



Visegrád School of Political Studies



2015

The project is cofinanced by the European Academy of Diplomacy, the Council of Europe, the International Visegrad Fund and the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland within the frames of “Public Diplomacy Cooperation 2015”.



Ministry
of Foreign Affairs
Republic of Poland



Visegrád Group – United in Diversity? Alternatives for the Future

“Our foursome is being buried prematurely. In the end, sooner or later we will have to cooperate together,” these words were pronounced by Vladimír Mečiar, former acting president of Slovakia. They clearly define the natural need for cooperation between the Visegrad Group members who shared common policies over years, using the group as a powerful and flexible instrument to raise a common voice in respect of each country’s sovereignty and freedom.

Created in 1991, the Visegrad Group (or V4) has constituted a consultative and cooperation forum for four countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. It has changed over the years, depending on volatile situations influenced by internal and external factors, particularly on political will. Firstly, the Visegrad Group went through a period of dynamic crystallization of the idea and form of cooperation between 1989 and 1992, during the fall of communism and democratic transition. Next, it experienced a phase of crisis between 1993 and 1998, when its members hardly cooperated with each other. Finally, the Visegrad Group re-established close cooperation between 1999 and 2003/20 thus, already as a part of the Euro-Atlantic community and before the accession to the European Union. Since 2004 all V4 countries could start cooperation not only within the NATO, but also in the framework of European community.¹

The impetus to establish regional cooperation between V4 countries was clearly marked in the Visegrad Declaration from February 1991.² The Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia referred to the convergence of their foreign policy, similarities in their historical experiences, and the geographic location, all of which inspired them to establish a new regional relationship. The declaration highlighted the main objectives of cooperation, among which the most important was the integration with the NATO and the EU structures.

With the membership in the Euro-Atlantic community since 1999 (apart from Slovakia, who joined the organisation in 2004) and the accession to the EU in May 2004, the V4 countries have met the essential objectives of the regional cooperation listed in the Visegrad Declaration. Thus, the question on the future of the group, its main objectives, and form of the collaboration have been posed, despite of regular meetings held by the prime ministries, ministries, or presidents of their national parliaments consulting various issues of concern to the V4 countries.

Do the differences prevail?

After a long process of political and economical transfor-

mation as well as accession to the Euro-Atlantic and the EU structures, the Visegrad Group seems to be very often of different opinions in many areas that could be directly transferred into the lack of a common denominator for the future joint actions.

Generally speaking, countries seem to follow pragmatic logic of their national interest. Therefore, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia were divided over the redistribution of the EU funds during the negotiations of the EU Multiannual Financial Framework 2014 - 2020, particularly within the limits of Cohesion Policy, the greatest beneficent of which seems to be Poland. Similarly, a different approach was shared toward Common Agriculture Policy, the reform of which postulated budgetary cuts supported by Czech Republic. Moreover, Slovakia as the only eurozone member advocates instruments and actions aiming at strengthening the euro area, that could parallelly and possibly divide the EU into two-speed Europe with first- or second-class members. Many examples of disagreement between V4 come to the fore in the area of environmental policy, for example, the European Commission proposal on back-loading concerning suspension of the part of the EU greenhouse gas emission allowances auctions, the idea of which was supported by Slovakia to the dissatisfaction of the rest of the V4 members. Furthermore, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia share different positions in the area of foreign policy, quite recently visible in the case of the Ukrainian crisis or the policy toward Russia, dictated very often by a pragmatic interest of country’s economy. The V4 members are also not united in terms of the involvement in the Eastern Partnership, playing less important role in foreign policy of Hungary and Slovakia.

The differences between the Visegrad Group members have various reasons, the deep analysis of which could take an entire chapter of a book. Generally speaking, they could be referred to the overall size of the country in terms of its economy or demography that could impose certain global expectations. Various factors might implicate certain policy, like structure of the economy and its greater dependence on export that could influence state’s position toward certain country or a group of countries. Political aspects should not be forgotten, as it might be easier to reach an agreement between governments coming from the same political family. Finally, there are also particular animosities between V4 members, like situation of Hungarian minority in Slovakia or negative campaigning on Polish agricultural products in Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Possible binding forces? Energy

policy, transport and infrastructure, defence... to foster economic and social development of the V4?

Nevertheless, all V4 members represent a valuable region in Central and Eastern Europe with well qualified working force, high standards and rule of law, or relatively low costs of work comparing to the other parts of the EU, that could tempt foreign investments. The Visegrad Group is present in different global and European organisations that could constitute forum not only for rivalry as a result of conflicting national interests, but also give an opportunity for closer cooperation to mutual satisfaction. Within the EU there are other effectively functioning groupings, for example Benelux, Weimar Triangle, or Nordic Group. The V4 has its potential that could be used within the European Parliament due to cooperation between national delegations of political groups or within the Council of the European Union, where Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia has the same power as France with Germany considering voting by qualified majority (i.e. 58 votes). Therefore, it is of utmost importance to join efforts not only for the day to day business, but also to determine long term goals for closer cooperation with synergy effect.

Considering great dependence on Russia and various internal challenges within the EU, the energy policy might constitute an important field of greater collaboration between V4 countries. During the V4+ energy security summit, held in Budapest in 2010, the security policies took a more central role within the V4 area, with the increasing consciousness of the importance of the issue and the need of changes to find alternative external suppliers (for example in the framework of the EU neighbourhood and eastern partnership) and to boost the dialogue with the existing ones, to increase the efficiency. The Slovak president of the V4 group, in charge during the recurrence of the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Iron Curtain, put emphasis on the development of safe energy policies, with priority on the realisation of a North-South gas and electricity interconnection, in line with the EU climate and energy policy. Another relevant issue is the one related to gas supplies, with the goal to proceed on the elaboration of joint preventive action plans and emergency plans also at regional level. The lack of flexibility on long term contracts and the limited transparency applied at the time of their stipulation is a problem to be eradicated, especially concerning the natural gas resources, that make the V4 countries, as well as the entire Europe, dependent on the Russian market, with evident consequences in bilateral relationships and eventual disputes. In 2012 the 33.7% of the EU imports³ of crude oil were from Russia, a fact that, even showing a slight decrease in comparison with the previous records, is keeping the Russian Federation in a leadership position as solid fuels exporter to the EU. In the Visegrad area, Poland and Czech Republic are relying on a relevant production of coal and lignite, Hungary on natural gas, that is anyway not enough to grant a common inde-

pendence without the creation of a relevant infrastructure more efficient than the actual one and creating coordinated common policies.

Another good example might be related to the necessary improvements of infrastructure and density of transport network, particularly in the cross-border areas, that could foster economic cooperation and promote citizens mobility. Infrastructure development and interconnections between the V4 countries is indispensable and fundamental for the credibility of any further integration plans in the V4 region. Fast and reliable public transport connections between major cities and towns are vital if the Visegrad region is to achieve closer cooperation, and stronger social, economic, and cultural connections. The example of the Benelux here is instructive: the region boasts an excellent high-speed rail network, frequent connections, and an extensive highway network.

Transport connections between Visegrad countries have always been characterized by a certain stagnation and slow development. The underdeveloped motorway network and the general condition of the railway network means there are few connections and slow travel times. Since the transition from Communism, road and railway networks have been redeveloped and expanded, but these developments have an East-West orientation. Recognizing this and propositions have been put forward continuously to cover the network between the V4 countries.

Connections similar to high velocity transnational networks in Western Europe have not been established between the V4 countries. EU maps of a planned high-speed train network stop at the borders of the former Iron Curtain. However, in the Czech Republic and Poland, and the rebuilding of certain railway sections to accommodate speeds of 200km/h has been proposed.

The project began in Poland, with the intent to build a Y-shaped connection from Warsaw towards Poznan and Wroclaw, and to order suitable vehicles. The new coaches were presented to the public recently, but afterwards the project was stopped due to financial reasons.

Regional railway connections are in worse condition. With a few exceptions, regional systems do not cross national borders. Ten years after accession to the European Union, the situation has not improved, but rather deteriorated. Painful examples are the almost nonexistent cross border rail lines between Hungary and Slovakia, as well as Slovakia and Poland. Fortunately, the Czech Republic provides a positive counterexample: in the Silesian area, there are local passenger trains that go to Poland.⁴

Passengers can also use bus lines. However, in the V4's regional transport network, choices are rather limited, similar to the rail situation. Bus timetables include connections between Czech and Polish cities, but between Hungary and Slovakia local and regional bus lines mostly

do not cross the border, despite the existence of a sizeable Hungarian minority in southern Slovakia. Thus connection between bus lines is only possible by a few kilometres walk between two bus stops in the neighbouring countries. There are odd exceptions in Komárom-Komárno, where, besides scarce workday connections, there is also a "transnational line" in the form of a contracted hypermarket service bus between Esztergom and Štúrovo (Párkány).

The motorway network of the V4 countries underwent major development in the past few years, mostly in the Czech Republic and Hungary. However, even motorways which seemingly have a North-South direction in reality mostly carry an east-west transport load, much of it transit from Turkey and the Balkans towards Germany. There is an obvious absence of a north-south corridor between Poland and Hungary through central or eastern Slovakia. This results in Baltic, Polish and Italian trucks speeding through tiny villages.

The question of transport connections between the Visegrad countries is not a static issue. We have a lot to do in respect of the development of the north-south corridors and regional connections. Other regional networks in Europe, such as the ones in the Benelux and Iberia, have much tighter connections, and the socioeconomic results are apparent.

Defence issues give also many possibilities for greater collaboration, in particular with the view of the Visegrad Battlegroup, the creation of which is planned by 2016. According to the agreement, the formation numbering 3000 soldiers will participate in international operations arranged within the NATO and the EU, as well fight against natural disasters. The leading nation of the Battlegroup, also providing the majority of the troops, will be Poland. This most significant short-term defence project, which is unique among the Visegrad Group and has a relevant long-term perspective, addresses the issue of shrinking defence budgets for short term political interests and react to changes in Europe's security environment by taking into account long term strategic interests.

The stand-up period of 2016 will provide the opportunity to develop the Battlegroup and the operation thereof through practice. Thus it is of high importance to monitor closely the process, learn from the lessons, recognize and identify the major problems, strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Accordingly, the Battlegroup will inevitably deepen the regional defence collaboration, therefore future steps are awaited to be made: in the future, V4 countries should maintain and integrate the battle group structures and capabilities, since the different resources and defence industries are taken into account during the building those structures, and 'permanent forms of regional co-operation would contribute to both the EU and NATO by building capacities at home'.⁵

This is the reason why the deepening of this defence collaboration project is in focus, and many recommendations have been shared, in order to make the existing cooperation even wider and more effective. Furthermore, since each of the V4 countries has other relations, this cooperation shall be open for other countries to join for certain projects. This would make the regional cooperation even wider, and would address the NATO's and EU's capability gaps even more directly.

First of all, the V4 countries shall improve and develop the collaboration on the field of exchanging information, sharing experience, joint training and education. This would build trust among the troops, and might make the participants equal, irrespectively of being uneven partners,⁶ the capacity and defence industry of which differs significantly. This shall be taken into account while addressing undercapacity and overcapacity issues and improving competitiveness of defence companies.⁷

Regarding joint training and education, among others, a tighter collaboration between the defence academies would be of high value and could be done within a reasonable period of time and without significant funds or investments. In the long run, a multinational training centre for helicopter pilots, and even a common V4 military academy may be established.

In order to strengthen the position of V4 within the NATO and EU military structures, joint standpoints on the distribution of staff positions should be established through a tight political cooperation.

Additionally, legal measures have to be adopted and implemented, in order to establish the solid ground for the cooperation by outlining the principles, guidelines, and structure thereof. The participating governments have to sign an agreement on long-term cooperation, which would be binding for all countries, irrespectively of the future changes of government. In order to make it more efficient, the national background thereof has to be established as well, the main aims regarding defence cooperation have to be agreed within the national politics, and a fixed long-term defence budget shall be accepted by the national parliaments.

Among the joint projects referred to above, many ideas have been drawn up by experts, for instance the establishment of The V4 chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) defence battalion, the development of the regional cyber security cooperation, and joint V4 air policing.⁸

Beyond courtesy of V4 summits

Although the authorities of the Visegrad Group relatively frequently occur together on the specific occasions, it might be questioned whether the declarations result in well coordinated action of all four countries. It is possible that each of them will seek for its own benefits, realising

that the partners' interests would be by definition of contradictory nature. In this context, the future of the Visegrad cooperation could either confirm or deny the timeliness of the international realism.

The key factors determining the future of the V4 might be related to the political willingness followed by the decisive actions in many areas, for example, within energy policy, transport and infrastructure, and defence, that could bring economic development as well as foster closer economic and social ties.

There are many reasons why the V4 cooperation could have great future, despite the existing challenges and frequently occurring differences. It is in the best interest of

all four countries to realize that more can be achieved for the region and, thus, for the for each country separately, if a tight collaboration is launched. The resources, the invested money, time and effort, together with the gained and exchanged experience might be used in a much smarter and more economical way on all fields mentioned above due to synergy effect. Thus, the Visegrad Group could achieve more by planning long-term, joint actions to mutual benefit, particularly in the strategic areas. Considering the global or the EU arena, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia could be more visible and might have greater influence by speaking with one voice showing the Central and Eastern European region as unified, although in diversity.

Annotations

¹For more detailed information on history of the V4 countries, see the Republic of Poland. Senate RP, Information on Visegrad Group (June 2012). Available at www.senat.gov.pl/download/gfx/senat/pl/.../102/.../inf_wyszegrad.pdf (accessed 18 October 2014).

²Visegrad Group, Visegrad Declaration 1991, <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-2> (accessed 18 October 2014).

³See Eurostat, Net imports of primary energy 2002–2012. Available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/main/home> (accessed 18 October 2014).

⁴For a detailed study, see Panorama on global security environment 2013, eds. M. Majer, R. Ondrejcsák (Bratislava: CENAA, 2013), <http://cenaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Panorama-2013-obsah-a-abstrakty.pdf> (accessed 18 October 2014).

⁵DAV4 II expert group report on visegrad defence collaboration. From battlegroup to permanent structures, ed. M. Šuplata (Bratislava: CEPI, 2013), 3, http://www.cepolicy.org/sites/cepolicy.org/files/attachments/dav4_2013_web.pdf (accessed 18 October 2014).

⁶Due to the differences between the V4 regarding size, economic resources, equipment, capabilities, etc., it is more difficult to build cooperation in the field of defence without generating dependencies and inequalities. Cf. Panorama on global security, 11–13.

⁷Cf. Towards a smarter V4: How to improve defence collaboration among the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. DAV4 Expert Group Report, ed. T. Valášek (Bratislava: SAC, 2012), https://www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=10484 (accessed 18 October 2014).

⁸For a detailed study, see Towards a smarter V4



Europejska Akademia Dyplomacji

ul. Oleandrów 6
00-629 Warszawa

tel. (+48 22) 205 06 18
faks: (+48 22) 205 06 35
e-mail: academy@diplomats.pl

www.diplomats.pl

Strategic Partners

European Academy of Diplomacy
Antall József Knowledge Centre
Prague Diplomatic Academy
Slovak Atlantic Commission

