European Commission:

	Grants	Grants as % of GDP (2021)	Loans	Loans as % of GDP (2021)	Total
Czech Republic	EUR 7.03 billion	2.95%	0 €	0 €	EUR 7.03 billion
Slovak Republic	EUR 6.33 billion	6.42%	0 €	0%	EUR 6.33 billion
Poland	EUR 23.85 billion	4.14%	EUR 11.5 billion	2%	EUR 35.35 billion
Hungary	EUR 5.81 billion	3.77%	0 €	0%	EUR 5.81 billion

Source: (Boris Julien-Vauzelle 2023)

2. Opposition to federalization

A second prevalent argument during the negotiation process, especially in the Czech Republic and Poland, was that **the NGEU mechanism should not lead to further federalization of the European Union**.

The Czech Republic reluctantly accepted the joint borrowing to finance NGEU. It stressed, however, that NGEU should be a one-off decision whose sole purpose is to fund the post-COVID recovery. There could, thus, be no question of a Hamiltonian moment. In addition, the Czech Republic stressed that the EU budget should be primarily financed from Member State contributions and not collected through EU taxes. This approach grants greater authority to national governments in determining the EU budget's size and allocation of funds. The right-wing ODS party was especially vocal on this topic. In its discourse, ODS argued that the pandemic was misused for a federalization and green agenda. It also firmly opposed the introduction of new EU-level taxes, which would create a tax Union, and criticized debt mutualization, which came at the expense of the East. While PM Andrej Babiš focused primarily on the Czech's net position in the NGEU budget discussions, he nevertheless denied that NGEU would lead to more federalization or that it would lead to the creation of new taxes.

Poland voiced similar concerns. During the negotiations, the country advocated for introducing a legal framework to ensure that NGEU would be a one-time instrument and would not set a precedent for further federalization. The government also unequivocally denounced that NGEU represented a Hamiltonian moment or would move away from the logic of negotiating national contributions. The government equally spoke out against centrally collected taxes that would give the EU a federalist dynamic. Lastly, while **Hungary** mainly criticized the Rule of Law conditionality, it also stressed that NGEU should be a one-off mechanism.

3. Who gets what? Limits to (southern) solidarity?

A third point of contention among the V4 states concerned the distribution of money over the various member states. Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary made, to varying degrees, economically responsible and irresponsible member states.

Firstly, **Czech** PM Babiš heavily opposed the initial distribution key, based not on the slump in GDP during the pandemic but on the previous unemployment rate[2]. The prime minister argued it would favor southern member states, which were less successful in managing the pandemic and overall economic output. He further claimed that, unlike Czechia, still recovering from its communist past, the South was living above its means[3].

Interestingly, a similar discourse was employed in **Slovakia**, where then-Prime Minister Igor Matovic used the populist dichotomies of rich versus poor, West versus East, and responsible versus irresponsible. He lamented that several countries, despite having a similar or even higher GDP, tried to secure a greater share of funding than Slovakia. Matovic pointed specifically towards Southern European countries, accusing them of being less diligent in managing their spending and parasitizing on EU generosity[4].

Also, **Hungary** employed this argument of responsible versus irresponsible states. On multiple occasions, Orbán stated that NGEU was needed because Western and southern European states (like Italy, Greece, and France) had mismanaged the pandemic, causing them economic hardship. Orbán further pointed out that the countries in economic trouble were not Central European states and that those countries had been underperforming independently of the pandemic. Orbán further claimed that while Hungary should not be made responsible for helping out those (underperforming) large and southern countries, it was pressured by 26 member states into accepting NGEU. As such, Orbán successfully applied the narrative of central European exceptionalism to the debate on the post-pandemic recovery.

Lastly, **Poland** was less vocal about the states deserving versus undeserving of EU funds. Nevertheless, like the other Visegrad countries, its government also pointed to the waning credit capacity of the southern EU member states.

4. Approach of the Visegrad Group states to the green and digital transitions within NGEU

NGEU aims not only to revive EU economies; it also prescribes that 37 and 20 percent must be invested in the green and digital transitions, respectively (European Commission 2023). Slovakia and Hungary viewed this decision positively, whereas the Czech Republic conveyed its concerns over the requirements.

More than any other Visegrad member, **Slovakia** viewed NGEU as an opportunity to modernize its economy and work towards economic parity with Western European states. With money for investments into the digital and green transition, NGEU was portrayed as a chance to foster innovation and create jobs with a higher added value. The idea that NGEU presented a historic opportunity to turn Slovakia into a "European economic tiger", constituted the dominant frame in the Slovak political discourse.

Also in **Hungary**, the government was constructive in adjusting the national plans to the NGEU's required investments in the green and digital fields. Even though the national plan had to be discussed and modified several times due to insufficient funds for the green and digital transitions, there were no signs that Orbán's government would have preferred infrastructure spending (Tóth-Biró 2021).

Contrary to Slovakia and Hungary, the priorities under NGEU were viewed more negatively in **the Czech Republic**, which publicly voiced its reservations over the fund. Its main argument was that national governments know best where to allocate funds to recover from the pandemic. Instead of directing investments towards the green and digital transitions, the Czech government preferred using the funds to support large-scale infrastructure projects, such as new motorways and railway lines. Yet, it did not succeed in obtaining greater discretion in the allocation of funds. Finally, while the dominant narrative in Czechia argued for a more bottom-up approach and freedom for member states to decide how the funds should be used, the progressive Pirate Party conveyed an alternative voice. Their discourse was more in line with the Slovak discourse, considering the fund as an opportunity to modernize the economy and reduce the country's dependency on fossil fuels.

5. Implementation difficulties

The NGEU plan, which, together with the MFF, will double the overall EU budget to €1 824 Billion for 2021 -2027 (European Council 2023), has been characterized as one of the most ambitious EU integration projects so far. However, the unprecedented investments have been met with implementation challenges in several V4 countries. **Practical problems in implementing the NGEU national plans** became apparent, particularly in the Czech and Slovak cases.

In **Slovakia**, the implementation of NGEU faced two significant challenges. Firstly, the previous government underestimated the implementation of NGEU investments, making it increasingly difficult to adhere to the established timelines. For example, to prevent the loss of funds, the government led by PM Ľudovít Ódor requested last-minute changes in various areas, including healthcare, to secure the Commission's approval. The second reason relates to the country's political reality, where certain essential laws were either not approved or passed only with a narrow majority. This poses a challenge, as some of these reforms represent crucial steps toward accessing the disbursement of NGEU funds. After an in-depth audit, the current finance minister[5] estimated that Slovakia might lose up to a third of the total NGEU funding due to these.

Also in **the Czech Republic**, the practical implementation of the EU recovery plans caused concerns. Already in May 2020, PM Babiš expressed himself rather critically towards the EC's proposal and warned that no country was ready to absorb the recovery money this quickly. While the plan has the potential to boost the Czech economy, the country needs to utilize the funding more extensively and upscale its absorption capacity for the recovery money to reach its full potential. The latter has been a continuing problem in the Czech Republic. In addition, Czechia is not particularly strong in developing mid and long-term strategies to base the disbursement of EU funding. Consequently, EU funds are sometimes disbursed without a concrete aim or strategy.

6. The shadow of the Rule of Law

In addition to practical challenges, the discussions on NGEU and 2021 – 2027 MFF were held in the shadow of an **ongoing conflict on the Rule of Law** and the finalization of the Rule of Law conditionality mechanism, making the two topics inseparable in Poland and Hungary.

According to the European Commission, the Rule of Law situation was the most problematic in the case of **Hungary**. While Orbán's initial discourse (during the June 2020 EUCO) towards the NGEU had been one of a superior and generous Hungary willing to help other EU states in economic distress, the discourse took a substantive turn in the months that followed. This shift was triggered by the inclusion of a clause making the funds conditional on the respect of the Rule of Law, which Orbán characterized as a political attack by Western corrupt elites on Hungary. In the months leading up to the December 2020 EUCO, the main objective of the negotiations between the Orbán government and the European Commission was to reduce the strictness of the Rule of Law conditions and to limit oversight by the European Commission in drawing funds from NGEU. The process escalated to the point where Orbán threatened to veto the 2021-2027 multiannual financial framework in November 2020.

During the negotiations, the government characterized tying economic policies and crisis mitigation to political conditions as irresponsible and even dangerous for the economy, arguing it would create the risk of misspending money and driving future generations into debt. More importantly, the Hungarian government considered EU funds and the possibility of non-disbursement as a control tool against individual member states and an act of revenge for Hungary's ideological standpoints. According to Orbán, the conditionality regulation was not about the defense of the Rule of Law and democracy but rather stemmed from opposition to Hungary's migration policies[6], its view on the nation-state and family values. It is, thus, impossible to separate the topic of NGEU from the Rule of Law issue. Both were portrayed as a combat against the EU's supranational tendencies and its repeated attempts to destroy nation-states (especially in Central Europe). As such, while NGEU received less attention than the general Rule of Law debate, Orbán managed to cleverly tie the NGEU budget debate to the broader **hostile empire narrative**.

A similar problem regarding the Rule of Law occurred in the case of **Poland.** However, unlike the Hungarian government, which used NGEU as an example to reinforce their argument of the EU as a hostile empire, the Polish government instead tried to paint NGEU as a major success on their government's part. Rather than focusing on the ongoing Rule of Law conflict, the ruling party stressed that Poland -thanks to the government's efforts- would be one of the largest beneficiaries of the fund, after Spain and Italy (Boris Julien-Vauzelle 2023). In addition, the government argued that it had successfully defended the interests of the Polish population by increasing funding in those domains most important to the country, including cohesion and agricultural policy.

In conclusion, while Orbán's ruling party tied the NGEU budget debate to its broader hostile empire narrative, the Polish government tried to stress its achievements. In both cases, however, **the opposition** characterized the blocking of funds as a **major failure** from their respective governments, which both failed to receive any funding as of October 2023[7]. In Hungary, the opposition pointed to the irresponsibility of Orbán's rule, arguing that the PM's preoccupation with destroying democracy led to his failure to govern. The opposition also argued that conditionality is a tool to protect EU funds from Orbán's corruption and promotes the interest of the people. It, therefore, argued for strong EU institutions and a strong European Parliament in particular. Similarly, in Poland, the blocking of the Polish NGEU plan is considered a major failure in Polish society and has become a symbol of the failure of the Law and Justice Party government. Finally, to a lesser extent, the opposition in Czechia also linked the NGEU discussions to Rule of Law concerns. Referring to then-PM Babiš, the progressive Pirate Party warned that important (agro) businesses should not misuse the NGEU funds and that the Rule of Law principles should be observed.

7. Absence of V4 cooperation

A final theme in this comparative analysis concerns V4 Cooperation. The negotiations on NGEU were characterized by a lack of cooperation and coordination among the V4 countries vis-à-vis the fund. States did not have a common approach or the same views on where to target individual investments. Likewise, states did not support each other in case of problems. Poland was the only one that tried to persuade the V4 states to adopt a common and unified position in the initial stages of the negotiations but ultimately failed. The biggest discord between V4 countries concerned the issue of the Rule of Law. In the past, it was common for the V4 countries to help each other at the European level. An example is the unity and the coordination of common positions during the migration crisis. However, in the case of the NGEU, neither Slovakia nor the Czech Republic supported Hungary and Poland in their efforts to relax the Rule of Law conditions for the disbursement of NGEU funds.

In the case of Slovakia, while the country did not criticize its neighbors explicitly, governmental actors considered Hungarian and Polish vetoes to the MFF and NGEU package in November 2020 as a barrier to receiving its much-needed funds to finance the recovery and modernization of its COVID-19 ravaged economy. Finally, Hungary, which found itself isolated during the negotiations, blamed the lack of V4 coordination on the Brussels elites, who conspired to divide the V4 in the budget negotiations, driving a wedge into the historical CEE alliance.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis has aimed to give an overview of the similarities and differences in the policies and discourses of Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary towards NGEU. Two main conclusions can be derived from the discussions on this historical initiative, which will undoubtedly shape the EU's future.

Firstly, the approach from all V4 states towards NGEU can be characterized as a "focus on the money" strategy aiming to maximize the net benefits – by focusing on cohesion and by distinguishing themselves from the other (southern European) semi-peripheries. While trying to maximize the allocation of funds to their economies, V4 governments remain **wary of further federalization**. Poland, Hungary, and Czechia emphasized that the instrument should be a one-off tool and voiced their preference for a Union budget based on member state contributions rather than own EU resources. Meanwhile, Hungary continues its combat against the EU's supranational tendencies and its repeated attempts to "destroy nation-states". From the V4's "focus on the money without federalization" approach that characterized the negotiations on NGEU, lessons can be drawn for the future. Firstly, the Czech Republic might develop into a fifth frugal member in the years to come. In addition, the negotiations clearly showed that the V4 favor a union with a strong role for the member states and resistant to federalization. Yet, despite these reservations, NGEU was unanimously adopted. With several significant taboos broken, it is, therefore, not unthinkable that this tool has set a precedent for a stronger EU role in the future.

Secondly, in Poland and Hungary, the debates on NGEU were overshadowed by **Rule of Law discussions.** As a result of the EU's increasingly strong stance on the respect of Rule of Law, neither country has received NGEU funds to this day. In both countries, the opposition has used the blocking of funds to point out the incompetence of their respective governments to rule. The Rule of Law conditionality created disagreement, not only within Poland and Hungary, but also among the V4 countries during the negotiations. While Hungary blamed the lack of V4 coordination on the Brussels elites, who conspired to divide the V4 in the budget negotiations, Slovakia, in particular, considered the Polish and Hungarian veto as a barrier to receiving its much-needed recovery funds. The lack of cooperation, in turn, weakened the V4 negotiation position, in which neither country succeeded in playing a significant role in shaping the setup of the historical instrument.

In conclusion, it is still unclear whether NGEU will fundamentally change the course of the Union in the future. It also remains to be seen whether the V4 will manage to coordinate its position better and exert greater influence on forthcoming historical decisions or if, on the contrary, the Rule of Law will continue to hamper cooperation in the years to come.

What do the results mean for the 2024 European elections?

The national reports of RevivEU and this comparative report analyzed the discourse and practical policy of the V4 countries towards Next Generation EU. In this final section, we draw the implications for the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024 for individual Visegrad Group countries.

The Czech Republic:

- The NGEU is fait accompli in the Czech Republic. There cannot be expected any discussion about the utilization of the funding scheme.
- Major political parties, both ANO and ODS, are likely to oppose any form of further integration of the EU, including future joint borrowing or the establishment of the EU's own resources.

Slovakia:

- The current official government of Prime Minister Ódor had to make several more fundamental changes in the Slovak NGEU after the government of Eduard Heger. It is possible that the government formed after the September parliamentary elections will have to make further changes. Given the change in investments or locations where investments will go, we can expect the opposition to use this topic before the European Parliament elections in 2024.
- It can be expected that NGEU will not be among the main topics of the 2024 European Parliament elections. Voter turnout in elections to the European Parliament has consistently been the lowest among the EU member states. If investment from NGEU becomes, to some extent, a pre-election issue, it will play out at the level of political parties between the then-ruling parties and those who tried to push through versus opposition parties that criticize how individual projects were conceived.

Hungary:

- In Hungary, the NGEU issue is so closely linked to other forms of EU funding in the MFF and the corresponding Rule of Law mechanism that it is highly unlikely that NGEU as such will have a significant and autonomous role in the European Parliament's 2024 campaign.

- The government will try not to discuss the issue of NGEU's lack of funding publicly and instead focus on cultural and symbolic issues. To the extent that it is forced to deal with this subject, it is likely to blame the EU and link underfunded social systems (especially the education sector) with the EU's refusal to open the taps.
- The opposition (except for the radical right-wing Mi Hazánk party) will try to point out the government's incompetence to draw on NGEU and link this dispute to the underperformance of the Hungarian economy in the years leading up to the 2024 EP elections.
- Hungary's lack of access to Next Generation EU funds only has the potential to change the EP campaign to the extent that the economic situation continues to deteriorate, and the Hungarian government fails to alleviate the EU Rule of Law concerns.

Poland:

- The NGEU issue is unlikely to be an important topic during the EP campaign.
- The issue of NGEU can come to the fore if one of the political forces can link it to rising prices and the effects of inflation.
- The topic of NGEU in Poland is intricately linked to the issue of the Rule of Law and is likely to be raised in such a relationship during the EP elections. However, it should be borne in mind the elections to the Polish Parliament which may be a crucial factor in changing this situation (autumn 2023).

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Authors of the original country chapters:

EUROPEUM (Czech Republic): Klára Votavová, Silke Maes (discourse analysis), Vít Havelka (policy analysis)

21 Research Center (Hungary): Gabriella Kopcsik (Torzsa), András Szalai, Ábel Bojár (discourse analysis); Orsolya Bajnay, Zsuzsanna Boda, Gabriella Kopcsik, Dávid Herskovits, Csenge Schőnviszky, Ábel Bojár (policy analysis)

Projekt: Polska (Poland): Adam Mielczarek, Krzysztof Mączka, Klaudia Rodziejczak, Maciej Milewicz

Bratislava Policy Institute (Slovakia): Viera Žúborová, Ingrid Borárosová, Adela Sadloňová (discourse analysis), Michal Vašečka, Filip Bajtoš (policy analysis)