

Neither beautiful nor ugly, but functional: a pragmatic view on the Visegrad Group

Tomáš Strážay

Abstract: *The Visegrad Four (V4) entered the third decennium of its existence as the most efficient regional cooperation in Central Europe and one of the most viable regional groupings in the entire European Union. The article suggests to hold a realistic perception of the V4 and avoid both exaggerated expectations and over criticism. It is divided in two main parts. While the first part evaluates issues connected with the functioning of the V4, especially institutional background and size of the Group, the second part focuses mostly on thematic priorities of strategic importance. The main aim is to support the hypothesis that the Visegrad Group is far from an existential crisis and has a significant potential for further development.*

Introduction

The Visegrad Four entered the third decennium of its existence as the most efficient regional cooperation in Central Europe and one of the most viable regional groupings in the entire European Union. For smaller countries like Slovakia or the Czech Republic the Visegrad Group represents an important instrument for pursuing their own national interests and agenda on the EU level. It is therefore natural that they maintain the V4 as an important foreign and European policy priority. Though verbalized discrepancies in the V4 countries positions towards the crisis in Ukraine made recently several political analysts and journalists draw the prospects

of Visegrad cooperation in dark colors¹, the Visegrad Group as such has maintained united and pro-active approach towards its eastern neighbor, which is also embodied in V4 declarations². Nevertheless, the above mentioned discrepancies raised questions about the prospects for the Visegrad cooperation, the relevance of its institutional background and adequacy of strategic priorities.

An informally institutionalized initiative

The V4 should by no means be considered as a coherent block of countries that would always speak in one voice. On the contrary, the V4 is a weakly institutionalized regional cooperation, based primarily on the willingness of participating countries to cooperate. The institutional background plays an important role while assessing the possibilities and aims of the Visegrad cooperation, so it deserves a closer look. The Visegrad cooperation has always been a politically driven initiative and is therefore underpinned by the willingness of all involved stakeholders to cooperate.³ There exist just a few framing documents on which the V4 is based on — three general declarations, two sets of guidelines plus one supplement to these guidelines.

The first declaration establishing the Visegrad Group was signed by the representatives of the “Visegrad Three” (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland) in 1991 in Visegrad, Hungary. This declaration set up basic goals of this regional initiative and created the basis for further development of joint activities, including “the full involvement in the European economic and political system.”⁴ After the revitalization of the cooperation in 1998, the prime ministers of the V4 countries agreed on the Contents of Visegrad cooperation, which were approved in Bratislava in 1999. The Contents included substantive elements of the cooperation in eight areas, including foreign affairs, internal affairs, education, culture, science, environment, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation. Another important element of the Contents was the description of the structure of the Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation, as well as the involvement of other stakeholders, including parliaments and civil society organizations.⁵ The role of the presidency of the Visegrad Group was defined in the annex to the Contents.⁶ The rotating presidency was supposed to intensify the cooperation and concentrate it on a few priority areas.

Main areas of cooperation in the post-accession period were then identified in the so-called Kroměříž Declaration (2004) and attached Guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad co-operation (2004).⁷ The latter also described more precisely the mechanisms of cooperation while mentioning specific role of meetings of presidents of V4 countries and cooperation of parliaments. The last declaration was adopted in Bratislava on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group and besides

evaluating previous achievements it concentrates on the future commitments in the EU and broader trans-Atlantic space.⁸

In comparison to other regional groupings in the EU, such as BENELUX or Nordic cooperation, the V4 is characterized by the weak level of institutionalization. In fact, the only standing institution in the V4 framework is the International Visegrad Fund⁹. Though low level of institutionalization has several undeniable advantages, including higher flexibility and possibility to develop coalitions with other countries, it also has disadvantages in terms of the lack of a single coordinating body or purely informal character of adopted decisions.

There is a consensus in the Visegrad Group not to institutionalize it beyond the level of the International Visegrad Fund. It can be, however, argued that the tradition of regular political meetings on the level of presidents, prime ministers and experts provided the basis for the development of informal institutionalized practices. The same can be said about the V4 presidency as such. This specific *modus operandi* makes the Visegrad Group an informally institutionalized initiative. Also, this institutional format enables the V4 countries to maintain different positions in some areas and concentrate solely on the issues of joint interest. Since the V4 countries are on different circles of European integration — Slovakia being the most integrated one due to its membership in the Eurozone — rigidly institutionalized initiative would certainly cause problems in the coordination of positions. Nevertheless, the steadily increasing budget of the IVF and support from the V4 governments, together with growing number of grants and scholarships — also from non-Visegrad countries — prove that the importance of the IVF for the V4 is irreplaceable. In other words, also an informally institutionalized initiative like the V4 needs a standing institution with hierarchical bureaucratic structure and annual budget.

To sum up, the way to a closer coordination within the V4 may be achieved by strengthening existing and creating new instruments of cooperation rather than by introducing new institutions. An emphasis is given on regular communication among political leaders, representatives of state administration or experts. This type of cooperation can also be regarded as an institutionalized form, although of a more informal nature.

The question of further expansion

Besides internal cohesion of the V4, its potential to address other partners is of the high importance, especially while taking into consideration the changes in the voting rules in the European Council that are related to the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty.

Though there exist a consensus among the Visegrad countries not to enlarge the V4, suggestions to expand the Group appear regularly on the table. One of the most recent suggestions came from the former Hungarian Foreign Minister Tibor Navracsics who suggested to invite Croatia and Slovenia to the V4¹⁰. Slovenia was also mentioned several times by the Czech President (and former Prime Minister) Miloš Zeman¹¹, as well as by the former Hungarian Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány who suggested to expand the Visegrad Group of Austria and Slovenia already in 2004¹². Similar proposals appeared in the late nineties, while the most frequently mentioned candidates for “membership” were exactly Austria and Slovenia. The former Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski even came with an initiative to invite Ukraine.¹³ The question, however, remains whether the expansion of the V4 would be profitable for the founding “members” and whether it will bring expected results.

The extension of the Visegrad Group would perhaps require changes in its modus operandi and would make it less efficient as regards the adoption of joint decisions and declarations. Such a decision would possibly also limit the number of areas where the participating countries could cooperate and reach a consensus. The more appropriate approach that satisfy both the needs of the Visegrad partners and desires of countries outside the Group seems to be the V4+ format. The V4+ mechanism enables countries outside V4 ‘to associate’ to V4 for a certain period of time and cooperate intensively in fields interesting for both the V4 countries and countries outside the group. This is a format which serves for better communication with countries and groupings of countries outside V4. Cooperation within this mechanism is variable, for instance the focus can be on economic issues or research, but its objective may also be the EU accession agenda as is the case of the Western Balkan countries. It depends just on the needs of the external partners and interest of V4 countries to accept such offers for cooperation, so the space for cooperation is very extensive.

The V4+ format already includes a wide variety of partners. Though most of them come from the EU (Nordic countries, BENELUX countries, Baltic states, Austria, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania etc.) or other European countries (Western Balkans, Eastern Partnership), the participation of non-European countries in joint initiatives is also unexceptional. Japan, for instance, has already become a traditional partner of the V4, while some other are also looking for possibilities to develop an enhanced cooperation with the V4 (one of the most recent examples is the Republic of Korea). The areas of cooperation include sectorial priorities, such as transport, energy, defense etc., but also know how transfer from transformation and integration processes. An important task, however, is to maintain an adequate balance between the internal cohesion of the Visegrad Group and cooperation with an increasing number of non-V4 partners.

As already mentioned before, for individual V4 countries — including Slovakia and the Czech Republic — the V4 represents an important instrument for pursuing their national interests. The V4 also serves as the basis — or as the core — for broader regional initiatives in which other EU members take part. The most recent examples include negotiations on the climate and energy package or adoption of the financial perspective for 2014–2020. In both cases the V4 countries managed to serve as the basis for broader coalitions of like-minded countries. The coalition-building potential will be even more important in the years to come. The change in the voting procedure in the EU Council that is connected with the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty forces the V4 countries to look for coalition partners in order to pursue their joint agenda on the EU level.¹⁴ The V4+ instrument can therefore become an even more important tool for enhanced cooperation with the V4 and other like-minded countries and basis for either ad-hoc or even long-term coalitions in the EU.¹⁵

Thematic priorities

An appropriate selection of common goals and aims turned out to be a crucial precondition for a successful functioning of the V4. The European Union offers Visegrad countries an important instrument to advocate their own as well as regional priorities or policies. Strengthening coordination mechanisms within the framework of the V4 formula on the European level is a fact, although the V4 countries sometimes do not achieve general agreement in some areas. This is also the reason why the V4 became a recognized ‘trade mark’ in Brussels and why the Visegrad Group is not only regarded as a functional initiative having solely regional impact, but as an efficient regional platform that has an influence on the decision-making on the EU level, too. In light of the above it is not surprising that the challenges the V4 faces now, as well as its most important goals are to a large degree inter-connected with EU policies. Joint action of the V4 countries has been noticeable, for example, in the context of negotiations on the EU financial perspective for 2014–2020 and in their support of cohesion policy. Several achievements have been made in the area of sectorial cooperation, especially in the field of energy and development of interconnectors on the North-South axis, as well as in the case of the climate and energy package. Transport and transport infrastructure are also becoming strategic priorities with the impact on the entire EU, though concrete results in this field are not so visible yet. The area of security and defense is also becoming increasingly important, especially in the connection with the ongoing crisis in Eastern Ukraine, with an emphasis put on the creation of the V4 EU battle group in the EU in 2016. The V4 territorial priorities — EU Eastern Neighborhood and the Western

Balkans — remain constant, though the V4 (and EU) backed concept of the Eastern Partnership is overcoming trying times due to the crisis in Eastern Ukraine. In both dimensions — Eastern and South-East — the International Visegrad Fund plays an unreplaceable role through introducing new and revitalizing already existing grant programs, which are becoming increasingly co-financed by donors from third countries (the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, and Korea can serve as examples).

One of the biggest challenges the V4 faces is connected with the possibility to transfer best practices to the neighboring regions of Eastern and South-eastern Europe, as well as to provide them with adequate political support. This includes going forward in cooperation with Eastern neighbors within the Eastern Partnership initiative, with specific focus of Ukraine. The main goal is approach the Eastern neighbors closer to EU standards, on political, economic, and societal levels. Assistance in the implementation of necessary reforms should also become integral part of this agenda.

As regards the Western Balkans, the challenge is twofold. On the one hand, the V4 should convince the Western Balkan countries to continue reform processes that will guarantee their EU membership in the future, while on the other hand the V4 should also strengthen efforts in convincing other EU members to guarantee the open door policy for all those countries who would meet membership criteria. Taking into consideration the statement of the president of the commission Jean Claude-Juncker that the EU needs a break in the enlargement process¹⁶, this task is particularly important. However, the V4 countries should not only 'give a lecture' to the Western Balkan countries, but also provide them with concrete information about problematic issues the V4 countries faced on the way to the EU accession so that they can avoid these mistakes.

While taking into account solely economic factors, one has to admit that in case of Slovakia the V4 plays an irreplaceable role. According to the Slovak Statistical Office, Slovakia's bilateral trade with the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland reached more than 24 percent of its total trade in 2013.¹⁷ For comparison, the trade with Germany amounted only to 19 percent, while all three Visegrad countries are more significant trading partners than neighboring Austria. Though the figures were slightly different for the Czech Republic (almost 16.4 percent of the total trade in 2012), the trade with V4 countries has been steadily increasing. The share of V4 countries as trade partners is also increasing in the case of the biggest V4 economy — Poland. The former Polish foreign minister Radosław Sikorski mentioned a few interesting facts about the V4 in his public presentation in Budapest in 2012: the combined GDP of the Visegrad countries tripled in comparison with the mid-nineties and already exceeds the GDP of Turkey. If the V4 was one country in would occupy the 15th position among economic powers in the world (while considering purchasing power parity). Interestingly sounds a finding that the trade between Germany and the V4 countries already exceeds the trade of Europe's largest economy with France.¹⁸

Though these statements create a perception that the Visegrad Group is a coherent block rather than coalition of like-minded countries, concrete figures prove that Visegrad cooperation is obtaining economic significance, too.

The cooperation in energy is another huge theme touching upon all of the V4 countries and having impact on the whole EU. The natural gas crisis from the beginning of 2009, when the Czech Republic and other Visegrad partners helped Slovakia to tackle its gas shortage after Russia cut the flow of gas proved the need for better cooperation in this field. Since all of the V4 countries are — though to a different extent — dependent on foreign energy resources, the coordination of their positions in the field of energy security can be considered as a natural step. The establishment of regular meetings on sectorial level on issues related to energy security shows an increasing willingness for further coordination among the Visegrad partners, with the aim to diversify the suppliers and routes. The building of energy interconnectors on the North-South axis, which also includes Slovak-Polish, Czech-Polish and Slovak-Hungarian interconnections, has also become one of the priorities for the entire EU. The plan to create a regional gas market in the V4 area can also be considered as a step on the way to the single energy market in the EU. The crisis in Ukraine brought the V4 countries another challenge — the issue of the reverse gas flow. All three V4 countries having direct borders with Ukraine responded adequately to this challenge, though Hungary decided to interrupt temporarily the reverse flow in the autumn of 2014.

Despite the fact that all four V4 countries have different energy mixes, they succeeded to coordinate their approach towards the newest climate-energy package. Not only this — they also managed to achieve the support of other like-minded countries (mostly among the “new” members states and influenced significantly the debate on this issue on the EU level. It is also worth to mention that the V4 countries share similar positions regarding the use of nuclear energy. Though Poland is the only V4 country without any nuclear reactor on its territory, it is planning to build one in the foreseeable future. Other three remaining V4 countries are planning to extend already existing power plants by building new reactors.

Cooperation in the area of security and defense becomes an important priority for the V4. Though past initiatives in this field — e.g. the joint modernization of Soviet helicopters — have not been very successful, prospects for future cooperation are rather promising. This is true especially while taking into account the new security challenges that are connected with the escalation of the crisis in Eastern Ukraine and raise of the new security threats in the MENA region. The most important initiative is the establishment of the EU V4 Battle Group that should be put into operation in 2016 and function under the Polish leadership. Until recently the V4 countries concentrated mostly on austerity measures while the issue of hard security was rather neglected by them, with the exception of Poland. Changing security environment,

however, seems to have an influence on their perception of security as such and there is at least a declared political will of the representatives of the Czech, Hungarian and Slovak governments to increase their defense budgets in the foreseeable future.

Though there is a systematic effort to bring Visegrad closer to citizens, the V4 remains to be predominantly political project, whose attractiveness in the population is to a large extent limited. Another big challenge is therefore related to the possibilities of spreading the Visegrad idea among the populations of the V4 countries. In this regard, the role of the IVF is of the high importance.

All the above mentioned initiatives have been implemented for a longer time and still remain to be both challenges and opportunities for the future. Though each of the V4 presidencies can pursue new agenda, similarly important is the maintenance of the thematic continuity with previous presidencies. The current Slovak V4 presidency seems to be aware of this need, which is also reflected in the Presidency program for the years 2014–2015¹⁹.

Concluding remarks

After the accession of the V4 countries to the EU there appeared skeptical voices questioning the future of the V4. The criticism of the Visegrad Group was particularly connected with the excessive expectations concerning the possibilities of this regional initiative. Nevertheless, the pragmatic interests of the V4 countries prevailed and the V4 proved its *raison d'être* also in the post-accession period.²⁰ One of the important lessons learned is that if the expectations of the cooperation implemented in the V4 format were realistic and if they were generated against the background of the current basis of institutions and agreements, more than twenty years of V4 existence could be connected with several important successes. The most significant success of all was their successful integration of all four countries in NATO and the EU, but new successful initiatives followed soon after 2004.

Visegrad cooperation is primarily a very pragmatic form of cooperation, serving the fulfillment of common goals of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The reevaluation of the importance of the V4 has the same negative effect as its underestimation. Visegrad cooperation never performed as a single block, and there also exist a whole list of areas where the Visegrad countries not spoken with one voice. Differences in positions of individual V4 countries regarding the crisis in Ukraine and application of sanctions against Russia should therefore be perceived in this context — in fact it is nothing exceptional.²¹ Poland's perception of security risks in its Eastern neighborhood seems to be more sensitive than in the case of other V4 countries, also due to different historical experience. Other V4 countries

should perhaps show more solidarity with Warsaw, though the V4 declarations on the situation in Ukraine show that on the V4 level the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia share the same positions with Poland.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the crisis in Ukraine will have an impact on many aspects of the Visegrad cooperation, including the change in the perception of security or recalibration of the concept of the Eastern Partnership and Eastern policy as a whole. The question of the coordination of positions on strategic issues should therefore remain a top priority for the current Slovak and upcoming Czech V4 Presidency. All in all, the Visegrad cooperation is not at the stage of an existential crisis. On the contrary, the developments in Eastern Ukraine (and Crimea) can serve as impetus for a useful debate on the quality of cooperation in the V4 format.

Notes and References

- ¹ See, for example, Lucas, Edward 'Grappling with irrelevance,' 30 June 2014. Available at: <http://www.cepolicy.org/publications/grappling-irrelevance-v4-after-its-split-ukraine> (Accessed on 30 December 2014) or Ehl, Martin (2014) 'Will the Visegrad Four survive Ukraine?', *Transitions online*, 17 June. Available online: <http://www.tol.org/client/article/24346-will-the-visegrad-four-survive-ukraine.html> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ² See 'The Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group Foreign Ministers on Ukraine', 31 October 2014. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/the-joint-statement-of> (Accessed on 30 December 2014) and 'Joint Statement of the Visegrad Group and Ukraine', 16 December 2014. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2014/joint-statement-of-the-141217> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ³ See also Strážay, Tomáš (2011) 'Visegrad – Arrival, Survival, Revival', in *Two Decades of Visegrad Cooperation - Selected V4 Bibliography*, pp. 14–38. Bratislava: International Visegrad Fund.
- ⁴ 'Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration', 1991. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ⁵ 'Contents of Visegrad cooperation', 1999. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ⁶ 'Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation', 2002. Available at: www.visegradgroup.eu (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ⁷ 'Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the Cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union', 12 May 2004. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1> (Accessed on 30 December 2014), 'Guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad co-operation', 12 May 2004. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).

- ⁸ ‘The Bratislava Declaration of the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group’, 15 February 2011. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/the-bratislava> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ⁹ The International Visegrad Fund was established in on June 9, 2000 and is based in Bratislava. The budget of the Fund (EUR 8 million since 2014) consists of equal contributions from the governments of the V4 countries. The Fund provides support through grant programs, scholarship schemes and artist residencies. Among the recipients of the Fund’s support are mainly non-governmental organizations, municipalities and local governments, private companies, schools and universities and individual students and artists. For more details see www.visegradfund.org.
- ¹⁰ See, for instance, ‘Foreign policy unchanged after ministry expansion’, *Good News on Hungary – Newsletter of the Embassy of Hungary in Finland*, 29 August 2014. Available at: http://www.mfa.gov.hu/NR/rdonlyres/77D7D0A7-ED14-4A3A-9943-90B81F83FCC9/0/h%C3%ADrlev%C3%A9l_140829.pdf (Accessed on 2 March 2015).
- ¹¹ See, for instance, ‘Zeman navrhuje visegrádsku pätku’, *spravy.pravda.sk*, 4 April 2013. Available at: <http://spravy.pravda.sk/svet/clanok/276485-zeman-navrhuje-visegradsku-paetku/> (Accessed on 2 March 2015).
- ¹² ‘Rakúsko podporí návrh rozšírenia V4 o Rakúsko a Slovinsko’, *sme.sk*, 11 October 2004. Available at: <http://www.sme.sk/c/1782875/rakusko-podpori-navrh-rozsirenia-v4-o-rakusko-a-slovensko.html> (Accessed on 2 March 2015).
- ¹³ See, for example, Lukáč, Pavol (2001) ‘Má Slovinsko rozšíriť rady Visegrádu? *Eurasijský expres* 4. Available at: http://euroasia.euweb.cz/4-2001_ba_lukac.htm (Accessed on 2 March 2015).
- ¹⁴ Until recently the V4 countries have been guaranteed the same number of votes as France and Germany together.
- ¹⁵ See also Walsch, Christopher (2014) ‘Visegrad Four in the European Union. An efficient regional cooperation scheme?’ *International Issues and Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 3–4.
- ¹⁶ ‘Juncker to halt enlargement as EU Commission head’, *EUbusiness*, 15 July 2014. Available at: <http://www.eubusiness.com/news-eu/politics-juncker.x29> (Accessed on 26 February 2015).
- ¹⁷ Slovenský štatistický úrad (2014) ‘Definitívne údaje zahraničného obchodu v roku 2013’. Available at: <http://slovak.statistics.sk> (Accessed on 30 December 2014),
Český štatistický úrad (2014) ‘Databáze zahraničného obchodu’. Available at: <http://apl.czso.cz/plll/stazol/STAZO.STAZO> (Accessed on 30 December 2014),
Ministerstwo Gospodarki (2014) ‘Ocena sytuacji w handlu zagranicznym w 2013 roku’. Available at: <http://www.mg.gov.pl/files/upload/8437/Ocena%20HZ%20za%202013.pdf> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ¹⁸ Sikorski, Radosław (2012) ‘The Visegrad Group – Building the Brand’. Available at: <http://www.mfa.gov.pl/resource/c417f00d-b09e-42a9-8db9-d2654a535087:JCR> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ¹⁹ ‘Dynamic Visegrad for Europe and Beyond—Program of the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group (July 2014–June 2015)’. Available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20142015-slovak> (Accessed on 30 December 2014).
- ²⁰ See, for example, Fawn, Rick (2014) ‘Visegrad’s Place in the EU since Accession in 2004: “Western” Perceptions’, *International Issues and Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs* 1–2.
- ²¹ The cancellation of the summit of V4 prime ministers in Hungary in 2002 can be mentioned as an example from the last decenium. The Slovak and Czech prime ministers, followed by their Polish counterpart, rejected to take

part in the summit organized by the Hungarian prime minister Victor Orbán. The boycott of the summit was a reaction to Orbán's statements on the Beneš Decrees and their incompatibility with the law of the European union. See Irmanová, Eva, Kopeček, Michal, Kunštát, Miroslav, Vykoukal, Jiří (2003) 'Visegrád mezi minulostí a budoucností', in Jiří Vykoukal (ed.) *Visegrád. Možnosti a meze středoevropské spolupráce*, pp. 351–359. Praha: Dokořán.