

Political Cooperation and Disagreements: 30 Years of the V4

Péter Sztás, PhD.

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Abstract: *On 15 February 1991, the President of Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel, the President of Poland, Lech Wałęsa and the Prime Minister of Hungary, József Antall signed the Visegrad Declaration which aimed at fostering regional cooperation between the parties involved. The three Central European countries recognized the similarity of their situation from an economic, geopolitical and military point of view also believing that together they could assert their interests more effectively in the new world order. The “Visegrad Three” association changed to “Visegrad Four” from 1993 after the disintegration of the Czechoslovak federation. This present study aims to examine the way in which this cooperation evolved over the years, and how the parties concerned managed to balance competition and cooperation.*

Keywords: *V4, Visegrad Group, Visegrad cooperation, EU accession, NATO enlargement, Central Europe, Migration.*

The Visegrad Group was initially an interest-based endeavour, but after three decades of cooperation it has managed to become a value-centred one. Prior to the NATO enlargement and EU accession, many tensions were present in the bilateral relations of the V4 countries; however, after 2010 the only important misunderstanding can be seen in the adjudication of the Russian Federation. In the migration crisis of 2015, the Visegrad Group managed to open a debate on European level despite the opposite will of important national and international actors.

After the Collapse of the Bipolar World

Amid the confusion caused by the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the member states of the former Eastern Bloc regained their freedom and sovereignty unexpectedly. The long-awaited possibility of establishing functional democracies on the debris of the socialist ruins were tempting, however the process was not a smooth one for any of the countries concerned. Economic difficulties, skyrocketing unemployment rates, rapidly growing crime and the sudden cessation of the former predictable way of life made it impossible for the population to enjoy and experience the possibilities that the freshly regained freedom provided. Moreover, the rapid political transformation brought to the surface many, decades long repressed but deep-rooted problems as well. Most of the countries were able to handle the new situation sensibly; however, this transitional process culminated in a bloody civil war in the Balkan Peninsula. The unpeaceful disintegration of Yugoslavia demanded tens of thousands of lives and ruined every result of the hard work what many generations had achieved. In this war not simply former allies, but fellow countrymen turned against each other sparing neither God nor men. The possibility of the outbreak of similar conflicts in Central Europe was also present, however, the countries of the region chose the path of cooperation and decided to start building their prosperous future instead. One of the most spectacular forms of cooperation was the establishing of the Visegrad Group.

Political Transformations in CE

In the revolutionary mood of the dawn of the 1990s, the Visegrad countries were all aware of the similarity of their situation from an economic, geopolitical and military point of view.¹ Although none of them were part of the Soviet Union, their membership in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon) and the Warsaw Pact Organisation (WPO) was compulsory. The Comecon was strongly based on the communist ideology, which rejected the concept of the free market's own decision-making capabilities. Thus, this membership defined but also limited their economic opportunities and relationships. These countries' vulnerability and forced loyalty to Moscow in all areas of international politics and economics were unquestionable. The post-transition priorities of the CE countries were very similar as they wanted to carry out a noticeable economic recovery, a smooth democratic transition with rapid Euro-

Atlantic integration. Hungary's situation was special since, due to historical reasons, at that time approximately five million ethnic Hungarians (but non-citizens of Hungary) lived in the neighbouring countries. Thus, these post-transition aims were supplemented by the active caretaking of the ethnic Hungarians living outside the country.² In itself, these intentions contained some self-contradictions, mainly in the eyes of the newly formed Slovak Republic, whose more than one tenth of the total population declared Hungarian ethnicity.³

The Disintegration of Czechoslovakia

The Visegrad Treaty was originally signed by the leaders of the three founding countries, however, because of the disintegration of Czechoslovakia, from 1993 the number of its members rose to four. In the nineties, the Czech and Slovak political relations were at a low point which resulted in the termination of the federal state. Despite their differences the successors managed to separate in a sophisticated manner. This is mainly because the majority of the population did not want the split, it was the outcome of the deal what the nationalist political elite on both sides made.⁴ After 1993 the lives of the former partners were radically different: the Czech Republic developed and prospered while Slovakia fell behind and impoverished. It is important to note that in the relationship of the two newly born countries it was not the nationalistic hostility what prevailed after their farewell, but rather the compulsion to prove the success of self-existence on both sides.

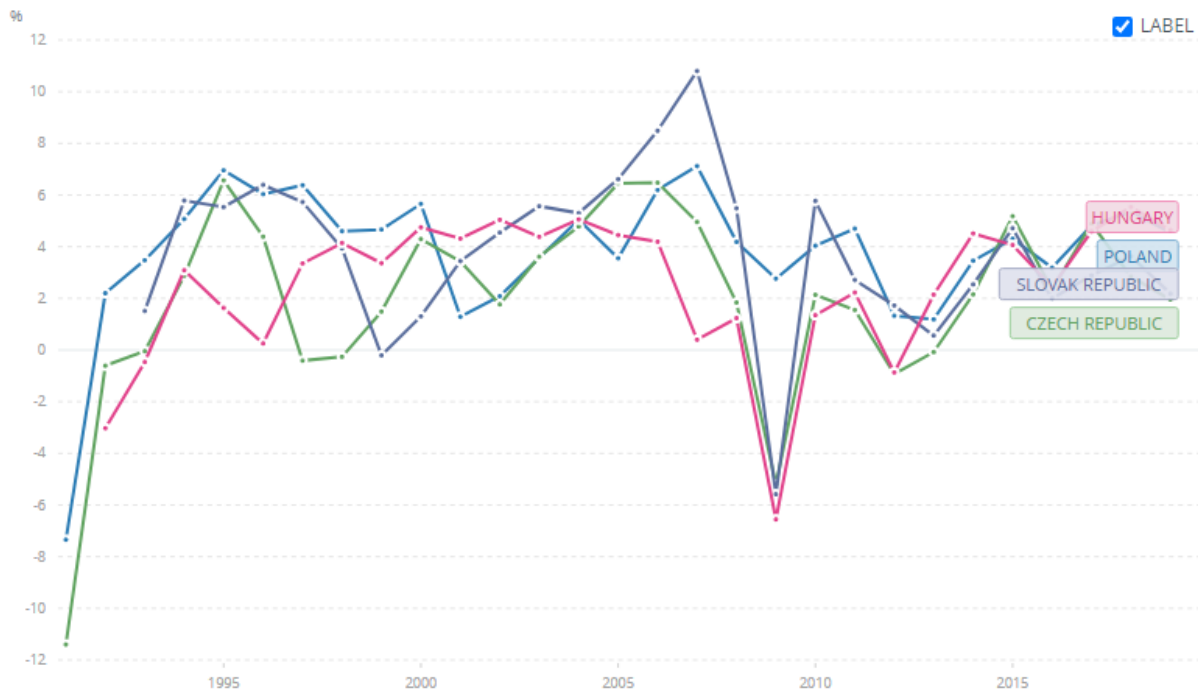
Slovak-Hungarian Disputes in the Nineties

On Visegrad level, the transition from V3 to V4 did not prove to be a smooth one. In the first years of her existence, Slovakia hardly found her place neither in the international community, nor in the Visegrad Group. It was not even clear whether the new state would start her journey on the western or eastern road.⁵ Her behaviour induced relentless conflicts, especially in the relationship with Hungary. In the eye of the freshly born independent country, the concept of the nation state as an achievable aim emerged. To make this a reality, Slovakia implemented a series of anti-minority measures: school principals were discharged because of their nationality, a discriminatory language law was adopted, and the introduction of alternative education was also put on the table in order to abolish the overall well-functioning minority school system. In addition to disagreements over ethnic minorities, a fundamental conflict

between the parties arose on Hungary's decision not to build the Nagymaros dam in the Danube Bend, in the immediate vicinity of the Visegrad Castle. This unilateral step was not left unanswered since Slovakia diverted the Danube and built the so-called C-variant of the hydro power plant. The price of this facility, in terms of both money and environmental damage was enormous. Neuralgic relations were not alleviated by the signing of the Hungarian-Slovak bilateral treaty in Paris in 1995 by the Hungarian Prime Minister Gyula Horn and his Slovak counterpart Vladimír Mečiar. To illustrate how grave the Slovak-Hungarian relations were, Mečiar once raised even the idea of a population change to be implemented between the two countries.⁶ A new chapter in bilateral relations was opened in 1998 when the political elite changed in both countries. In Slovakia, a broad right-wing governing coalition was formed, of which the Party of the Hungarian Coalition also became an irreplaceable pillar. Changes took place in Hungary too; a civil coalition government was elected under the leadership of Viktor Orbán. The transition in Slovakia took place late so she did not get an invitation to join NATO in the first enlargement round. However, all Visegrad countries managed to enter to the EU in 2004, and that year Slovakia became a full member of the NATO as well.

The Road of Poland before the Accession

The most important goal of Poland after the regime change was to become a full member of the NATO at any cost. In this fellowship they saw the guarantee of peace, security and ultimately the sure survival of the Polish state. The nation's other priority was the EU accession. Poland took both obstacles successfully. Moreover, the country's economic performance has been consistently impressive, occasionally even spectacularly standing out in the region. From the chart below it can be seen that even at rock bottom of the crisis in 2009 Poland managed to develop⁷, which was unique not just in the V4, but on a European level as well.



GPD per capita growth (annual %) – Poland, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Hungary. Source: World Bank⁸

As far as bilateral relations are concerned, the country's relationship with Germany and Russia has traditionally been ambiguous. The latter were even aggravated by the Smolensk air disaster in 2010 in which the President of Poland, the entire general staff, the President of the National Bank, all passengers and the whole crew lost their lives.⁹ In connection with the accident conspiracy theories are still ongoing to this day. In terms of V4 relations, Poland was not keen on the Slovak-Russian rapprochement between 1993-1998. By 1997, the Polish-Slovak bilateral relations had sunk to such a level that Warsaw's ambassador to Bratislava did not see the security interests of the two countries as identical.¹⁰ As for Czech-Polish relations a historically neuralgic point in their bilateral relations was a lengthy struggle concerning the Taschen region, which both nations claimed as their own. In the beginning of the 20th century the parties even waged war for this territory. Since the regime change, however, this is no longer a central issue. The countries are allied in every possible field and economically connected by a thousand strands.

Within the framework of the V4, the Polish-Hungarian relations have traditionally been the best. The main reason for this is to be found in the common historical past and in the lack of conflicting interests.

Intra-V4 Relations After in the Last Decade

While the first fifteen years of the Visegrad Cooperation was more like a profit maximiser contention among its participants than a real collaboration, in the last decade a positive change can be observed in the attitude of every member state. Not only the bilateral relationships are exemplary, but in some cases the Visegrad Group has been behaving like a united actor that is able to formulate goals and act jointly to achieve them. This shift in behaviour was the outcome of the recognition that the Central European states on their own are weak even on a regional level and no one is willing to represent their interests, if they are unable to do so themselves. Today the leader of the V4 is unquestionably Poland, which realized that despite of her size and economic performance, on her own is unable to compete with the most powerful states of Europe or influence their behaviour in key issues, of which there are plenty of.

Migration Crisis of 2015

The most cardinal case where the V4 voiced her opinion aloud was the question of unlimited illegal migration what the Visegrad Group firmly rejected and did everything in its power to block, even on the level of the European Union.¹¹ While the European Committee and some Western European leading states intended to bring into effect the “open door” policy and the distribution of both illegal migrants and legal refugees entering the Union based on quotas, the firm resistance of the V4 prevented this from happening. According to the V4, the quota system is in contrary to the EU's four freedoms and the international law. Due to her geographical location the issue affected Hungary the most since hundreds of thousands of people tried to illegally enter the European Union through the Southern border of the country. To prevent this from happening and to fulfil obligations derived from the Schengen Treaty, Hungary unilaterally decided to close the green line by establishing a physical boundary lock throughout the southern border section and protecting it with human force. In the implementation of the effective border patrol the Visegrad partners provided additional police forces to strengthen the Hungarian forces.

Conclusion

The Visegrad Group was born out of the deep recognition that a cohesive community is the epitome of strength. During the thirty years the cooperation had its ups and downs but, with the passage of time, the relationship among its members has gotten

stronger and more extensive. Although there have been several attempts by non-member states to break the unity of the V4, in the beginning of the 2020s it is stronger than ever. If the four countries can set aside their neuralgic bilateral issues in the future focusing on cohesion it may even strengthen the cooperation further.



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