

BOOK REVIEW

Sándor Gyula Nagy (2021). *The Visegrád Countries and Brazil*,
Budapest: Ludovika University Press, ISBN 978-963-531-396-9

Reviewed by *Márton Baranyi**

Published online: May 17, 2021

© 2021 The Author(s)



Brazil, a country of more than 200 million inhabitants and a robust developing economy measured by its size, is the 8th biggest in the world (based on PPP). The largest Latin American country also has a dynamically growing population, which, together with the country's rich natural resources and its upward evolution of competitiveness (following the recession of 2014) makes Brazil one of the five major emerging economies of the world (BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). A similar economic powerhouse characterised by huge economic potential, yet of different magnitude can be found in Europe as well. The Visegrád countries, a historic alliance of Central European countries (consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia), represent a cohesive political and an ever-growing economic block within the European Union (EU), located in the direct proximity of Germany. It is expected that these EU member states will become a booming and flourishing region in Europe in the short term. *The Visegrád Countries and Brazil*, sponsored by the Hungarian Diplomatic Academy and the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, edited by Sándor Gyula Nagy, a Hungarian expert on Latin America, can be seen as a unique and comprehensive attempt to cover all the important aspects of cooperation between Brazil and the Visegrád countries.

Taking the increasing economic power and the rich historic ties between Brazil and the Central European region into account, one could expect that *the book* is a compelling success story of mutually beneficial and strong political and economic cooperation that stretches across continents. This is only partly true however. On one hand, the book is indeed a thesaurus that takes stock of the long-standing relations between Brazil and the Visegrád countries, putting emphasis not only on the economic ties between the countries, but also on the other important aspects of bilateral relations, such as political relations and cultural ties, including sports and tourism. On the other hand, *The Visegrád Countries and Brazil*, which was compiled with the help of both contributors from Brazil and all of the Visegrád countries, can also be perceived as a blinking warning light about lost opportunities. Or rather as a wakeup-call with regards the huge potential that the relations between these countries might offer. Indeed, as the several forewords of the book argue, *The Visegrád Countries and Brazil* makes a compelling case about the need to keep investing in the future of this relationship, since the comprehensive work covers all major aspects of the current cooperation. It highlights several aspects and elements of the complex

PhD candidate, Corvinus University Budapest, Budapest, Hungary. E-mail: baranyimarci@gmail.com

relationship that can be seen as success, but nevertheless sheds light on a number of areas where there is still room for improvement.

The Visegrád Countries and Brazil targets a rather large audience in the respective countries, and the book can indeed be used for various purposes (academic teaching, training of diplomats or practising professionals). It is structured as follows: the focal point of the book consists of four thematic country chapters; these quasi country reports take stock of the respective Visegrád country's bilateral relations with Brazil in various policy fields. In the case of each country, the chapters analyse the political and diplomatic cooperation, the economic relations, the cultural educational and scientific ties, and lastly, the tourism and sport relations between the respective Visegrád countries and Brazil. The contributors to the volume are academics, researchers, professors and/or diplomats. Martin Hrabálek from the Mendel University Brno and Jan Nemeč from the University of Economics in Prague drafted the Czech country chapter; Barbora Janubová from the University of Economics in Bratislava was responsible for the Slovak country chapter. Bartłomiej Znojek from the Polish Institute of International Affairs contributed by analysing Polish-Brazilian relations, while the Hungarian country report was written by Sándor Gyula Nagy and Judit Ricz, both from the Corvinus University Budapest, Barnabás Szabó from the Hungarian Institute of Foreign Affairs, and Zoltán Dubécz from the Hungarian Central Bank. The Brazilian perspective is also represented following the Visegrád country chapters, since Mauricio da Costa Carvalho Bernardes, a Brazilian diplomat formerly in charge of the Central European region within the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also provides his views on the relations between Brazil and the Visegrád countries.

The first aspect of the relationships covered is political and diplomatic cooperation. Overall, the Visegrád countries and Brazil witness historic ties and long-standing political relations, even if these were of an oscillating magnitude. Brazil was the first Latin American country to recognise the newly established European countries in the early 20th century, and despite the de facto absent relations due to Brazil and the Visegrád countries being on the opposing sides of the Cold War, the relations received a new impetus subsequent to the European countries' NATO and EU accession. This was further accelerated following the global financial crisis (2008): the political relations were characterised in the past 15 years by numerous high-level meetings and visits. Today, all Visegrád countries are present at the highest possible diplomatic level in Brazil (this is unique in South America) and vice versa, complemented by other services, such as trade and investment promotion representations which, focussing on the economic dimension of relations, aim at boosting bilateral trade and triggering higher investment levels.

The second dimension of the academic scrutiny is the economic cooperation between Brazil and the Visegrád countries. Overall, it can be stated that Brazil is usually the top trading partner for all Visegrád countries from the Latin American region (competing with Mexico), and that trade volumes were significantly increasing for all Visegrád countries in the last decade. Nevertheless, the share of trade with Brazil accounts for only around 0.1–1 percent of the total trade of the Visegrád countries, meaning that despite the ever-growing trade volumes, the two regions are quasi insignificant trading partners for each other. One possible hope is that the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement will have a positive impact on the rather low trade volumes, once the agreement comes into force. Similarly, extremely low numbers and volumes can be seen with regards to foreign direct investment (FDI) in the context of the bi-regional relation: overall FDI flows are rather marginal with regards to the FDI portfolio of the Visegrád countries, and approximately equal to less than 1 percent of the total FDI volumes. The low numbers are rather



discouraging, especially in light of long-existing success stories: a Brazilian company active in the field of refrigeration production (Embraco) initiated one of the biggest foreign investments in the eastern part of Slovakia in 1997, in a region characterised by high unemployment. The initiative led to the establishment of a production site that is active ever since, and the Brazilian investment made the company the biggest employer of the region. The story of Embraco is therefore considered as an outstanding success in terms of mutually beneficial Brazilian FDI investment in the Visegrád countries.

Another important aspect of current economic relations is the Visegrád countries' stance towards the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement that is aiming at increasing bilateral trade and investment between the two blocks by lowering tariffs and non-tariff trade barriers. Although the agreement between the parties has been recently reached in principle, the final texts have not been signed or ratified yet and therefore have not entered into force. The Visegrád countries are not blocking the entering into force, yet their national positions differ considerably with regards to the EU-Mercosur free trade agreement: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia have no major opposition towards the agreement, while Poland was only reluctantly supportive, fearing the potential loss of competitiveness in the agricultural sector. Apparently, agriculture is an important factor affecting the density of the bilateral relations with the Visegrád countries: in the case of the Czech Republic, economic relations outweigh political ties, which is not surprising since Czech industry complements Brazilian agriculture rather well, not creating any conflicts of interest. The latter is not valid in the case of other Visegrád countries: due to the competitive agricultural sectors, Poland does not have such deep economic ties with Brazil, and neither does Hungary.

An important asset of *The Visegrád Countries and Brazil* is that it not only ponders about the economic potential between the two blocks and the theoretic possibilities to overcome the difficulties, but also identifies the obstacles that are in practice hindering the further deepening of the ties between these countries. Apart from the generic reasons for the limited intensity and scope of the Visegrád-Brazilian relations, including the vast geographic distance, limited mutual knowledge and insignificant government incentives to seek for a more substantial relationship, several other factors are also mentioned explicitly. Such hindering factors are the primary focus of the Visegrád countries' companies on Europe, the poor market knowledge, economic protectionism and over-bureaucratisation of public services in Brazil, including the complicated administrative and taxation processes. Nevertheless, other factors that are hindering deeper cooperation are also mentioned, albeit only implicitly. Such a factor is the reluctance of certain, already embedded European actors (including EU member states with historic ties in the region) that are not enthusiastic about other, additional EU members seeking mutually beneficial economic and political ties in their ex-colonies (see e.g. the case of a derailed Hungarian agricultural investment in Angola in 2020; [Buzna 2020](#)).

Finally, as far as cultural, educational and scientific cooperation is concerned, the related parts of the various country reports unveil that the Visegrád countries and Brazil can boast rich, complex, and substantial relations. To start with, it is not well known that vast immigration took place in several phases in the past 300 years from Central Europe to the American continent (starting with the Jesuit Order's presence in South America), and according to the various estimates, around 1.5 percent of Brazilian society has origins related to the Visegrád countries. It is not surprising therefore that all Visegrád countries aim at enhancing the cultural, educational and scientific cooperation with Brazil, with more or less success so far. Hungary can be named as



a good example in the field of educational cooperation, since it not only has a specific strategy on Brazil, but it also launched a comprehensive academic programme to woo international students to study in Hungary. This scholarship programme already bore fruit: the number of Brazilian students increased substantially in the last decade, peaking at around 1,350 students during one academic year (in 2014).

Overall, *The Visegrád Countries and Brazil* is not only an interesting read, but it represents a rather unique and comprehensive attempt by providing insight into the relations of Brazil with Central European countries to those who are not familiar with the topic in great depths. It analyses the various dimensions of the relations of the Visegrád countries with one of the most prominent countries of Latin America. Although the book also unveils that Central Europe have historically developed good bilateral relations with Brazil, of which both the political and economic relations are stable and continuous, the comprehensive approach of the book demonstrates that overall there is still much for improving the relations between these countries in several policy areas. If only one takeaway of the book is to be mentioned, then it would be the following: the future represents a huge challenge as far as the bi-regional relations are concerned, since significant effort is needed to exploit the mutually beneficial possibilities that still lie within the Visegrád-Brazilian cooperation.

REFERENCES

- Buzna, V. (2020): Európai szövetségeseink fúrták meg Orbán útját [Our European allies have sabotaged Orbán's trip]. https://index.hu/kulfold/2020/11/19/angola_orbanviktorszijasportepeterportugaliaeu/, accessed 08/04/2021.

Open Access. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided the original author and source are credited, a link to the CC License is provided, and changes – if any – are indicated.

