

The Visegrad Four – Group of a political Carpe Diem

Enikő Bagoly

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Abstract: *“The V4 has become a well-known brand – a symbol of a successful initiative for pursuing joint interests and a central element of cooperation in Central Europe.”¹ – stipulated in the 2016 Polish Presidency Program. This current study seeks to outline the evolution of the V4’s image, how it shaped itself from an intellectual idea² to a leading but controversial political brand in the CEE region over the 30 years of its history.*

Keywords: *Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, V4, Visegrad group, Visegrad countries, Visegrad brand, Visegrad message, geo-branding*

How can a group intentionally avoid institutionalized and all-encompassing collaboration and effectively represent itself over three decades at the same time? Over the 30 years, self-determination of the V4 and its image towards the international community has moved in a completely opposite direction: it started as an “eminent candidate aiming to rejoin to Western structures”, however in the past 15 years the V4 became a Euro-Atlantic ally emphasizing the importance of its sovereignty. In context of the EU foreign policy, the V4 acts as an excellent role model for the EaP, however in case of other EU policies, such as migration, the Group appears as the rebellious Cooperation towards EU unity. Areas of consistent image building belong to the fields of soft power, emphasizing the common cultural image and touristic attractiveness of the Visegrad Group countries.

In 1991, after freshly regaining their independence, the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe declared their mutual commitment toward joint (re)integration to the Western political, economic and security structures by signing the

Visegrad Declaration. “Visegrad” – the chosen name of the cooperation, echoed the centuries-old common historical tradition of the founding countries symbolized by the royal convention between Bohemia, Hungary and Poland in 1335.³ In the first half of its history, the Group was tent to form an image identifying itself as a single region with equally developed economies and shared cultural heritage. The catalyst of creating the V4 image was the recognition that Visegrad counties are stronger together and “that together their voice is better heard”⁴ in shaping favourable position during NATO and the EU accession process.

Gaining the original aims of the Visegrad Declaration in 1998 and 2004 resulted in a change in the group’s ambitions and image while their motto “we are stronger together” remained the same. At the first half of its history the political raison d’etre⁵ of the V4 was “return to Europe”, and the motto was used to refer to the effectiveness of joint efforts to assimilate to the western institutions, however following the success of accession it became much more about preserving the V4 countries cultural identityⁱ and strengthening the Group’s advocacy within EU structures.

Early years – “eminent candidates”

The most vivid example of the discourse change in the 30-year history is the brand communication of the V4 that appears in the context of EU migration policy. Contrasting views and suggestions of the V4 in comparison to the mainstream EU proposalsⁱⁱ on the migration issue in some respects turned the V4’s former “eminent candidates” into “EU trouble makers”⁶. Stances of the Visegrad Group on EU migration policy, their sharp and consistent criticism on suggested relocation quotas produced much of the “toxic” image of the Visegrad brand in the EU.⁷

In the second half of its history, the V4 collaboration continuously emphasizes a form of cooperation that focuses on the shared interests of the member states while avoiding institutionalization. However, the intentional flexibility of the Visegrad Cooperation

ⁱ The V4 often emphasizes that „strength of the EU lies in being “united in diversity”, which includes preserving national and cultural identities as well”. In: Panel discussion of the V4 ambassadors at The King’S College London. <https://london.mfa.gov.hu/eng/news/v4-nagykoevetek-panelbeszelgetese-a-londoni-kings-college-egyetemem> (20.05.2021)

ⁱⁱ Statement of Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis stipulates the opposition of V4 to the EU Commission’s New Pact on Migration and Asylum: „We have to stop migration and the quotas and relocation. These rules are not acceptable for us.” In: Reuters, 24.09.2020. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-hungary-idUSKCN26F1T6> (20.05.2021)

significantly determines its brand building possibilities, as it lacks the ability to define a consistent, all-encompassing group-level message. Building a coherent V4 brand and covering all issues can only become successful in particular policy directions and/or on specific topics that are in line with declared overlapping interests of the Group Members.

After the accession – committed dilettantism

The V4 has successfully built its strong image on foreign policy matters, also in the field of the EU- and its internal enlargement policy. The Group's message regarding its own enlargement policy is most clearly stipulated by the Czech Presidency Report describing the concept of the Visegrad Cooperation as a “historically-rooted” brand. The document also highlights the indivisible and incomparable unity of the V4, identifying this character as one of the reasons why the group enlargement cannot be considered as a viable option. However, a stronger Visegrad brand allows more effective cooperation with regional partners and third countries, for which the V4+ formation can provide the most suitable platform. Visegrad countries also have a strong foreign and neighbourhood policy message in connection with EU and NATO enlargement processes, where they interact like a “role model” for the EaP countries promoting their know-how of the European integration experience.⁸

The V4's image building efforts appear most successfully in soft power areas, intending to strengthen their common cultural image and touristic attractiveness. Since 2002, national tourist organizations of Hungary, Poland and Slovakia and the Czech Republic have joined forces to promote tourism of the four V4 states to overseas visitors. They created a brand-building project, called “European Quartet - One Melody”,⁹ with the aim to perform as one destination to attract potential overseas tourists. The 2011-2012 Polish Presidency Program with the motto of “Innovative Visegrad” envisages a specific action plan to enhance the tourist attractiveness of the Visegrad Four. The Program calls for joint coordination of the activities of national tourism headquarters and missions to increase the effectiveness of campaigns in “traditional (Russia, USA, China, Japan) and new prospective destinations (e.g. India, Brazil, the Gulf Countries, Australia, Taiwan)”.¹⁰

During the Hungarian presidency between 2017 and 2018, one of the priority objectives was also continuing to strengthen the V4 tourism brand and to facilitate adaptation to new trends in tourism.¹¹

The only institutionalized form of cooperation between the V4 is International Visegrad Fund, which is also an umbrella organization for cultural image building in the broadest sense. The IVF contribute to the continuous development of the V4 as a key cultural brand in the Central European region by funding scholarships and other educational programs providing financial support to studies on external and internal perception and self-reflective publications, organizing various V4 themed conferences and supporting the development of Visegrád image elements, such as the logo and a flag.

Conclusion

Shared historical roots and cultural traditions provide indisputable strength of the V4 brand, giving a many centuries context for the cooperation. From the '90s, nearly at the first half of its history, the political *raison d'être*¹² of the Visegrad Cooperation can be described with the motto "Return to Europe". The era of gained memberships at the Western structures brought a renewal in the objectives and image of the Group, which became more diversified and - more controversial. After the realization of its initial assimilation efforts, the V4 image much more emphasizes the necessity of preserving its own identity stepping up for its sovereignty within the Euro-Atlantic community.

The brand building efforts appear – partly – in the common V4 foreign policy by joint statements, varied in theme, but always reflective of current events. The development of a unified V4+ formation provides an excellent platform for cooperation with third countries; however, the group's common foreign policy does not cover the full spectrum of foreign policy relations. The V4s have the strongest profile in the field of culture and tourism, where real, constant cooperation has taken place along the agreed directives.

The message of the V4 today is therefore a "Carpe diem" in the political sense, insisting a common but typically ad-hoc cooperation structure of the Member States without a strong institutional commitment.

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¹² CHAPTER 2 T H E VISEGRAD GROUP: AIMS AND EVOLUTION