

All in the Same Boat

Visegrad Four Can Do More to Defend Free Movement in the EU

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Central European states, notably Czech Republic and Poland, have been vocal defenders of the Schengen-zone and the free-movement it provides. The strong, public response in both countries to the UK's recently proposed clampdown on free movement is a welcome continuation of this tradition that can help to mitigate the threat to a key EU principle. However, the Schengen zone, which is the most important manifestation of the EU's commitment to free movement, is also under threat in other ways. Schengen countries, including the Visegrad Four (V4), need to do more to share the uneven burdens that come from participating in the Area of Freedom Justice and Security (AFSJ). Failure to create an effective common asylum policy and to adequately support the countries bearing the brunt of migratory flows risks the dismantling of a key European achievement and the end of one of the EU's most popular policies. The V4 can, and should, do more to defend free movement, by sharing more of these burdens than they do currently.

Analysis: Free Movement Under Threat

British Prime Minister [David Cameron's latest contribution](#) to the increasingly poisonous debate about migration in the UK, particularly concerning inward movement of citizens from other EU states, has drawn sharp responses. [Polish Prime Minister Ewa Kopacz and Czech Europe Minister Tomáš Prouza, among others, rebuked the British government](#) for threatening the free movement that Czechs and Poles, like other EU citizens, value so highly. Free movement is consistently among the EU's most popular policies and more than 1.25bn intra-Schengen journeys per year show why, as people living in the Schengen zone take advantage of the possibilities it offers. However, free movement of people, goods, services and capital, are also crucial to the EU's *raison d'être* – delivering peace and prosperity in Europe – through the increased interaction of Europeans for pleasure as well as business and promoting tolerance as well as trade.

It is to the credit of successive governments in the V4 countries that they have emerged as some of the strongest defenders of free movement in the EU. Upholding this key principle has also afforded the V4 states a way to engage with, and exert greater influence over, EU decision-making. In different ways and for different reasons, Czechs, Poles, Hungarians and Slovaks have made the most of their opportunities for free movement, thus enacting a key aspect of EU-European identity. This has highlighted a key practical benefit of EU membership and increased citizens connection to, as well as their sense of belonging within, the EU.

However, free movement is also under threat from the challenges created by the large, mixed-flows of migrants, seeking to reach the EU via the Mediterranean. Significant tensions have emerged between those states that are either major arrival areas – such as Italy – or destination countries – such as Germany – and those who are not – such as the V4.

Public concern over un-managed migratory flows has prompted the tightening of external border control, while the outcry over migrant deaths has spurred improved search-and-rescue efforts. Neither measure is a substitute for an effective, common mobility and migration policy, which recognizes that the corollary of internal free-movement in Schengen is equitable sharing of the burdens, as well as the benefits, of inward mobility.

The V4 countries do not currently do enough in this regard, but formulating a common position, especially if it shows willingness to burden-share, could provide a catalyst for an EU-wide solution to this issue. Formulating a common position on an issue where there is substantial overlap of interests and principles would also provide a welcome boost to V4 co-operation, and remind the countries involved of the benefits of cohesive action for making the V4 a meaningful pole of EU policy-making.

Outlook: A Timely Opportunity to Act

The threat to free movement posed by the British government primarily [relates to the UK's troubled relationship with the EU](#), which has helped –partly through the rise of UKIP – to create domestic political conditions, in which migration is an increasingly toxic subject. Until the UK's wider issues with the EU are resolved this is likely to continue and so presents an ongoing risk to a key EU achievement.

For practical and political reasons, as well as the principled defence of free movement that stems from historical experience of having mobility forcibly curtailed, V4 countries are likely to remain vocal defenders of free movement in the EU. However, words are not enough to mitigate the threat to the AFSJ from the divided and discordant approaches to inward migration that have [prompted calls to re-introduce permanent frontier controls between Schengen states](#). This situation creates an opportunity for the V4 to co-ordinate their efforts to support free movement and push for the creation of a common migration and mobility policy. However, despite their common interests and approaches, finding common ground still mainly depends on political will.

Recommendations: Further Action from V4 Required to Defend Schengen

- ◆ **V4 countries** should continue to intervene in debates on free movement across the European Union, emphasizing the positive elements, benefits of and opportunities created by, migration and mobility.
- ◆ **V4 countries** should actively seek to formulate a united position in pushing for a common EU policy on migration and mobility and then act in unison at the EU level.
- ◆ **V4 countries** should proactively seek share the burdens as well as the benefits of free movement [taking in asylum seekers from third countries](#), including those who arrived elsewhere in the EU.

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