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Non-compulsory compliance with the EU: Implementation of European Semester recommendations in the Visegrad countries

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Abstract

This paper examines the extent to which Visegrad countries take into account country-specific recommendations received within the framework of the European Semester, and the level of implementation experienced in the region as compared to that in the European Union. Based on a database created by using assessments of the European Commission's annual country reports, we discuss not only the national-level implementation of recommendations within a term of one year, but also their long-term implementation. According to the annual assessments, the four Visegrad countries all belong to the second half of the field for the EU as a whole, with slightly below 'some progress' achieved in implementing recommendations. However, the impact of EU recommendations on the public policy decisions of Member States is much greater in the longer term than annual assessments can show. Important proof of this statement is that, over a multi-annual period, the Orbán government took measures addressing nearly two-thirds of EU recommendations, which were assessed as at least 'some progress' by the European Commission. In overall terms, this study demonstrates that European integration can make an impact on Member States not only through hard, binding instruments and exclusive powers, but also in a softer way, through public policy coordination.

Keywords: European integration, Europeanization, European Semester, public policy, Visegrad countries

1 Introduction

As a direct result of the global economic crisis of 2008, the European Union has tightened its public policy coordination with Member States, as part of which the European Commission has monitored key public policy developments in annual cycles and made recommendations to national governments on how to move forward (European Commission, 2021). However, due to the lack of a strict mechanism for sanctioning, proposals set out in the European Semester may only be regarded as recommendations, the implementation of which at the national level depends entirely on the activities of the governments of Member States (Darvas

& Leandro, 2015; Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018). In this study, we review how the Visegrad countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia), which are regarded as renitent in international public discourse as a result of some cases that have become symbolic, have reacted to public policy recommendations made by the European Commission. We sought an answer to the research question whether the governments in the Visegrad countries implemented EU public policy recommendations received within the framework of the European Semester to a lesser extent than other Member States. Additionally, we considered it important to examine not only the extent to which recommendations were implemented within one year, but overall in the long term since the first recommendations were issued as part of the European Semester in 2011. As the European Commission has conducted sub-recommendation assessments for comprehensive recommendations only since 2013, and this study is part of a comprehensive research project examining the impact of EU membership on Hungary's public policy making until the parliamentary elections in 2018, the period we investigated evolved accordingly: the national-level implementation of recommendations between 2013 and 2018 (the end of the annual implementation cycle of recommendations made in 2017) is the subject of our examination.

Toshkov (2012) proved empirically that practical implementation and EU law application in CEE are not disastrous, and a look at the infringement procedures – the major enforcement instrument available to the EU institutions – confirms this picture. When it comes to infringement procedures, Börzel & Sedelmeier (2017) have shown that concerns that enlargement inevitably increases non-compliance by new Member States are unfounded. Börzel (2021) even argues that non-compliance cannot be blamed on the EU's Central and Eastern European Member States. A case study of the Europeanization of law-making in Hungary also shows that the transposition of EU law into national laws has continued relatively smoothly even during the years of the Orbán government (Bíró-Nagy & Laki, 2020). However, we need to distinguish between enforceable compliance with EU law and voluntary compliance with the European Semester. It is far from obvious that general expectations about compliance might still be fully relevant in terms of voluntary compliance. Even in his research about infringement procedures in Central and Eastern European Member States, Sedelmeier (2008, p. 822) underlined that 'the compliance laggards among the EU8 appear to be those with higher Euroscepticism within national parliaments'. When it comes to the non-compulsory element of cooperation with EU institutions, we assume that this is even more the case, as it opens the opportunity for Eurosceptic political actors to engage in non-compliance without serious political or policy consequences.

An investigation of the member countries of the Visegrad group is highly relevant in this respect. Concerning the Hungarian government during this period, it is important to point out that the Eurosceptic Orbán government was in power during all these years. Data on Euroscepticism from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (Bakker et al., 2021) between 1999–2019 shows that PM Orbán's Fidesz party became strongly Eurosceptic after it came back into power in 2010: by 2019, Fidesz was considered more Eurosceptic than the formerly far-right Jobbik party. We hypothesise that the Euroscepticism of the Orbán government has an influence both on the short-term and long-term implementation of EU recommendations. Given that compliance with the policy recommendations of the European Commission is voluntary, we assume that Hungary's short-term and long-term compliance with EU recommendations will be weaker than the EU average. The same applies to the other Visegrad countries,

as 'soft Eurosceptic' parties (Dúró, 2014) were in government in Slovakia (SMER), and after 2015, in Poland (PiS), while the ANO party of Andrej Babis became a coalition partner in the Czech Republic in 2013 and won the elections in 2017.

In the first part of the study we present the process of the European Semester, the mechanism within which Hungary and other EU Member States receive annual public policy recommendations from the European Commission. Then the main findings of previous academic literature on the European Semester are reviewed – in particular, the nature, objectives, and effectiveness of this public policy mechanism. In the third section, based on a database developed by using assessments published in the European Commission's annual country reports on the implementation of recommendations, we present the extent to which country-specific recommendations have been implemented in the Visegrad countries and how they relate to the indicators of other EU Member States. In the fourth section, the long-term implementation of country-specific recommendations in the Visegrad countries is examined; i.e., the extent to which EU recommendations as a whole were implemented from 2011 until the country reports of 2018. The lessons of the research are presented in the conclusions.

2 Coordinating policies across the European Union: The European Semester

Launched in 2010, the European Semester is a mechanism for economic policy coordination and part of the European Union's economic governance framework. The European Semester is an annual cycle in which EU Member States coordinate their budgetary, macroeconomic, and structural policies in line with the objectives and rules adopted at the EU level in order to meet the economic challenges facing the EU. This mechanism allows Member States to take EU considerations into account in their national budgetary procedures as well as in their economic policymaking, because the European Commission (EC) makes recommendations to Member States and provides ex-ante opinions on national budgets as part of this process. In other respects, however, the Commission also carries out ex-post monitoring activity as it assesses ex post the extent to which national governments have complied with EC recommendations.

As a result of the global economic crisis of 2008, several Member States of the European Union, in particular Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal, experienced severe credit crises, and confidence in the framework of the Economic and Monetary Union faltered. This institutional structure was not able to ensure that all EU Member States recovered from the recession after the global financial crisis. Thus, the institutional framework needed to be revised, in addition to giving financial assistance to southern Member States (and Ireland). As part of their response to doubts about the institutional framework, European leaders set up the European Semester, which is aimed primarily at reducing macroeconomic inequalities across the Member States of the Eurozone and the EU and establishing a kind of EU public policy oversight of interconnected economies. In addition to preventing macroeconomic imbalances, the declared aims of the European Semester are to promote sound public finances – i.e., to avoid excessive public debt –, to support structural reforms conducive to employment and growth, and to stimulate investment (European Commission, 2021).

In addition, it is important to emphasize that, if we interpret the European Semester narrowly and look only at the acceptance or non-acceptance of country-specific recommendations, then the introduction of the process does not mean giving up national sovereignty. However, since the introduction of the mechanism the European Commission has become more dominant in monitoring, examining, and influencing the direction of Member States' economic, fiscal, and social policies (especially in the Eurozone) than ever before (Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018, p. 138). The European Semester in the broadest sense also includes the examination of budgetary control and macroeconomic imbalances, and since both areas can be sanctioned by the Commission, if we look at the bigger picture, the new public policy coordination mechanism puts the Commission in a stronger position than before. It is also important to add that the European Semester is a special instrument because, on the one hand, it represents continuity; i.e. pre-existing institutional elements (stability and convergence programs) have been subordinated to it and, on the other hand, some new elements of institutional innovation (monitoring macroeconomic imbalances – alert mechanism; part of the 'six-pack') have also become parts of it.

The European Semester, the process of economic governance coordination, begins at the end of each autumn with the publication of the European Commission's *Autumn Package*. In this preparatory phase, the European Commission carries out an analysis of the EU's economic situation and implements follow-up measures related to the previous semester. Part of the Autumn Package is (1) the Annual Growth Survey, in which the EC sets out the EU's main economic priorities and provides general policy guidance to Member States for the coming year. Also, part of the Autumn Package is (2) the Alert Mechanism Report, which shows, through a screening of Member States, which Member States are at risk of economic imbalance. The Autumn Package also includes (3) the Joint Employment Report, which reviews employment and social trends in the Union and Member States' reform measures, and (4) the Euro Area Recommendation, which sets out measures to maintain the stability of the single currency area.

Bilateral meetings between the European Commission and national governments begin the analysis phase, during which the Commission assesses the economic and social situation in each Member State in the form of country reports. In addition to presenting the budgetary and macroeconomic situation in the various EU countries, the reports also review progress made in areas covered by the previous year's country-specific recommendations. In parallel, the European Parliament gives its opinion on the employment guidelines and the Council of the European Union examines the Annual Growth Report and the Euro Area Recommendation, and adopts conclusions. Then the European Council, made up of heads of state and government, issues policy guidelines.

Thereafter, in the spring, Member States present their proposals, including the (1) National Reform Programme, (2) the Stability Programme for euro area countries, and (3) the Convergence Programme for non-euro area Member States. In these documents, Member State governments set out in detail the policy measures they intend to take to address the problems identified in country reports, the macroeconomic effects they expect as a result of their economic policy measures, and how they want to achieve stable growth in their countries. Once Member States have outlined their specific objectives and plans, the European Commission assesses the Member States' budget plans and prepares draft country-specific recommendations (CSRs): the EC makes policy proposals to national governments according

to the situation in each Member State. The recommendations indicate that the Commission basically has an idea of what should be improved and how, but in many cases the Commission leaves it to Member States to decide on the content of policy actions. These proposals set goals that can be realistically achieved in 12–18 months. After the Commission has presented its recommendations, they are discussed by ministers of Member States in the Council; then they are endorsed at the meeting of the European Council of Heads of State and Government in June; and then they are formally adopted at the meeting of the Council of Finance Ministers of Member States (ECOFIN) in July.

In the last phase of the European Semester, Member States make preparations and incorporate recommendations into their reform plans and budgets and send their draft budget proposals for the following year to the European Commission by 15 October. The EC then examines whether Member State proposals are in line with the requirements of the Stability and Growth Pacts and then comments on their plans. At the end of the year a new cycle begins with the Autumn Package – i.e., the European Semester process restarts.

With regard to the primary *output* of the European Semester, the country-specific recommendations (CSRs), it is important to emphasize that the European Commission does not impose measures on Member States but wants to convince them of the importance of achieving commonly agreed goals after extensive consultation. The mechanism encourages the European Commission and national governments to engage in the widest possible consultation, which also aims to increase the legitimacy of the European Semester through the increased participation of Member States (Alcidi & Gros, 2017). In addition, it is important to emphasize that the European Commission does not prescribe exactly what policy changes Member States should make, but its recommendations emphasize what goals national policies should set for themselves (Costello, 2017, p. 1). The Commission makes individual recommendations for all Member States except for those covered by a macroeconomic adjustment programme: the Commission made country-specific recommendations for Greece, for instance, in 2019 for the first time. Some changes in 2015 affected the number of CSRs: while the Commission made a total of 253 recommendations to Member States in 2015, it made only 166 the following year. It should be added, however, that in contrast to the second Barroso Commission (2010–2014), the EC chaired by Jean-Claude Juncker (2014–2019) made integrated and more targeted recommendations covering several areas, with more sub-recommendations included (Alcidi & Gros, 2017, p. 6). Otherwise, CSRs cover a wide range of policy issues, including areas (e.g., education or health) where the European Union has only very limited, so-called supporting competences (Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018, p. 138).

The implementation of country-specific recommendations is assessed by the European Commission in the first half of the following year, when the EC gives information in country reports about the addressing of, or the failure to address, issues identified in the previous year's CSRs. For preparing assessments, the EC conducts in-depth analyses, primarily qualitative ones, involving experts from different disciplines and, based on these analyses, the EC assesses each recommendation on a five-point scale (Deroose & Griesse, 2014, p. 2). The elements of this scale are: (1) no progress – the Member State concerned has not implemented any of the measures in the recommendation; (2) limited progress – the Member State has announced the implementation of certain measures but these are insufficient to address the recommendation or their adoption/implementation is doubtful; (3) some progress – the Member State has announced or has already adopted all or part of the recommended measures,

but the outcome of their implementation is still questionable; (4) substantial progress – the Member State has adopted the recommended measures, most of which have already been implemented; (5) fully addressed – all recommended measures have been effectively implemented.

3 The nature, objectives, and effectiveness of the European Semester

Several streams of academic research on the European Semester have emerged since the introduction of the mechanism in 2011, focusing primarily on (1) the nature of the public policy process, (2) its objectives, and (3) its effectiveness.

3.1 The nature of the European Semester

The nature of EU economic governance has been examined in several studies through the relationship among the various elements within the European Semester – each of these typically emphasizes the hybrid nature of the mechanism. According to Armstrong (2013), the mechanism mixes both rule-based and coordination-based forms of governance, and Bekker (2013) interprets the European Semester as a hybrid constellation of *soft* and *hard* elements. Bickerton et al. (2015) draw attention to a new kind of intergovernmentalism through which closer European integration has emerged without a formal transfer of power to supranational institutions (Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018).

Many analysts approach the investigation of the European Semester from the perspective of democracy, usually (e.g., Chalmers et al., 2016) emphasizing that, with the introduction of the European Semester, various governmental responsibilities have shifted from democratic institutions to unelected and unaccountable technocrats. According to Dawson (2015), the new economic governance that followed the crisis shifted away from previous legal and political accountability mechanisms without developing new models of accountability. Ben Crum (2017), in his research, sought to identify how the introduction of the European Semester has affected the ability of the European Parliament and national parliaments to control economic policy. According to his study, although national governments have retained their budgetary powers, parliaments' accountability powers have been reduced, which is not compensated at the European level, and the European Parliament does not have any effective instruments to influence the substantive decisions of the European Council and the European Commission as part of the European Semester process. Hallerberg et al. (2017) examined the role of national parliaments in the mechanism of the European Semester. In particular, they were interested in how legislative institutions of the different Member States are involved in the process, such as whether they negotiate and vote on their national reform programmes and stability or convergence programmes, and which parliamentary actors are involved in the mechanism – the results suggest that there are significant differences in the legal regulations and political customs of different Member States.

3.2 The objectives of the European Semester

Numerous studies have examined the focus of the European Semester objectives. It is frequently established that, due to the structure of the mechanism, economic goals and actors have inherently been favoured over social goals and actors (Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018). According to Copeland and Daly (2015), as macroeconomic goals (which are prioritised over social goals) have become the number one priority of the European integration, the EU's social dimension has been made dependent on the community's economic development, while earlier it had complemented the community's economic goals. Crespy and Menz (2015) also find the European Semester's primary goal of reducing budget deficits to be contrary to the EU's social ambitions, arguing that reducing poverty in a Member State does not seem viable if its government is encouraged to cut costs in its national social policy. Maricut and Puetter (2017) examined the asymmetric relationship between the economic and social aspects of the European Semester, which they argue is related to the unequal development of coordination infrastructure – namely, that different economic and social actors have different opportunities and instruments to assert their interests in informal policy dialogues.

Bekker (2015), on the other hand, argued that since the economic crisis the concept of 'economic policy' has been defined much more broadly and already includes social issues, therefore the European Semester creates a new opportunity to achieve social goals. Gómez Urquijo (2015) also argues that, due to its increased powers, the Commission has the opportunity to fight poverty through the European Semester, instead of implementing austerity measures. The European Semester has indeed placed increasing emphasis on social issues over the years, with recommendations increasingly urging the achievement of social goals, and the EU's social and employment decision-makers have also received an increasingly important role in monitoring Member States (Zeitlin & Vanhercke, 2017). It is also true that more and more studies have been published that evaluate the European Semester on the basis of specific areas (health, labour market, pension system, social policy, etc.) (e.g., WHO, 2014; Azzopardi-Muscat et al., 2015; Reuter, 2019; Tkalec, 2020).

3.3 The effectiveness of the European Semester

The third priority research area of the European Semester (to which this study is also linked) involves examining the effectiveness of the mechanism, primarily through the analysis of the implementation of country-specific recommendations (Verdun & Zeitlin, 2018). According to the Commission's first study on the subject (Deroose & Griesse, 2014), which created a synthetic indicator to measure performance, the score for Member States' implementation of CSRs was 41.7 per cent between 2011 and 2014. This means that 'some progress' – i.e., moderate progress, can overall be observed with regard to country-specific recommendations, a level which is higher, according to the EC, than previously voiced by critics of the mechanism. Besides this, however, they calculated a 3-percentage point decrease in the implementation of country-specific recommendations by Member States between 2012 and 2013. In addition, they established that national governments tend to implement recommendations to a greater extent if there is no parliamentary election in the country within 12 months. Their

study, furthermore, refuted the hypothesis that there would be a difference in implementation between smaller and larger populations but, on the other hand, they observed higher than average implementation rates in the case of Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, and Sweden).

Other research results prepared using another methodology show that, since the first cycle of the European Semester in 2011, the rate of implementation of country-specific recommendations has declined. According to a study by Darvas and Leandro (2015), CSRs were not significantly implemented by Member States even in the first cycle, but implementation has further declined over the years: according to their research, while 40 per cent of CSRs were implemented by national governments in 2011, only 29 per cent of them were in 2014, despite efforts to increase the efficiency of the European Semester. It is important to note, regarding the methodology, that the percentage rates represent progress made in the measures proposed by the Commission, and not the number of recommendations fully implemented. A similar downward trend was observed by Efstathiou and Wolff (2018), who examined the implementation of EC recommendations by Member States between 2013 and 2017.

Looking at a breakdown by policy area in the period between 2013 and 2017, CSRs were related to fiscal policy (to the greatest extent) (14 per cent), employment (11 per cent), the long-term sustainability of public finances (including pensions) (9 per cent), education (8 per cent), and the fight against poverty (7 per cent) (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018, p. 9). In addition, most recommendations were received in respect to active labour market policies; public administration; the promotion of skills development and lifelong learning; and energy policy (6 per cent each) during the period under review. A study by Alcidi and Gros (2017, pp. 6–7) shows that over the years there have been fewer CSRs on fiscal policy, labour market, and pension reforms, while the proportion of recommendations has increased related to the financial sector, social issues, poverty reduction, growth, and innovation, which, according to the researchers, can be explained by changes in the economic environment and policy priorities (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018, p. 14).

Between 2013 and 2017, recommendations for the financial sector were implemented to the greatest extent by Member States, while CSRs related to taxation were implemented to the least (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018, pp. 7–8). This is also confirmed by Deroose and Griesse (2014, pp. 6–8), who examined the implementation of recommendations associated with the year 2013: according to their research, recommendations on the financial sector (60 per cent) and public finances (55 per cent) were implemented to the greatest extent by Member States, while CSRs on tax reforms (29 per cent) to the least. According to an analysis by the Bruegel Institute, between 2013 and 2017 national governments implemented recommendations on financial services mostly (54 per cent), followed by proposals on private-sector indebtedness (46 per cent) and funding sources (45 per cent). (Efstathiou & Wolff, 2018, pp. 7–8). In addition, Member States listened most to guidance from the European Commission in the areas of skills development and lifelong learning (43 per cent) and childcare (41 per cent). In contrast, Member States have least implemented the Commission's recommendations on unemployment benefits (29 per cent), competition in the services sector (27 per cent), broadening tax bases, and reducing over-indebtedness (22–22 per cent). The level of implementation of the different policy areas has also been markedly stable over the years, with the exception of fiscal proposals, which have been implemented at a significantly lower rate by Member States over the years.

The above literature review illustrates well that there are serious problems with the effectiveness of the European Semester. Efstathiou and Wolff (2018, p. 14) explain this primarily as due to the fact that national authorities and parliaments that are able to implement recommendations simply do not want to give up their sovereignty. Therefore, in their view, the solution could be for the recommendations addressed to countries under the macroeconomic imbalances procedure to focus on areas that are truly relevant for correcting imbalances and that also spill over to other countries. Less important recommendations, in turn, should be reduced, thus mitigating the administrative burden on Member States. In other words, they say that EU supervision should only deal with problems that pose a real threat to the Eurozone and to the European Union, and other issues should be dealt with at a national or regional level. In addition, they call for better communication by the EC to make their views better understood in Member States' debates.

4 Annual implementation of country-specific recommendations in the Visegrad countries

We review below how Member States of the Visegrad countries have implemented recommendations in comparison to the European Union. We evaluated the implementation of country-specific recommendations on a scale of 0 to 100 by relying on a database based on official assessments issued by the European Commission (these can be found in country reports available on the Commission's website: 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018). We rated recommendations at 0 point in areas where no progress had been made; at 25 points where limited progress had been observed by the European Commission; at 50 points where some progress had been recorded; at 75 points where substantial progress had been made; and, finally, at 100 points when recommendations had been fully implemented by Member States. In addition to the method we used, of course, there are other ways to approach the processing of the topic. The European Governance Support Unit (EGOV) of the European Parliament (2020), for example, combines several classifications used by the European Commission and uses only three categories: (1) no progress and limited progress; (2) some progress; and (3) substantial progress and full implementation.

Regarding the methodology of the research, it is important to note that the new European Commission, established in 2014, changed the previous practice. While the EC headed by José Manuel Barroso made 6–7 recommendations per country each year, Jean-Claude Juncker's Commission made fewer but more complex policy proposals to national governments. It made 4–5 country-specific recommendations to Member States after assessing their plans in 2015, and it made only 2–3 in 2016 and 2017. In the vast majority of cases, however, each recommendation consisted of several different sub-recommendations, which were assessed separately by the European Commission, so in our research we did not consider the overall assessment of recommendations, but the assessment of each sub-recommendation. As the European Commission has been conducting a sub-recommendation assessment for comprehensive recommendations only since 2013, the period we investigated has evolved accordingly: the national-level implementation of recommendations between 2013 and 2017 is the subject of our examination.

In the case of the four Visegrad countries, we cannot observe any significant differences between them concerning the implementation of the European Commission's country-specific recommendations: if we analyse assessments of implementation for each year, we can identify 30 to 35 points on a scale of 100 points, on average, for all four Visegrad countries in the five-year period 2013–2017 (Figure 1). This means that, concerning an average recommendation, the government of a Visegrad country has made slightly less than medium progress in one year, ranging from 'limited progress' to 'some progress'. This, without exception, ranks the Visegrad countries in the second half of the field for the EU as a whole, lagging far behind the leaders in the period under review. Finland (53 points), the United Kingdom (51 points), and Slovenia (48 points) fulfilled EU recommendations to the greatest extent. The Czech Republic ranked seventeenth, Poland eighteenth, Hungary and Slovakia finished twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth in a tie in terms of meeting country-specific recommendations, when annual implementation is analysed.

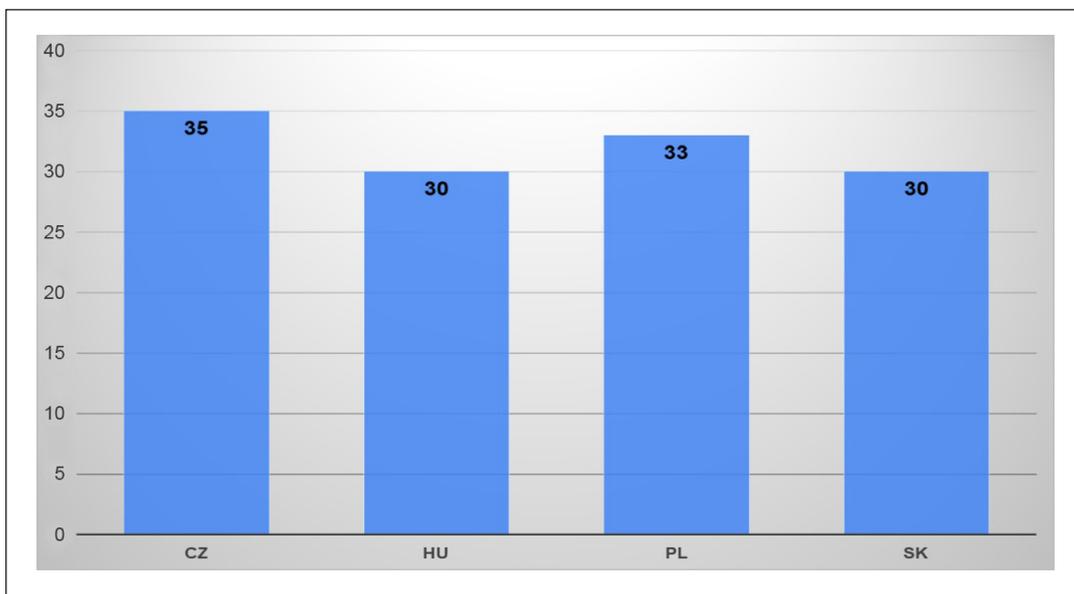


Figure 1 Implementation of country-specific recommendations in the Visegrad countries, on a scale of 0–100, on the average of the 2013–2017 period

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

In addition to the five-year averages, it is worth taking a look at trends over the five years (Figure 2). This clearly shows that while there have generally been improvements in the implementation of EU recommendations in the Czech Republic, there has been a clear decline in Poland. The trend was broken in 2015 when the Law and Justice party came to power in Poland and conflicts with the EU became a key element of Polish government policy. In the years after 2015, the implementation of country-specific recommendations in Poland did not even reach the average rating of 'limited progress'. Interestingly, Poland did not fully imple-

ment any of the partial recommendations in the five-year period (it is also true that in the case of the other three countries the Brussels recommendations were fully implemented in only one case each). The opposing trend can be seen in the Czech Republic, where the rate of implementation of EU recommendations rose to 46 points five years later, from 25 points in 2013. In Hungary and Slovakia, these five years did not bring any significant change in the extent to which EU recommendations were incorporated into domestic public policy decisions, and the implementation indicator in both countries fluctuated at around 30 points. Overall, the Czech Republic has increasingly embraced Brussels' proposals, Poland has paid less and less attention to the European Commission's guidance, and Hungary and Slovakia were positioned somewhere in-between by the end of the five-year period. This is how in the implementation of recommendations Poland has gone from being a leading driver to trailing behind, and the Czech Republic a leading driver from trailing in the region within five years.

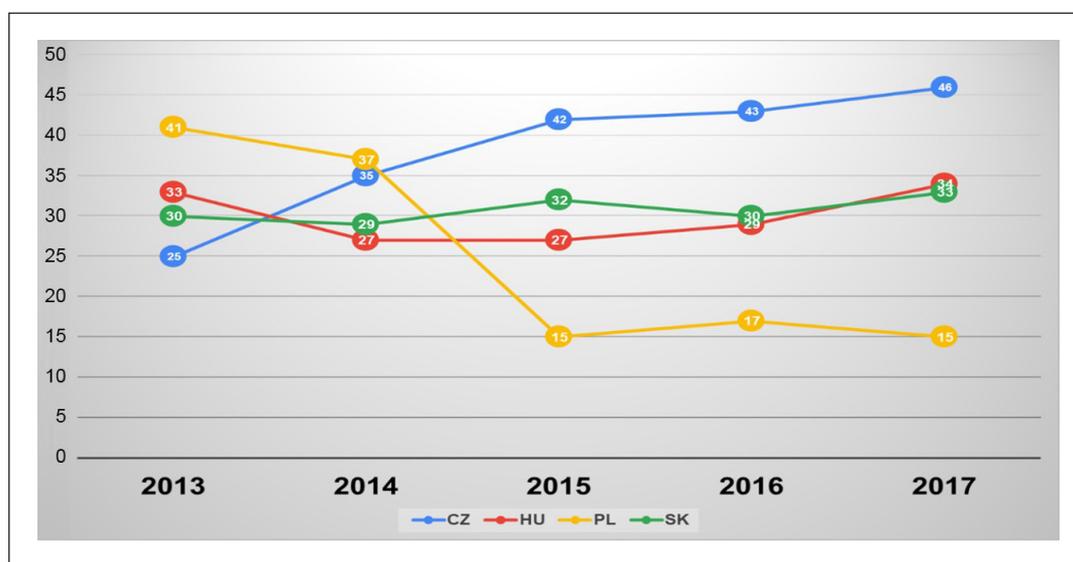


Figure 2 Implementation of country-specific recommendations in the Visegrad countries, on a scale of 0–100, in a yearly breakdown (2013–2017)

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

4.1 Czech Republic

Between 2013 and 2017, the European Commission made a total of 73 country-specific sub-recommendations for the Czech Republic (Figure 3). Nine of these were not implemented at all, thirty at a minimum, twenty-eight in part, and three were substantially fulfilled by the Czech government, while the EC made only one recommendation during the five semesters that were examined which was fully implemented by the Czech government. In two other cases, the EC did not assess the recommendations afterwards, so we arrive at an implementation score of 35 points in total.

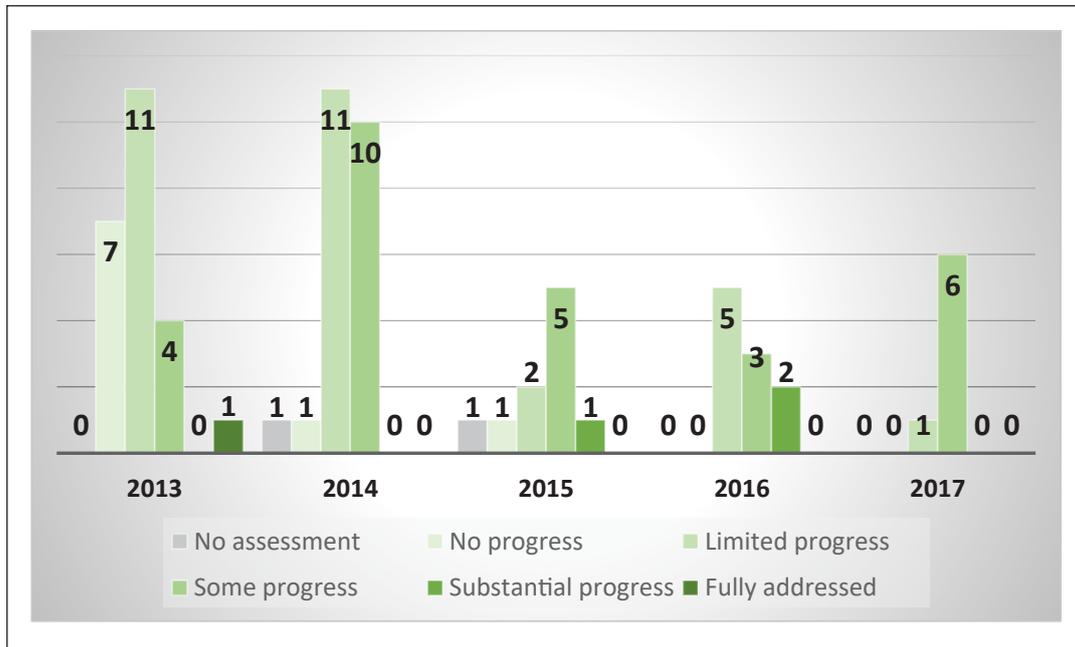


Figure 3 Implementation of country-specific recommendations in the Czech Republic, in a yearly breakdown (2013–2017), pieces

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

The Czech government implemented the largest proportion of the European Commission's recommendations in the last year under review (46 points) but did not lag significantly behind in the two years preceding it either (2015: 42 points; 2016: 43 points). The Czech Republic took up recommendations the least in 2013, when it implemented 23 partial recommendations with an assessment of only 25 points – this coincides with the term of Jiří Rusnok's caretaker government.

4.2 Hungary

Of the Visegrad countries, Hungary received the most recommendations: The European Commission made 91 recommendations during the period under review (Figure 4). Twenty of these were completely ignored by the second and third Orbán governments, with limited progress in 36 cases, moderate implementation of recommendations in 25 cases, substantial progress in 4 cases, while only one sub-recommendation was fully implemented. We found a total of five recommendations that were not assessed by the Commission. Overall, the Hungarian governments received 30 points as an assessment regarding the implementation of the EC's recommendations during the period under review.

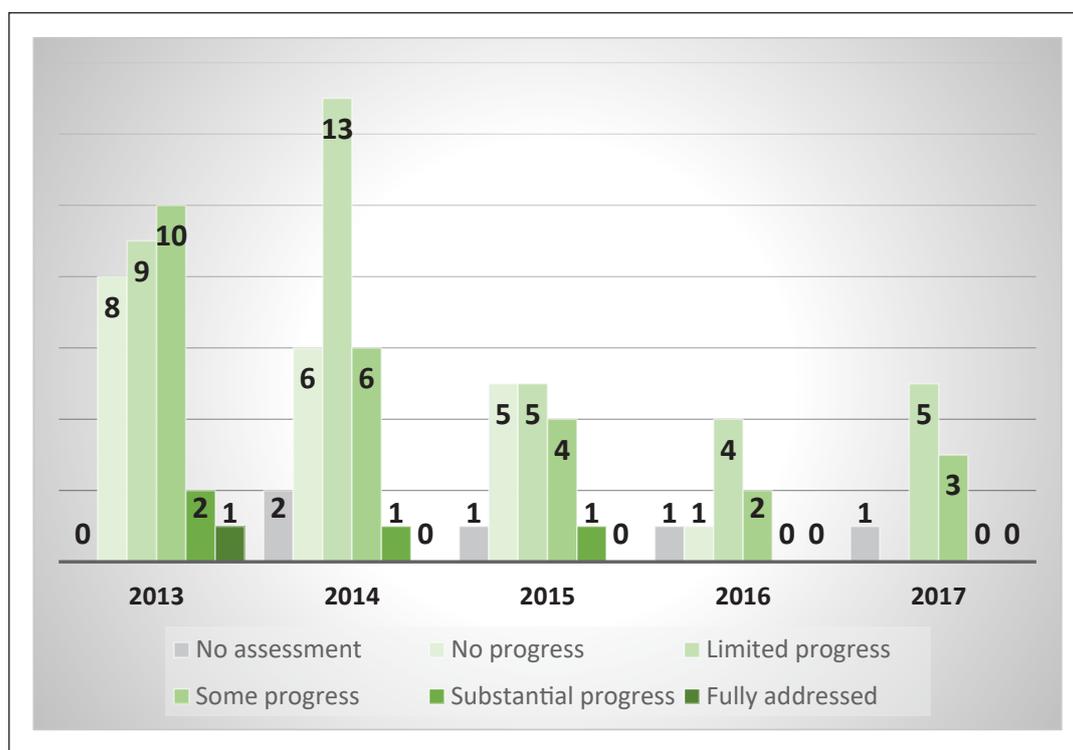


Figure 4 Implementation of country-specific recommendations in Hungary, in a yearly breakdown (2013–2017), pieces

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

In the case of Hungary, there are no significant differences in the extent to which the recommendations were implemented in the different years. In 2013 we assess compliance at 33 points; the EC recommendations were implemented the least in 2014 and 2015 (27–27 points); in 2016, the score was slightly higher (29 points); while in the last year we examined we find the best assessment (34 points).

4.3 Poland

In the case of Poland, 67 recommendations can be identified during the five public policy cycles we examined (Figure 5). Twelve of these were completely ignored by the Warsaw governments, with 24 cases where minimal progress was made concerning the respective issues, 21 areas where EC guidelines were implemented in part, and only six cases where significant progress was made. In addition, we can find four recommendations the implementation of which was not assessed ex post by the Commission. Examining all the years, we can award 33 points to the different governments of Poland for their progress in the implementation of the European Commission's country-specific recommendations.

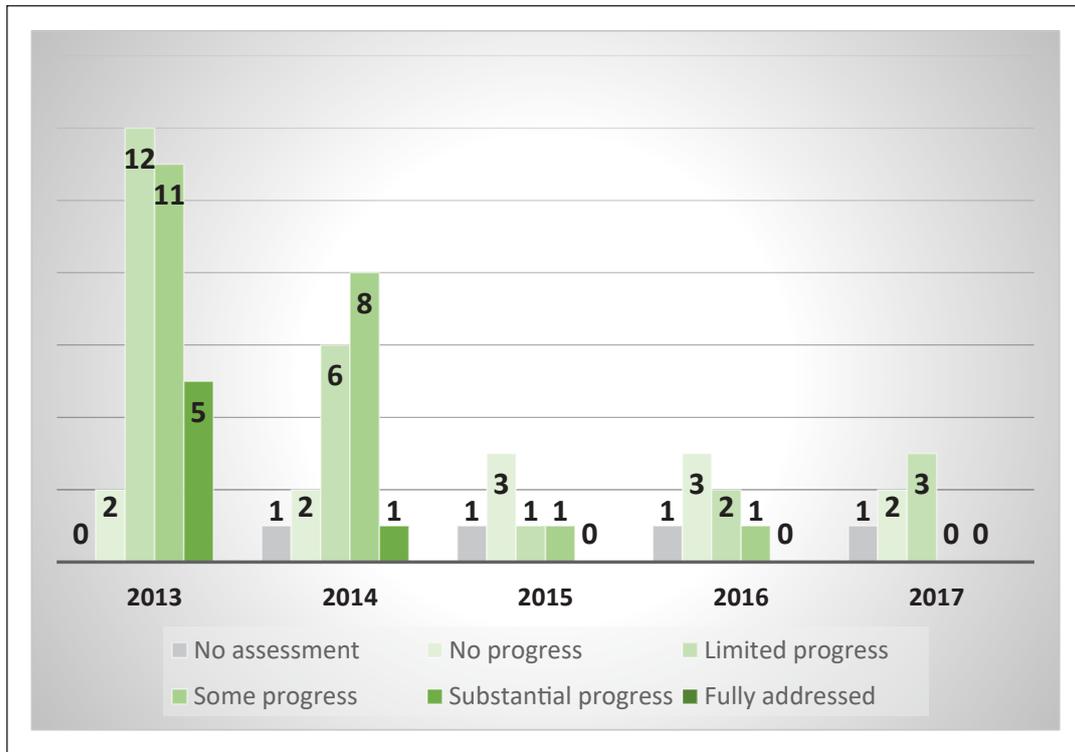


Figure 5 Implementation of country-specific recommendations in Poland, in a yearly breakdown (2013–2017), pieces

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

The change of government in Poland in 2015 clearly left its mark on the implementation of CSRs: In 2013 and 2014 we awarded 41- and 37-point ratings, while when the clearly Euro-sceptic Law and Justice came to power the rate of implementation of recommendations dropped significantly, with only 15- and 17-point ratings between 2015 and 2017.

4.4 Slovakia

A total of 76 country-specific recommendations were issued by the European Commission to Slovak governments between 2013 and 2017 (Figure 6). In 11 of these cases, the EC recommendations fell on deaf ears, in 38 cases the Bratislava government made minimal progress, and in 21 cases moderate progress, while substantial progress and full implementation was observed only for one recommendation each. In a total of four cases during the years under review, the EC did not assess the implementation ex post. This represents a total score of 30 points for Slovakia.

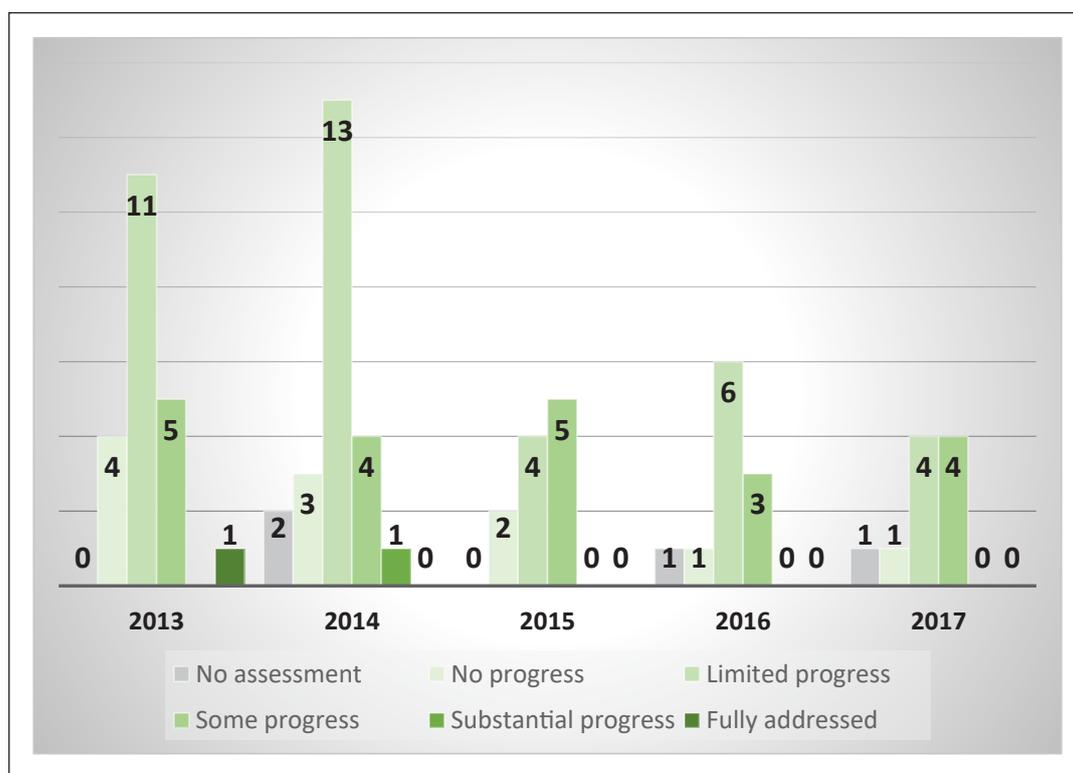


Figure 6 Implementation of country-specific recommendations in Slovakia, in a yearly breakdown (2013–2017), pieces

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

In the case of Slovakia, we can observe the most stable implementation rate, as the difference between the weakest (2014: 29 points) and the strongest (2017: 33 points) years is only four points. In addition, we assess compliance at 30 points in 2013, 32 points in 2015, and 29 points in 2016.

5 Long-term implementation of EU recommendations in the Visegrad countries

The European Commission not only carries out annual assessments of the implementation of recommendations but also multi-annual assessments to examine the extent to which Member States implement recommendations over a number of years. In the summary below, for the period from the launch of the European Semester to the 2018 country reports, we show the proportion of implementation as established by the European Commission for recommenda-

tions issued earlier, or even many years earlier (Figure 7). In its country reports, the European Commission places particular emphasis on the extent to which each Member State has implemented each recommendation at least at a medium level in the long term. Recommendations associated with a score of at least the middle of the five-point scale (i.e. the level of 'some progress') are recommendations for which the EC may consider substantive progress has been made in the long term.

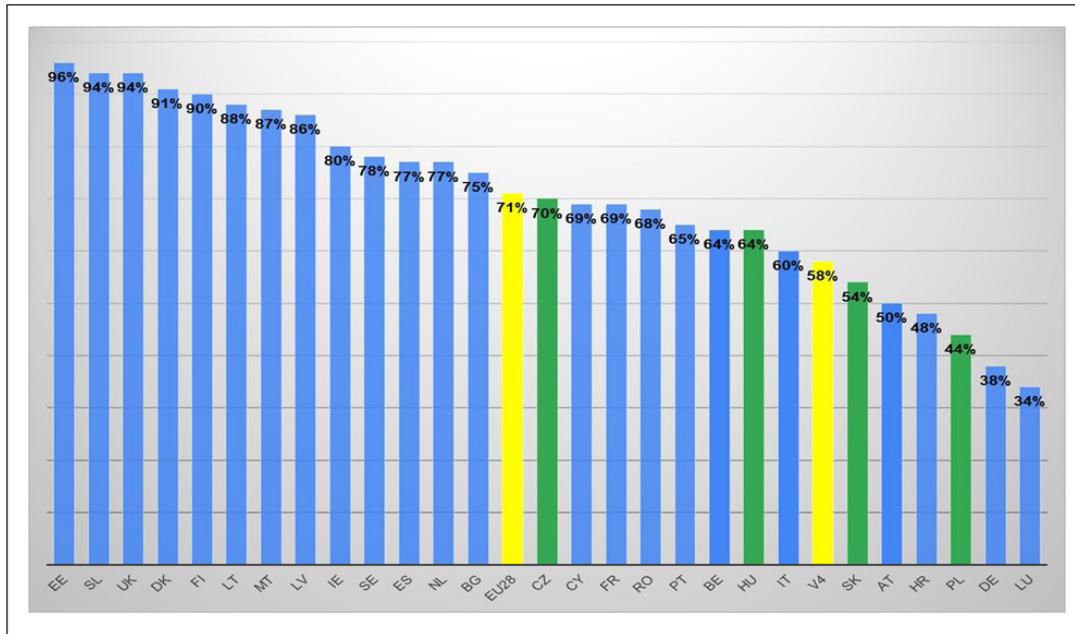


Figure 7 The proportion of country-specific recommendations with at least 'some progress' in the multi-annual perspective, according to the European Commission's long-term assessment (2011–2017)

Source: Own calculation based on country reports of the European Commission.

It is clear from the long-term aggregation that, over a period of a few years, many more EU recommendations have a meaningful impact on national policies and are implemented thanks to national governments. This is no different in the Visegrad countries: in all three countries in the region, apart from in Poland, there was 'some progress' in at least half of the EU's public policy recommendations. From this longer-term perspective, for example, the Orbán government, which is widely considered Eurosceptic, took measures in relation to almost two-thirds of the EU's recommendations (64 per cent), which the European Commission also assessed as 'some progress.' This is the second-best indicator among the Visegrad countries – only the Czech Republic implemented more EU recommendations, at least in part. At the same time, it is striking that even the highest-performing Czechs (70 per cent) still performed a hair's breadth below the EU28 average (71 per cent). The average of the Visegrad countries (58 per cent) is 13 percentage points lower than the EU average. Based on this, it can be stated that although the EU recommendations have a more significant public

policy impact in the Visegrad countries in the long term, they are more likely to be ignored in a few years' time than in most EU Member States. As Poland implemented recommendations to the extent of only 44 percent according to the multi-annual assessment, they have the third worst indicator in the EU as a whole. The Czech Republic is ranked fourteenth, Hungary twentieth and Slovakia twenty-second as regards the long-term implementation of EU recommendations.

Thus, while the Visegrad countries belong to the second half of the field, it is clear from the EU-wide aggregation that this is certainly not an East-West fault line. The Baltic countries, for example, are all among those who follow EU public policy recommendations the most: Estonia leads the EU as a whole, with 'some progress' with 96 per cent of the recommendations in the long term. For the same indicator Latvia scores 88 per cent and 86 per cent for Lithuania, but the examples of Slovenia (94 per cent) and Bulgaria (75 per cent) also show that there is a different attitude towards recommendations from Brussels within Central and Eastern Europe. However, recommendations are also ignored in some Western European Member States (Austria 50 per cent, Germany 38 per cent, Luxembourg 34 per cent), and the outstanding long-term performance of the Scandinavians (Denmark 91 per cent, Sweden 90 per cent, Sweden 78 per cent) are not considered to be typical of countries located to the west of the former Iron Curtain.

6 Conclusions

This study examined Visegrad countries regarding the extent to which they take into account public policy recommendations from the European Commission and whether the level of implementation in this region can be considered low or high in comparison to EU countries as a whole. Looking at the average of the five years we examined, the four Visegrad countries practically moved together when implementing EU public policy recommendations at the national level. There are no major differences across the four Visegrad countries, all of which belong in the second half of the field for the EU as a whole. This finding is in line with our previous expectations given the Euroscepticism of many key governmental players over the years in the region. We expected that non-compulsory compliance would be below the EU average in the V4 countries. In terms of implementing recommendations within one year, the Visegrad countries made slightly below-average progress in implementing recommendations at a national level according to the European Commission's assessments. However, we can observe some opposing trends that underlie this rather uniform average annual performance (ranging between 30 and 35 on a scale of 100 for all four countries). In the Czech Republic, the implementation of public policy recommendations at a national level steadily improved over the period under review, while in Poland the trend was completely the opposite: after the 2015 change of government, the Polish government paid spectacularly less attention to public policy recommendations developed based on EU policy analyses. There were no major fluctuations in Hungary and Slovakia in individual years – their implementation of the EU recommendations at the national level was characterized by values of around 30 points, i.e., 'limited progress'.

However, the impact of recommendations of the European Semester on the public policy decisions of Member States is much greater in the longer term than the level shown by annual assessments. In the long term, country-specific recommendations made a significant

impact not only in other EU Member States, but also in the Visegrad countries, which have a more confrontational relationship with the EU. Important proof of this statement is that, over a multi-annual period, the Orbán government addressed nearly two-thirds of EU recommendations (the latter assessed as at least 'some progress' by the European Commission). This said, it is also true of the long-term implementation of recommendations that they are more likely to be ignored in Visegrad countries than in most EU Member States. All four countries implemented such public policy recommendations from Brussels at a lower rate than the EU average. Examining why compliance is better than expected, at least in the long-term, is beyond the scope of this paper, but this phenomenon suggests an obvious direction for further research.

Overall, an examination of the national-level implementation of country-specific recommendations shows that European integration can make an impact on Member States not only through hard, binding instruments and exclusive powers, but also through softer public policy coordination. This is particularly evident if we look at the implementation of recommendations by Member States not only within a one-year period but after several years. However, in this area the future is likely to involve stronger links between the national-level implementation of public policy recommendations in compliance with EU priorities and access to EU funds. An important sign of this is that the huge economic recovery programme (Next Generation EU) that is designed to address the crisis caused by the Coronavirus, with funds complementing the seven-year budget, may in future be linked to the European Semester, which also means that compliance with and the implementation of country-specific recommendations may be required to access these funds. Such a close link between recommendations and funds did not exist in the 2010s, so by examining the implementation of country-specific recommendations we were able to get an idea of the impact of the EU on national-level public policy decisions when it essentially acted in an advisory capacity.

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