

30 years of
Cooperation:
Aims and Successes of
the Visegrad Group.

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March 2021

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Abstract: *The foundation of the Visegrad Group can be considered as a unique effort toward a multilateral and subregional partnership in Central and Eastern Europe, aimed at creating a framework discussing and representing common interests of its member states both on external and regional platforms. This current study seeks to outline the most outstanding achievements of the V4 from a 30-year perspective, like its unique advocacy, moreover its “informal and de-institutionalized method of cooperation”¹ on the political platform, but also on the economic and cultural.²*

In the first half of its history, the Visegrad Countries' cooperation focused on accession into Euro-Atlantic structures. An objection to the original proposed strategic goals resulted resettling the key areas of the V4 cooperation, as the new Declaration stipulates: developing cooperation within the V4 and the EU, toward the NATO and other integrational organizations and partners. By accessing to the Schengen zone, the V4 achieved advanced integration within the EU, parallelly, by launching the International Visegrad Fund, the V4 aspired to strengthening ties within the area. Security threat, caused by the migration crisis in 2015, provided an opportunity for the Visegrad Cooperation to jointly pronounce a distinctive stance of its interests. However, during the COVID-19, the V4 countries seek to adopt a policy response at Member State level, instead of developing a common solution of the issue.

Early years – „Striving for European Integration”

Common goals, different approaches

As the Visegrad Declaration (1991) stipulates, **the primary aim of the Visegrad Group was facilitating the integration of its member states into Euro-Atlantic structures (European Union and NATO)³ and expand economic, infrastructural and social cooperation within the region.⁴**

At this stage, the main objective of the Visegrad Cooperation was common („return to Europe”), however, **the cohesion between the member states wasn’t developed enough to represent a consistent group-level argumentation.^a Besides, the advantages of the V4 formation were interpreted differently among member states:** Poland was seeking to use it as “the instrument of balancing between Russia and Germany” while Slovakia aspired to reduce its political isolation, and the overall dynamics of the Group were significantly determined by competition of its member states for acquiring leadership.⁵

Early example of **the Visegrad Group’s attendance on the international platform as a „support instrument”⁶** appeared in its contribution in order to release Slovakia from its political isolation^b between 1994-1998⁷. Diplomatic support of **the Visegrad Group facilitated a bridge for Slovakia to Euro-Atlantic institutions**, at the same time contributed to shape favorable perception of the V4 format itself. Advocacy of regional solidarity and willingness toward mutual cooperation suggested a positive

^a In years between 1992 and 1999 the relationship among member countries and their approach to the Visegrad Cooperation was far from consistent. Although Poland and Hungary were committed to supporting the formation, the other two member countries aspired to emphasize their sovereignty. The Czech Prime minister Vaclav Klaus constantly raised his concerns over the Visegrad cooperation: „the Czech Republic would be able to join the European Community on its own”. (VINCENT, J. E: „The Visegrad Countries of Central Europe - Integration or Isolation.” In: Minnesota Journal of International Law, 89, 2019., 9. 241. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/217210371.pdf> (10.03.2021)

He also believed, that a well-prepared state could more easily join Euro-Atlantic organizations on its own than if it tried to cooperate with other candidate states. Besides, the Visegrad member countries were open to bilateral agreements, in order to achieve the memberships under more favorable conditions and a shorter timeframe. PERNAL, Marek: „A Visegrádi csoport és az európai integráció.” In: Európai Utas, 2001/4., <https://www.europaiutas.hu/europaiutas/20014/7.htm> (08.03.2021)

^b Slovakia was excluded from the candidacy of both membership negotiations (was not invited to join NATO in 1999, and left out from accession talks with the EU for not satisfying the Copenhagen political conditions. NIC, M., SLOBODNIK, M, SIMECKA, M: „Slovakia in the EU: An Unexpected Success Story?” In: DGAP Analyse. https://dgap.org/system/files/article_pdfs/2014_06_dgapanalyse_slovakia_www_final.pdf (02.03.2021)

image of the Visegrad Group toward the EU right before the start of accession negotiations. The aforementioned example of the V4's engagement toward group solidarity has won the sympathy of individual countries,^c which have expressed their intention to join the Visegrad Group.⁸ The leaders of the Visegrad Group instead of expanding the existing four-country format, launched the Visegrad Plus (V4+), a platform for pursuing common foreign policy contributing to the expansion the Visegrad Group's influence.

The most indubitable achievement at the first half of the V4 format's history is the implementation of NATO accession (Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland joined NATO in 1999, Slovakia joined in 2004) and the EU accession in 2004 by its „big-bang enlargement”. The **V4's dual membership of the EU and NATO has enhanced the position of these countries in Europe and in the international arena as well,**⁹ however, contribution of the V4 format itself toward joining to Euro-Atlantic structures was limited as each country focused on their own efforts in accomplishing NATO/EU accession^{10, d}

Pre-accession commitments

In the early 90's, in accordance with the directions of their desired integrations, the V4s established two commitments (an economic and a security related cooperation) enhancing the prospects of gaining membership in Western institutions. To facilitate security cooperation and promote consultation and cooperation on military matters within the Group, member states signed bilateral military cooperation agreements^e which virtually created a multilateral platform to strengthen the dialogue between member states on defence matters.^f

^c Lithuania, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria and Croatia expressed their to join the V4 format. „Report of the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2012-June 2013.”, Warsaw, 2013., p. 9 <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/download.php?docID=240> (08.03.2021)

^d The main reason of loosening the ties between V4 countries at this time was the concern that building regional structures could slow down the pace of accession: Czech Prime Minister Václav Klaus strongly advocated bilateral negotiations, supposing that „the Czech Republic would be able to join the European Community on its own”.

^eIn 1991 three bilateral military agreements were completed between Czechoslovakia and Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Poland, and Hungary and Poland. LATAWSKI, Paul: „The Visegrad Group: Aims and evolution.” In: Whitehall Papers. Volume 28, 1994 - Issue 1. p.18. (07.03.2021).

^f These agreements supported consultation on matters of military doctrine, training, education and in the democratisation of the armed forces, they also widened areas of cooperation (provision of spare parts for military equipment and the possible joint development, production and procurement of defence

As areas of security collaboration between the Visegrad member states were limited through political obstacles, this attempt was determined to remain at level of formal security commitments.¹¹ However, in terms of economic cooperation, the Visegrad Group was able to create the CEFTA, which remained important for EU membership candidate countries even after the accession of the V4 countries to the EU.

The Central European Free Trading Agreement¹² (signed in 1992 by the V4, entered into force in 1994) might be considered as **a transitional organization¹³ in terms of economic cooperation** between countries aiming to facilitate their process of joining the European Union. By establishment of CEFTA, the V4s agreed on a three-step elimination of interregional customs duties,¹⁴ at the same time, they rejected expanding the cooperation toward customs and monetary union emphasizing that **the agreement was never intended to be an alternative to the EU.**¹⁵

From a 30-year perspective, the significance of the CEFTA from the founding countries point of view has decreased, as their membership was ended when accessing the European Union. On the other hand, the CEFTA fulfills its originally designated main role: it prepares its members⁹ to join the European Union by stabilizing their economies and preparing the quality of their export goods in order to meet the EU criteria.¹⁶ From this viewpoint, the CEFTA (as a 'model to follow') is a specific legacy of the V4s, providing widening opportunities for its' current members, the Balkan states, toward their integration to the EU.

Post-enlargement cooperation

Succeeding the accession both to NATO and the EU also meant that the **V4 completed their strategic goal, stipulated in the 1991 Visegrad Declaration.** In order to redefine their relationship to each other and also the priorities and key areas of their cooperation, the V4 adopted a renewed, common new **declaration in 2004^h,**

equipment, sharing of certain training facilities). LATAWSKI, Paul: „The Visegrad Group: Aims and evolution.” In: Whitehall Papers. Volume 28, 1994 - Issue 1. p.18. (07.03.2021).

⁹ In regard to the 2004 and 2007 EU enlargement, the opportunity of CEFTA membership was expanded to Balkan countries. 2006 opened a new chapter in the history of the Agreement, as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) representing Kosovo signed an amendment to join the CEFTA. Agreement on Amendment of and Accession to the Central European Free Trade Agreement, <https://cefta.int/legal-documents/#1463498231136-8f9d234f-15f9> (02.03.2021)

^h referred as „Visegrad Declaration 2004” or „Kroměříž Declaration”

expressing their intention to further cooperation toward enhanced representation of common goals.¹⁷ **The 2004 Visegrad Declaration identifies four key areas: developing cooperation within the V4 and the EU, toward NATO and other integrational organizations and partners.** Besides, it describes mechanisms of further cooperation on governmental, presidential and parliament levels between the four countries.¹⁸

Another milestone toward strengthening the cooperation among the V4 countries was the **creation of the only international institution of the Group, the International Visegrad Fund in 2000.** The purpose of IVF is “to promote and finance regional transport and energy infrastructure projects, commission analytical studies, prepare individual investment projects, and harness national, EU and private resources”.¹⁹ The IVF is also responsible for building a common Visegrad identity by funding the Visegrad Summer school, cultural events and scholarships.²⁰

Developing cooperation within the EU

Between 2004 and 2007, at the center of cooperation of the Visegrad Group was deepening the formally accessed EU membership by accelerating internal integration within the EU, guaranteed by Schengen. **The accession to the Schengen zone in 2007 from a V4 perspective was important as another step forward a full-fledged EU membership, resulting in the first and one of the most complete cooperation successes of Visegrad countries.** In this case, member states jointly applied for the Schengen membership,²¹ realizing advantages of collective action and declaring their intention for enhanced cooperation. Difficulties surrounding the accession processⁱ strengthened the V4's internal cohesion (unlike the EU accession process) and motivated to increase their advocacy capacity within the EU. By issuing a joint declaration,²² the V4 effectively argued against possible postponement of their accession to the Schengen area, besides, cooperation with the B3 member states (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) created a new axis (V4+B3) on the issue within the EU.²³

ⁱ The V4 states faced with internal challenges linked to the easing of border regimes, besides, due to technical reasons (problems in launching the SIS2 electronic database) the EU proposed to postpone the previously agreed date of accession. BAUEROVÁ, Helena: „The V4 and European Integration.”, In: Politics in Central Europe, Vol. 14, No. 2., p. 125.)

EU membership – from policy takers to policy shapers

One of the most illustrative examples of **stronger advocacy capacity of the V4 format on the political platform appears through their voting weight at the European Council**, which occurs to be equal to the votes of Germany and France together (58 votes).²⁴ The influence of unified V4 arguments and resolutions in the EU decision-making process appear also in various forms from **supporting candidacy of V4 countries to EU agencies**^j to participation in the EU structures and institutions. As a “force for good changes in the European Union”²⁵, the V4 launched an initiative toward achieving “equitable representation of all EU Member States”.²⁶ The V4’s suggestion for developments in the staffing of the EEAS (European External Action Service)²⁷ established an informal coalition with support by another 11 countries²⁸, thereby contributed and shaped the foundations of the organization and functioning of the EU instrument system itself.

The refugee crisis starting from 2015 generated unprecedented security challenge shared by the whole of Europe, urging fast and coordinated action from the region. The position of the Visegrad Group significantly differed from Brussels’ “open-door” approach: **the V4 jointly articulated its commitment²⁹ to securitize irregular migration and stood against mandatory relocation mechanism³⁰** proposed by the European Commission.³¹ By consistently advocating its position for protecting its interest, the Visegrad Group has become an influential regional “player” in terms of European migration policy. During the Czech Presidency of the Visegrad Group a joint declaration was adopted, containing solution proposals: **support for ‘feasible solidarity’** of EU member states aiming to “preserve the voluntary nature of the EU measures”, also emphasizing **the importance of enhanced protection of the EU's external borders** and support for **protection of the EU external borders** and importance of **proper border management**. Besides, another cornerstone of the V4 common migration policy is the **on-site approach** (meaning that

^j Among others by supporting deployment of EU agencies in the Visegrad countries. The V4s jointly supported the Czech Republic’s candidacy for the deployment of GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System) Supervisory Authority in Prague. GÜBER, K., TÖRŐ, Cs.: „A Visegrádi Négyek (V4) Európai Unió belüli együttműködésének szempontjai és eddigi tapasztalatai.”, In: Külügyi Szemle, 2021.02, p.57., https://kki.hu/assets/upload/Kulugyi_Szemle_2010_02_A_Visegredi_Neegyek_V4_E_.pdf (06.03.2021)

the root causes of migration should be treated right at their source), also **“full implementation of the EU–Turkey deal”** and **“in the spirit of solidarity”, “provide further support to the front-line Member States to the countries of the Balkan migration route and to the Eastern Partnership countries”**.³²

A collective dismissive approach toward Brussels’ migration policy still exists among the Visegrad Countries, however, when it comes to rejecting the New Pact on Migration and Asylum, proposed by the European Commission in 2020, Slovakia seems more willing to compromise on the new draft³³, but still does not openly criticize the countries of the V4. Besides, with the successful repositioning of their migration management, the New Pact on Migration and Asylum might be a tool for strengthening the V4 migration policy shaping role in the EU.³⁴

From the Visegrad Group’s policy-oriented operation mechanism perspective, the security issue caused by the **COVID-19 pandemic might serve as another trigger to strengthen the cooperation among Visegrad member states** (similar to the 2015 migration wave). However, during the three waves of the pandemic, **the V4 countries were less focused on finding common solutions for the challenges of the COVID-19 than strengthening external cooperation within the pandemic agenda.**

The countries of the Visegrad Group confirmed their first cases of COVID-19 almost simultaneously and took similar (but not synchronized) strong and relatively early measures against the spread of the pandemic. In result of strict restrictions, during the first wave of the pandemic, progression of COVID-19 remained linear among V4 countries.³⁵ At the early stage of the second wave of the pandemic, there were different approaches toward restrictive measures among the V4s. The second wave hit the V4 countries hard, as they became one of worst affected in Europe (especially Czechia).³⁶

Another example of **similar but not synchronized action among the V4** is their vaccine procurement approach, as **they all deal with vaccine producers which have not yet been authorized by the European Union**: the Russian and Chinese vaccine are authorized in Hungary and in the Czech Republic, Slovakia ordered Sputnik V, Poland negotiates with China to speed up vaccination of its citizens.

Besides, the V4 as a committed supporter of the EU’s Eastern Partnership Programme, in a joint declaration **agreed on backing the financial support under**

the International Visegrad Fund in the fight against COVID-19, also on launching the East Solidarity Programme for its implementation.³⁷

Conclusions

In the first half of its history, the strategic goal of the Visegrad Countries' cooperation was to join NATO and the European Union. Despite the common ambitions, the cohesion among the V4 was too loose to pursue a strong, unified advocacy capacity during the accession processes. After achieving the Euro-Atlantic integration, the focus of the V4 cooperation has moved to specific policy areas in the EU, stipulated at the 2004 New Visegrad Declaration. In favor of strengthening ties within the V4 area the International Visegrad Fund was launched, aiming to develop the Visegrad identity,³⁸ also for financing regional transport and energy infrastructure projects. The first step of achieving advanced integration within the EU was the accession of the Schengen zone in 2007, implemented as a result of exemplary cooperation among the Visegrad Group. The migration crisis in 2015 gave an opportunity for the Visegrad Cooperation to jointly pronounce a distinctive stance of its interests, however, the other significant security threat, the COVID-19 pandemic did not lead to a similar cooperation between Visegrad Member States.

Looking to the future from a 30-year perspective, **the Visegrad Four may ensure its opportunity to increase its effectiveness by strengthening internal instrumentalization and cooperation,³⁹ acting as a coalition of willing, concentrated on the issues of joint interests.⁴⁰**

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