

BETWEEN COMMON INTERESTS AND NATIONAL EGOTISM

THE ROLE AND POTENTIAL OF THE VISEGRÁD COUNTRIES IN THE EU

Hubert Gehring / Laura Kirchner

Over 20 years ago, Poland, the former Czechoslovakia and Hungary formed the Visegrád Group (today known as the V4). Their goal was to free themselves from the Soviet sphere of power and influence, and to integrate themselves into Western structures. Since that time, the original motives for cooperation have changed and the goals have shifted. As a result, the role of the V4 has increasingly been viewed in a critical light, especially since the entry of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary into the EU in 2004. There are those who believe the four states could act as a community of shared interests within the EU, especially as their vote in the Council of the European Union carries the same weight as that of Germany and France, while other observers question whether it makes sense for them to continue to act as a unified group. The consecutive presidencies of the EU in 2011 held by Hungary and then Poland were therefore regarded with varying expectations.

Indeed, it seems that high expectations of the V4 may well be misplaced. But if they are smart and can show they are capable of acting in a unified way, the Visegrád Group could help broaden the EU agenda in certain clearly defined areas and provide initiatives with the necessary regional proximity. Within the region itself, the Group is to some extent helping generate contacts. Germany is an important partner and point of reference for all four countries, and in turn the Visegrád countries are also important to Germany.



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THE HISTORY OF THE VISEGRÁD GROUP

By signing of the Visegrád Agreement in 1991, Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary set themselves certain concrete goals to achieve as a group.

The partnership between the Visegrád countries has had its fair share of ups and downs. With the signing of the Visegrád Agreement on 15 February 1991, the presidents of Czechoslovakia and Poland and the prime minister of Hungary set certain concrete goals that they wanted to achieve as a group. These included removing all traces of totalitarianism from their countries and regaining their national sovereignty through the withdrawal of Soviet troops and their own withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). The countries also wanted to be integrated into the West, including gaining membership of NATO and the EU, and realise a shift towards democracy and a social market economy.

The Agreement did not anticipate setting up any specific institutions as instruments of cooperation, but focused more on developing joint positions among the countries' presidents, regular consultations on security issues and the promotion of more contacts within civil society and business. During the early phases, the Group was able to establish itself as a kind of regional brand that would also be recognised by external organisations such as the EU. By acting jointly, the Group was able to work towards the signing of the Europe Agreements in 1991. With these agreements, they became the first countries from Central and Eastern Europe that not only enjoyed closer contacts and a certain amount of rapprochement, but also had the prospect of one day joining the EU. At the same time, the Group was working towards a liberalisation of trade in the region, for example the establishment of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) in 1992.

When Czechoslovakia split into two separate states in January 1993 the V4 took on its current form. However, it was also during this time that the real interest in joint cooperation within this forum began to wane. The Czech Republic under President Václav Klaus in particular made it clear that it saw itself as part of the West, which made it difficult to work with Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar, who espoused more nationalistic policies. Tensions between Slovakia and Hungary also put an additional burden on relations within

the Group. CEFTA proved to be the area where they had the most success when it came to cooperation.

After 1998, cooperation between the Group members reached a new level of intensity.

This was partly due to the ending of the Klaus and Mečiar eras, but also to a growing need

for consultation on the imminent NATO membership of three of the four countries. In 1999 the government leaders signed a declaration in Bratislava in which for the first time they agreed to hold regular meetings of ministers. This step was seen as necessary for the future success of the cooperation between the countries.¹ It was also agreed to coordinate foreign policy much more closely, to adopt joint positions on certain issues and to liaise on matters relating to the judiciary and home affairs. Culture, education, environmental policies, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation were also added to the areas where they would work closely together. It was also decided to make serious efforts to support Slovakia in making up lost ground in the process that would lead to membership of the EU and NATO. The 1999 Bratislava Declaration made specific reference to this aim and foresaw the exchange of experiences and strategies for gaining NATO membership. In 2000, the launch of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) provided a solid institutional foundation for cooperation between the countries. Despite its small initial budget of one million euros, the fund was able to set in motion numerous civil society projects.

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Although the prospect of EU membership had initially strengthened their actions as a Group, there was also evidence of competition between them, as each of the V4 members was also dealing with the EU on a bilateral basis. This competition was especially obvious during the EU summits at that time, such as the convention on the European constitution. The Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán even went as far as to politically insult one of the Group's members when, in front of the European Parliament, he denounced the Beneš decrees and the resulting dispossession, displacement and disenfranchisement of

1 | Cf. Michal Kořan and Jan Růžička, "Totgesagte leben länger – die Visegrád-Gruppe nach dem EU-Beitritt", *Osteuropa*, Oct 2006, 27-41.

the Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia. Despite these setbacks, the V4 continued to act as a forum for coordination. Slovakia became a member of NATO in 2004, and in the same year all four countries were part of the 10-state "Big Bang" expansion of the EU. Having achieved its initial goals, the question arose as to whether it made sense for the Visegrád Group to continue to exist.

THE WORKINGS OF THE V4

Despite the general scepticism after their EU entry, the prime ministers of the four countries did meet up in 2004 in Kroměříž in the Czech Republic to discuss continuing their partnership. In their declaration they expressed their political willingness to continue working together, even though the original motives behind their cooperation had now been met. Once again they established fundamental goals, including closer cooperation, support for neighbouring countries and keeping the EU open to the idea of further expansion. They also agreed on specific areas and mechanisms for their cooperation.

The Mechanisms for Further Cooperation

The role of the presidency is to establish a programme in the run-up to a meeting of the four countries at ministerial level which will determine the agenda of the V4 for the term of that presidency.

Fundamental to their continued cooperation is the annual rotation of the presidency of the Group, and in summer 2011 this was handed over to the Czech Republic by Slovakia. The role of the presidency is to establish a programme in the run-up to a meeting of the four countries at ministerial level which will determine the agenda of the V4 for the term of that presidency. However, the presidency is not in a position to impose any goals or objectives through its programme, so dialogue amongst the partners is required.

This includes the official meeting of the prime ministers. The main aim of this meeting is to evaluate the past presidency and to present the programme for the next one. In addition, there is also a further informal meeting each year. The topics for discussion and the presence of additional partners at these summits are not as standardised as at the meeting of foreign ministers. These ministers get together twice a year to prepare for the meeting of the

prime ministers. One meeting generally deals with issues surrounding the Western Balkans, usually with representatives of the countries concerned in attendance, while the other focuses on the Eastern Partnership.²

The Visegrád Declaration also includes an option for the various prime ministers or foreign ministers to consult on major international decisions. At the EU level, this normally happens prior to EU summits and meetings of the General Affairs and External Relations Council, one of the configurations of the Council of the European Union. Since 2009 there has been a tradition of devoting these top summits to one particular issue, and it has also become common practice to invite representatives of the EU presidency or of other member states and institutions to these meetings of foreign and prime ministers.³

Contact between representatives of the Visegrád countries also extends to the lower levels of the Council of the European Union. While V4 members of the European Parliament do maintain informal contacts, affiliation to party groupings takes priority in day to day parliamentary dealings.⁴ The Group's permanent representatives at international organisations, especially at the EU, are expected to work together, but their work is largely unknown. However, one positive example could be the opening of the first Visegrád House in Cape Town, where costs are shared and officials from the individual countries provide ongoing consular services on a rotation basis.

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Other ministers can also meet within the V4 framework, or indeed V4+, which involves the inclusion of additional partners. The Kroměříž Declaration leaves it open as to whether and how often such meetings take place as well as which ministers should attend. Since joining the EU,

2 | Interview by the author with Jiří Čištecký, head of the Central Europe section of the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 3 Feb 2012.

3 | Cf. Michal Kořan, "The Visegrad Cooperation, Poland, Slovakia and Austria in the Czech Foreign Policy", in: idem et al. (eds.), *Czech Foreign Policy in 2007–2009: An Analysis*, Institute of International Relations, Prag, 2010.

4 | Cf. Simon Hix and Abdul Noury, "After Enlargement: Voting Patterns in the Sixth European Parliament", *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 34(2), 159-174.

communications between individual ministries have steadily intensified, resulting in the development of a complex, somewhat confusing network of contacts. V4 coordinators in the various ministries therefore have an important role to play in coordinating all these activities. They initiate contacts, identify and promote different projects and define the main aims of the cooperation. They do the necessary groundwork for the presidency, the meeting of the foreign ministers and, indirectly, the meeting of the prime ministers.

While government cooperation is predominantly at ministerial level, there are also presidential and legislative components. From a formal point of view, the highest level of cooperation is the meeting of the presidents of the V4 countries, which takes place at least once a year. Decisions on practical issues are not made at these meetings, but they are used as a platform for issuing declarations and announcing matters of joint interest. Meetings of national parliaments also offer additional opportunities for discussing and coordinating legislative programmes. These discussions are mostly about European issues and take place between the speakers of the national assemblies and the chairmen of the Committees on European Affairs.

Many commentators see this network as a quasi-institutionalised structure, as the contacts have already been established and are to some extent politically determined. However, in reality, the International Visegrad Fund remains the V4's only formal institution.⁵ Cooperation between the V4 and the V4+ groups, especially in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and the South Caucasus, is based on promoting joint programmes in the areas of culture, science, research and education, youth exchange, cross-border cooperation, tourism promotion and individual mobility. The IVF is seen as the area of cooperation that offers the most tangible results, as in recent years there has been an increase in both the quantity and the quality of the proposals for funding.⁶ Despite restrictions

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5 | Cf. Daniel Izsak, "A Region in Transit: The Role of Exogenous Forces in the Resurgence of the Visegrad Group", 2010, http://www.etd.ceu.hu/2010/izsak_daniel.pdf (accessed 21 Jun 2012).

6 | Cf. Kořan and Růžička, n. 1.

on public spending, the fund's budget has continued to grow steadily, and in 2012 stood at seven million euros, with each of the member states providing an equal amount. As a result, it is now twice as high as in 2006. The categories for support and funding have also been extended and reflect the foreign policy focus of the V4 countries.

Cooperation in the Region

The Kroměříž Declaration distinguishes between cooperation within the V4 region, with the EU, with NATO and with other partners and international organisations. However, there is evidence of a growing Europeanisation of the cooperation taking place within the region.⁷ The main areas of cooperation within the V4 region clearly have an EU slant, including culture, cross-border cooperation, infrastructure projects, environmental protection, combating organised crime, illegal immigration, terrorism, Schengen cooperation and dealing with disasters, as well as cooperation on labour and social policy, support for initiatives aimed at attracting direct investment, defence and the arms industry and, of course, the work of the IVF. This kind of cooperation, for example in relation to judicial and police matters, is very similar to the EU approach.

The fund is making an obvious contribution to region-building in the form of civil society exchange programmes and the creation of an awareness that they all belong to the same

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region. Its success has been remarkable, especially as it has to fulfil an ever-wider range of tasks with a relatively small budget. The IVF was set up predominantly as an instrument of soft power to help create a sense of identity through regional ties. However, these legitimising tasks are slowly being superseded by other demands, such as the furtherance of V4 foreign policy objectives.

Radomír Špok of the EUROPEUM Institute has shown that, based on 2003 figures, around half of the population of the four countries have not heard of the V4 cooperation, and many of those who have heard of it are not sure what it

actually means.⁸ A *Radio Praha* report at the end of 2011 suggested that people in the V4 countries knew very little about the other countries in the Group, such as their important historical figures.⁹

Nevertheless, within the state and non-state sectors a clear process of regionalisation has been underway, with a significant growth in the number of contacts being made within the V4. However, some observers think this has more to do with the EU than with V4 initiatives.¹⁰ In this respect, identifying the impact and influence of the V4 can be very difficult. Vít Dostál from the Association for International Affairs (AMO) believes that the EU has made it more difficult to demonstrate the concrete influence of the V4, as many of the Group's initiatives overlap with measures being undertaken by the EU or are part of them.¹¹

THE V4 IN THE EU – BETWEEN PRESSURE GROUP AND TALKING SHOP

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There are considerable differences of opinion as to just what the V4 can achieve in Europe. While some see it as a kind of pressure group that promotes the interests of Central Europe, others see it as little more than a symbolic talking shop. Because a significant part of the cooperation is indeed carried out on an informal and ad hoc basis, it is difficult to see which of these two views is the most accurate.

Optimists view the interest of other countries such as Slovenia in joining Visegrád, the interest of countries like the Balkan states in entering into a similar form of cooperation themselves, and the growing recognition of other EU

8 | Cf. Radomír Špok, "Visegrad Cooperation: Before and After Accession to the EU", in: Mariola Quesaraku (ed.), *Towards a Regional Advocacy for Cooperation in the West Balkans via European Best Practices?*, 2009, <http://idmalbania.org/sites/default/files/publications/Regiona%20Cooperation%20Visegrad.pdf> (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

9 | Lena Drummer, "'Kennen wir uns?' – Studie untersucht Verhältnis zwischen den Visegrad-Staaten", *Radio Praha*, 5 Dec 2011, <http://radio.cz/de/rubrik/tagesecho/kennen-wir-uns-studie-untersucht-verhaeltnis-zwischen-visegrad-staaten> (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

10 | Cf. Izsak, n. 5.

11 | Cf. Interview by the author with Vít Dostál from the Association for International Affairs on 26 Jan 2012.

countries, as signs of the importance of the V4. And there is good cause for this optimism. Comparative studies of the Visegrád cooperation and the Regional Partnership, another regional sub-group within the EU made up of the V4 countries plus Austria and Slovenia, show that the V4 not only meets more often, but discusses a much wider range of issues. The Visegrád cooperation also seems much better suited to the informal exchange of ideas within EU institutions, as the various groups involved appear much more prepared to make contact with their opposite numbers without needing specific directives. As a result, it is hardly surprising that studies have empirically proven the influence of the V4 Cooperation in EU Council working groups.¹²

Unlike the Benelux union, which has exercised its influence over the EU for many years and which has to an extent been the pioneer in this field, Visegrád is a relatively recent phenomenon. So far, the Visegrád countries have only had the possibility to make their mark in certain niche areas. Their ability to act has been further limited by the fact that individual initiatives by new member states have little prospect of success, according to the political scientist Juraj Marusiak.¹³ Also, none of the Visegrád countries is currently seen as a particularly reliable or constructive partner. Orbán's Hungary is currently extremely isolated on the international stage; the Czech Republic and Slovakia were conspicuous because of their lack of action at home in terms of the euro bailout; and Poland also drew attention because of its opt-out on the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. The V4 could have been in a strong position in the EU, as they have as many votes in the Council as Germany and France. The Treaty of Lisbon and the increasing use of weighted voting instead of the unanimity principle have also served to strengthen their position. However, if the V4 were to act as a community of interest, they might

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12 | Cf. P. Luif, "Die Zusammenarbeit in Mitteleuropa als Element der Österreichischen EU-Politik. Projektbericht für das Bundesministerium für Land- und Forstwirtschaft, Umwelt und Wasserwirtschaft", 2007.

13 | Cf. Rudolf Hermann, "Ein selbstbewusstes Zentraleuropa als Brücke nach Osten", *Neue Züricher Zeitung Online*, 16 Feb 2011, http://nzz.ch/nachrichten/politik/international/ein_selbstbewusstes_zentraleuropa_als_bruecke_nach_osten_1.9545787.html (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

well alienate other EU partners, which is why Michal Kořan of the Institute of International Relations in Prague suggests they need to adopt a smart approach in order to win over more partners. The choice of top level partners for the V4+ group is evidence that this smart approach has indeed been adopted.¹⁴ These days, it is more and more common for representatives from the Presidency of the Council, from other member states, especially the older member states, as well as other high-ranking EU representatives, to be invited to important summit meetings.

It is hard to think of one single concrete EU project that is clearly and unequivocally the work of the V4, although this is partly because it is difficult to determine the role of individual member states in the political process. However, it is certainly unclear as to what extent Visegrád actually uses its formal strength. In past crises in Eastern Europe Visegrád failed to find a common voice, such as when Russian troops marched into Georgia or during the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine.¹⁵

The past has shown that Visegrád is dependent on the extent to which an understanding of foreign affairs in the individual countries leads to cooperation within the Group.

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When they feel something is to their advantage, each country has a tendency to act on its own initiative. Poland, for example, was happy to join with Sweden in proposing the Eastern Partnership. The EU format encourages the tendency to seek out alternative ad

hoc coalitions as required, as there are always a number of potential cooperation partners available. In the European Parliament in particular, which is becoming more and more important these days, being a member of a regional group like the V4 is less important than being in a party grouping.

14 | Cf. Kořan, n. 3.

15 | Cf. Rafał Sadowski, "The Visegrad Group – the dispute over the conflict in Georgia", Centre for Eastern Studies, 17 Sep 2008, <http://osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/ceweekly/2008-09-18/visegrad-group-dispute-over-conflict-georgia> (accessed 12 Jul 2012); Zuzana Zelenická, "The Visegrad Group and the EU: Balanced Relationship Between the Visegrad Group and the EU?", http://www.fpvmv.umb.sk/userfiles/file/4_2009/2_zelenicka.pdf (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

It does of course make sense to look after one's own interests and to be flexible in the choice of partners in pursuing those interests. Established existing structures can in fact be seen as an obstacle to flexible decision-making, so within the V4 there is a limited amount of willingness on the part of each country to compromise in order to safeguard the interests of the others. A good example of this is when the countries seek a consensus on a joint candidature. Although they were able to agree on Pavel Stehlík as a joint candidate for the Expo 2010 steering committee in 2009, which was the first time they had managed to agree on a common candidature, all previous attempts had failed due to national egotism. Hungary and Poland, for example, both applied for the headquarters of the European Institute of Technology and Innovation to be in their country. The fact that the V4 are calling for equal representation of old and new member states in the European External Action Service may be a possible sign that this attitude is changing.

However, consensus amongst the V4 seems to be largely a matter of the lowest common denominator. While they share indeed some fundamental interests, they often have very different ideas when it comes to specific issues. Although the government in Prague was happy to trumpet the success of the Eastern Partnership during its presidency of the EU Council, the Czech Republic actually has little natural interest in Eastern Europe as it does not border these countries and for a long time now has maintained few economic or civil society contacts with the region. It is safe to assume that the Czech Republic wanted to be seen to shine in this particular area of European policy, but not out of solidarity with its V4 partners, rather more for strategic reasons.¹⁶

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In addition to their past under communism, what united the V4 countries during the period immediately after they all joined the EU was their common situation as new EU member states. However, these factors are rapidly decreasing in importance. These days the differences between the countries are becoming more obvious and there are clear

16 | Cf. David Král, "The Czech Republic and the Eastern Partnership – from a By-product to a Beloved Child?", in: Izabela Albrycht (ed.), *The Eastern Partnership in the Context of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the V4 Agenda*, Kosciuszko Institute, Krakau, 2010, 5-18.

signs of politically motivated divergences, including foreign and European policy objectives, not to mention problems arising from differences in physical size, and economic and internal political situations. Some observers even see the V4 countries as in competition with each other when it comes to things such as influence and subsidies.¹⁷ The interests of Poland, a country which is highly reliant on agriculture, and those of the more industrialised Czech Republic are an obvious example. The internal cohesion of the Group is threatened by competition for direct foreign investment and a lack of EU funding for V4 projects.¹⁸

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There are also differences in the progress each country is making in terms of integration. Slovakia is currently the only one of the four countries to join the eurozone. The other countries all have different opinions on whether or not to adopt the euro. While Poland is very much open to the idea of joining, the attitude of the Czechs has so far been somewhat sceptical. The same can be said for Hungary. The lack of agreement on the Lisbon Treaty serves to underscore the differences of opinion within the Group on the institutional make-up of the EU.

In Hungary it is clear that the status of the Visegrád and the EU is largely dependent on which party is in government. In political debates within Hungarian political parties since 2004 on the subject of the cooperation, it has been the conservative voices that have tended to favour strengthening the country's commitment to the V4 platform in order to have a more influential position within Europe and to make the region stronger. In contrast, the Left have tended to adopt more openly anti-Visegrád EU policies.¹⁹ In theory, the fact that the governments within the V4 have a similar political bias should be beneficial, even if the latest elections in Slovakia have changed this situation to an extent.

17 | Cf. Kořan, n. 3.

18 | Janusz Bugajski, "Visegrád's Past, Present and Future", *The Hungarian Review*, tome 2, No. 3, 7 Jun 2011, http://hungarianreview.com/article/visegrads_past_present_and_future (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

19 | Judit Hamberger, "The Future of the Visegrad Cooperation from the Hungarian Perspective", *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, 15, No. 03-04/2006, 91-107.

The volatility of the V4 countries is proving to be a fundamental weak point in their cooperation.²⁰ The balance of seats in the individual parliaments can vary tremendously from one election to another and the party system in each country is not yet fully settled. As a result, foreign policy focus and attitudes to the Visegrád Group can change after every election and, as such, the non-institutionalised structure of the V4 could prove to be a problem. When this volatility is combined with bilateral tensions it can be a dangerous combination. The smouldering conflict between Slovakia and Hungary over the language and civil rights of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia threatens to ignite with every change of government. However, it seems likely that political realism in isolated Hungary and politically embattled Slovakia will ensure that the conflict is kept in check.

Added to this is the potential future role of Poland, which has been a topic of speculation ever since the country joined the EU. There were concerns that Poland would either cold-shoulder the V4 in favour of other partners such as those in the Weimar Triangle, i.e. Germany and France, or go the opposite way and misuse these partnerships to dominate Eastern Europe. In recent times Poland has opted for an ideal solution whereby Warsaw has presented itself as an active and constructive member of the EU, improved its relations with the USA, Russia and Germany, been much more active within the Weimar triangle and has also looked to take on more of a leading role in the region as a whole.²¹ It has been noticeable, however, that Poland has stopped sending its top officials to V4 ministerial meetings, which has given their partners the impression that Poland is not as interested in regional projects as it used to be.²² Whether people are afraid that Poland has too much or too little ambition is not really the point, because neither scenario is particularly beneficial to the stability of internal relations within the V4.

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20 | Cf. Interview by the author with Vladimír Handl, Research Fellow at the Institute of International Relations, Prague, 26 Jan 2012.

21 | Cf. *ibid.*

22 | Tomáš Valašek, "The new Poland and its neighbours", *Czech-
position*, 29 Nov 2010, <http://ceskapozice.cz/en/news/foreign-affairs/new-poland-and-its-neighbors> (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

Once it becomes clear that unfettered optimism vis-à-vis the V4 is misplaced, the question is whether the pessimists are more accurate in their assessment of the partnership. In their view, Visegrád is no longer justified in today's climate. They see nothing but talk and symbolic procedures at the summit meetings, without any tangible results. As far as they are concerned, it makes no sense that the meetings are not only continuing to be held, but are in fact increasing in terms of their frequency and the number of issues covered. However, the fact that the V4 provides a platform for communication and the exchange of ideas means that it has indeed an important role to play. The V4 makes an important contribution to stability in the region and this is important to the EU, which has all manner of other problems to deal with. We should not forget that the V4 also acts as role model for eastern European regions, although, as Vladimír Handl from the Institute of International Relations in Prague points out, Visegrád has so far proven to be less of an instrument for resolving crises as an instrument of consolidation after crises have been resolved.²³ This can be seen in the support given to the integration of Slovakia into the Group, NATO and the EU after the fall of the Mečiar government in 1998.

In recent years there has been more evidence of an understanding of the benefits of working together and a willingness to learn from past mistakes.

In certain niche areas, the V4 could to a limited extent take on more of a leading role within the EU, including the promotion of democracy and transformation, the eastern partners within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and energy security. In recent years there has been more evidence of an understanding of the benefits of working together and a willingness to learn from past mistakes. A form of best practice has been developed that is constantly being revised and that seems to involve working together in a very low-key fashion.

Even if general consensus is not always sought, the huge range of contacts within the V4 can be very useful when it comes to gathering internal and external information. This can be a significant advantage in the EU, as it can not only lead to a division of labour, but it also means that the position of the partners can be taken into consideration before

23 | Cf. n. 20.

any action is taken,²⁴ and this can help to make the EU more effective and efficient. Vít Dostál makes the observation that the V4 tend to consciously act in concert until they reach a point where they can no longer agree, and as such are practising a kind of soft lobbying that creates a friendly climate in which to pursue their interests.²⁵

As the Czech Prime Minister Petr Nečas is quick to emphasise, fears of a central European alliance within the EU are unfounded. These kinds of concerns were thought to underlie comments made by Nicolas Sarkozy in 2009 when he reproached the V4 for their habit of meeting together prior to EU summit meetings. Nečas, for his part, sees the V4 as a natural grouping of countries with similar interests based on their culture and history, comparable with Germany's natural alliance with France.²⁶ As a result, the V4 should not be underestimated, as they could become strategically important partners in the future. The V4 could exercise a kind of soft power both at home and abroad. At home, because they are less likely to be working at cross purposes, and abroad, because the V4 are in a position to ensure that the EU does not permit the euro crisis to allow it to lose sight of certain issues such as their Eastern neighbours or energy supplies.

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THE FOCUS OF THE V4 – A QUEST THROUGH THE MISTS OF SYMBOLISM

The Eastern European, Western Balkan and South Caucasus regions play a key role in the rhetoric of the Czech V4 presidency. The activities of the IVF are also skewed towards these regions. It is partly about rapprochement and mediation between the EU and these target regions, and partly about supporting the process of transformation and democratisation. The majority of the V4 countries also have a vested interest in maintaining stability in these regions, as they share common borders and are involved in economic and civil society exchanges with the various

24 | Cf. Kořan, n. 3.

25 | Cf. n. 11.

26 | "Nečas: 'Die Visegrád-Gruppe ist keine Freimaurerloge'", *EurActiv*, 28 Sep 2010, <http://euractiv.de/328/artikel/necas-die-visegrad-gruppe-ist-keine-freimaurerloge-003701> (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

countries involved. This means they are almost predestined to play a mediation role between the EU and their neighbours. This is very difficult, however, as the interests of the various parties are hardly compatible. The EU is currently ruling out the possibility of any new members, something which provides little in the way of incentive for change amongst the various partner countries.

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The V4 countries all have different foreign policy interests, so each V4 presidency tends to bring with it different regional priorities and areas of focus. This makes coordination very difficult. Poland is clearly interested in adopting a position of power. Its interests lie with the Eastern Partnership countries, especially the Ukraine, where it actively supports democratisation efforts and promotes social contacts.²⁷ The Czech Republic is less interested in promoting EU membership, but is more focused on democratisation, without it necessarily leading to EU membership for these countries at a later date. It has also been critical of any relaxation of visa requirements because of its experience with Ukrainian migrants.²⁸ Hungary's foreign policy is aimed at trying to help Hungarian minorities living abroad, so it actively supports Serbia and the Ukraine in their bid to join the EU and Schengen and is intensifying its focus on the Balkans.²⁹ For its part, Slovakia is interested in the Western Balkans, where it sees Croatia and Serbia as the guarantors of regional stability. It is therefore actively encouraging efforts to gain EU membership and to relax visa requirements.³⁰

The Eastern Partnership stands out as one of the main successes. Its basic idea is to deal with the eastern countries within the ENP – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and the Ukraine – as a separate group from the other partners in accordance with their

27 | Viera Knutelská, "Visegrad Countries in the EU: Visions and Priorities", *Association for International Affairs*, 25 Oct 2011, <http://amo.cz/publications/visegrad-countries-in-the-eu-visions-and-priorities.html?lang=en> (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

28 | Zelenická, n. 15.

29 | Zoltán Pogatsa, "Hungary's Foreign Policy after the 2010 Parliamentary Elections: Change or Continuity?", in: Olga Gyarfašova and Grigorji Mesežnikov (eds.), *Visegrad Elections 2010: Domestic Impact and European Consequences*, Institute for Public Affairs, Bratislava, 2011.

30 | Martin Butora, "Slovakia's Foreign Policy: Legacies and New Horizons", in: *ibid.*

particular needs. The plan is to create multilateral platforms at governmental and civil society levels to promote the exchange of knowledge, in addition to renewing any existing bilateral agreements. Standards are also to be harmonised in line with those of the EU. The long-term goal is to make it possible for people from neighbouring countries in the region to travel without the need for a visa. Action plans to that effect are already in place for the Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Although there was intensive consultation with the V4, in the end the proposal turned out to be a Polish-Swedish initiative. The end result was that the EU Commission submitted a proposal which was passed in 2009 during the Czech presidency of the Council. The Czechs were happy to include this proposal on their agenda as they wanted to improve their profile in Europe and the tensions in Eastern Europe seemed to offer a suitable, contemporary platform for this purpose.³¹ In March of this year, the Group re-emphasised the importance of the Eastern Partnership at a summit in Prague attended by representatives from EU institutions and some member states and partner countries. Following the summit, the activities of the IVF became more focused on this particular area and the EU was called upon in a statement to actively support the initiative.



Constantly in debate, but with an uncertain goal: the heads of government Robert Fico, Petr Nečas, Donald Tusk and Viktor Orbán, with Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament (2nd f.l.). | Source: Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów (CC BY-NC-ND).

31 | Cf. Král, n. 16.

The V4 can only claim limited success in promoting democracy. Despite their expertise in this area, they lack the necessary financial resources to make a real difference. Local partners have not been sufficiently involved and they have failed to focus on achieving tangible results. As a result, there have been suggestions that a Visegrád fund for democracy should be set up.³² This is similar to a proposal made by the Polish presidency of the EU Council to create such an instrument in the form of a European Endowment for Democracy. The Civil Society Forum is now playing an ever-increasing role in the debate over the Eastern Partnership and has taken up the issue of the apparent lack of civil society involvement. This forum for representatives from civil society and official bodies has already met three times since 2009. It has been generally well received, and for this reason, Poland was keen to support it during its presidency of the EU Council. However, past crises have shown that the V4 countries have found themselves unable to present a united front. Slovakia, for example, adopted its own position on the issue of Kosovan independence.³³ During the Georgia crisis of 2008, the V4 proved incapable of adopting a common position on anything.³⁴

Different attitudes towards Russia are also proving to be something of a stumbling block, particularly with respect to the Eastern Partnership, energy security and cooperation on security issues. Opinions vary on just how big a split there is within the V4, but in general terms, Hungary and Slovakia tend to be more positive towards the Russians.

Apart from their joint efforts to ensure visa-free travel to the USA and Canada, the V4 countries have tended to go their separate ways in respect to the USA and NATO.

The USA and NATO are important partners for the V4 and they have openly stated their desire to develop good relations with both. However, apart from their joint efforts to ensure visa-free travel to the USA and Canada, the V4 countries have tended to go their separate ways in this respect as well. National egotism reared its ugly head during the discussions on visa-free travel, with each country making separate representations in addition to the joint V4 efforts. It is only now that some joint activities are being

32 | Cf. Zelenická, n. 15.

33 | Tomáš Strážay, "Visegrad- Arrival, Survival, Revival", in: *Two Decades of Visegrad Cooperation*, International Visegrad Fund, Bratislava, 2011.

34 | Cf. Sadowski, n. 15.

undertaken in connection with NATO, even though such cooperation has been under consideration for a long time as a way of saving money. They are currently considering the idea of forming a V4 battle group, led by Poland, from 2016 onwards.³⁵ However, it is not clear just how serious they are about this, or if any concrete action is being taken, as the idea has already been put on ice several times. Nevertheless, the V4 countries did reconfirm their commitment to this idea in their joint declaration on NATO in April of this year.

Since joining the EU, the most significant success of the V4 countries has been their entry into the Schengen Area. Numerous committees are still exchanging information on this, and Schengen is now largely responsible for the mostly unsung but lively communication between the respective interior ministries. However, it has to be said that joining Schengen was just the kind of area where cooperation was both appropriate and justified.³⁶ The V4 countries even protested en bloc last April against the decision by Switzerland to impose certain restrictions on citizens from eight EU countries.

Another pet subject of Visegrád rhetoric is energy security. This covers both diversification of supply and creation of the necessary infrastructure. There are opportunities for cooperation in this area because, although all four countries have different energy portfolios, they are all heavily reliant on energy supplies from Russia via the Ukraine. The Eastern Partnership needs to be understood against this background. Poland is in a slightly different situation because it has significant coal reserves. Since its discovery of shale gas, Poland has been dreaming of good business and a chance to free itself from its reliance on Russian gas. Like the Czech Republic, it is not as dependent on gas imports as the other Visegrád countries. The Czech Republic's energy security is actually considered to be untypically high for the region.³⁷ Hungary, on the other hand, is

35 | "A militarised Visegrad Group?", *EurActiv*, 13 May 2011, <http://euractiv.com/global-europe/militarised-visegrad-group-analysis-504824> (accessed 12 Jul 2012).

36 | Zelenická, n. 15.

37 | Petr Binhac and Jakub Jaroš, "Energy Policy of the Czech Republic", in: Joanna Świątkowska (ed.), *Energy security of the V4 countries. How do energy relations change in Europe*, Kosciuszko Institute, Kraków, 2011, 37-41.

seriously dependent on others and is therefore seeking to diversify as well as maintain good relations with Russia. It is currently involved in the South Stream project, a pipeline running from Russia to Italy.³⁸ Unlike its partners, Slovakia is less critical of its high raw materials dependency, and is working to build good relations with Russia and the Ukraine alongside the V4+ initiatives, but was rattled by the gas crisis in 2008.³⁹

Overall, the gas crisis helped to bridge some of the countries' differences. Despite their disagreements, Slovakia and Hungary even signed agreements on transportation via joint pipelines, although their objectives diverge. Bilateral relations between Poland and the Czech Republic suffered because of Poland's position on the North Stream gas pipeline and the Czech Republic's tit-for-tat rejection of the Odessa-Brody oil pipeline.⁴⁰

However, the countries are all trying to keep the issue of energy security on the EU agenda. In this respect, they believe nuclear power is a vital source of energy. A joint position on energy is expected before the end of the V4 presidency.⁴¹ The Slovakian presidency has already succeeded in pushing the V4's views on this into the EU arena. The V4 concept includes a North-South gas corridor in addition to existing East-West routes, with the Nabucco pipeline at its centre. In 2010, the V4 sent a letter on this topic to the European Commissioner for Energy, Günther Oettinger. This addressed the issue of expanding the energy infrastructure and the necessary financial support. These points were incorporated into Oettinger's proposal of linking together the Baltic Sea, the Adriatic and the Black Sea to form a North-South corridor for the transportation of gas. This idea was approved by the European Council in February 2011. A high-level working group was set up to work on turning this plan into reality. Its members include the V4 countries, Bulgaria and Romania, while Croatia has observer status.⁴²

38 | Mariusz Ruszel, "V4 in the European Union", in: *ibid.*, 73-78.

39 | Cf. Kořan, n. 3.

40 | *Ibid.*

41 | Cf. interview of author with Jiří Čištecky, head of the Central Europe department of the Czech Foreign Ministry, on 3 Feb 2012.

42 | Maciej Kołaczkowski, "V4 energy cooperation with special view on natural gas", in: Świątkowska (ed.), n. 37, 77-83.

The V4 has also been active with respect to the EU budget. The Czech EU presidency focused on this, as it was felt there was a connection between the EU's financial outlook and the competitiveness of the EU and the V4 region. It seems likely that this topic is once again on the agenda, as decisions are looming for 2014. First of all, the Czechs drew up a non-paper. This was then followed in October 2011 by a declaration by the government heads of the V4 countries in which they agreed on a joint message. The main points were that the proposed budget amount was satisfactory for the V4 and that the budget must ensure competitiveness and growth, but also cohesion, so a cohesion policy must continue to be targeted at the weaker regions and member states. A sectoral approach should not be introduced, as this would make it more difficult to achieve the goals of the cohesion policy. Instead, the cohesion policy should take up a separate, important position among EU policies and maintain its focus on the reduction of regional imbalances. This was a repetition of certain aspects of the Bratislava Declaration on the occasion of its 20-year anniversary, but it also made reference to reforms in agricultural policy. Increasing the budget and strengthening agricultural policy would only be in Poland's interest. Agricultural reforms, the introduction of the euro, institutional reform of the EU and the protection of minorities are areas where it seems unlikely that the V4 will reach any kind of agreement.⁴³

So the V4 has set in motion some joint, co-ordinated projects in certain areas. This is particularly true of the Eastern Partnership, energy policy and the EU's budget. But even here there are differences in national interests, and there is not always evidence of any coordinated action. It was widely expected that 2011 would be the year of Visegrád because Hungary and Poland held the Council presidency. But despite their valiant efforts, this was not to be the case in the end, as the euro crisis meant that the presidency had to devote itself to crisis management. However, topics such as the Eastern neighbours could also be of interest to the V4's huge neighbour – Germany.

It was widely expected that 2011 would be the year of Visegrád because Hungary and Poland held the Council presidency.

GERMANY AND THE VISEGRÁD GROUP – A WORTHWHILE EXPERIMENT?

In the past Germany was an active supporter of their EU membership and initially welcomed the V4 union. But this was based on pragmatism rather than on real enthusiasm for the V4 idea.

To date, there has been almost no defined or institution-alised cooperation between Germany and the Visegrád Group on a multilateral level, despite the fact that the Federal Republic and the individual V4 countries have had strong bilateral contacts and extremely intensive economic relations since 1989. Indeed, in the past Germany was an active supporter of their EU membership and initially welcomed the V4 union. But this was based on pragmatism rather than on real enthusiasm for the V4 concept. Germany saw the Visegrád partnership as a project for stabilising the region that would act as a model for future partnerships, as it was seen as a kind of cooperation training camp and collecting tank in connection with their EU membership. The only contact of any note between the Visegrád Group and Germany was a mainly symbolic meeting of the heads of government of the V4 states and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder in 2000.

When the V4 countries joined the EU, Germany's relations with the Visegrád states intensified, but contacts between the Group and Germany are still relatively rare. The formerly asymmetric relationship shifted in favour of the Visegrád states, who are now equal partners in the EU and who to some extent see themselves in a better position with respect to structural reforms. It is true that when Germany held the presidency of the EU Council in 2007, the V4 sought to strengthen its contacts with German representatives. But this practice has since continued with successive Council presidencies and is hence not something that was specifically directed at Germany.⁴⁴

Over the last year there have been a few meetings between high-level politicians, but again they were mainly just symbolic. It is a clearly-stated goal of the German government under Chancellor Angela Merkel to foster good relations with its eastern neighbours. In February 2011 she attended the celebrations to mark the 20th anniversary of the Visegrád Group, along with the Austrian Chancellor and the Ukrainian prime minister. They took the opportunity

44 | Kořan, n. 3.

to discuss the situation in the countries of the Eastern Partnership, particularly Belarus, along with topics such as energy policy, securing energy supplies and fighting inflated food prices. The participating states agreed on a declaration condemning the actions of the Belarus government, but the representative of the Ukraine refused to sign.

This was followed by a visit from German foreign minister, Guido Westerwelle, in March 2011. Other guests included the EU's foreign affairs representative, Catherine Ashton, EU Commissioner, Stefan Füle, and representatives of the Eastern Partnership. At this high-level meeting, Germany agreed on certain joint declarations with the V4. These included motions condemning the murder of Pakistan's minister for minorities and the violence in Belarus. Other issues included a statement on the Eastern Partnership proposing it should be further promoted and a summit held in Warsaw under the Polish presidency of the EU Council. In relation to the Arab Spring, a statement was made on the Southern Partnership condemning the violence in Libya and raising the prospect of humanitarian aid and assistance in carrying out the steps toward transformation. However, these were largely symbolic statements that were not acted upon.

Germany agreed on certain joint declarations with the V4. These included motions condemning the murder of Pakistan's minister for minorities and the violence in Belarus.

Kai-Olaf Lang of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs believes this reluctance to act is due to the fact that Germany wishes to avoid pursuing a genuine Central European policy as this could arouse suspicion. The V4 countries and also other EU partners could get the impression this was just a German attempt to regain some of its lost influence in these regions. Additionally, Germany does not necessarily want to contribute to a strong institutionalisation of sub-groups within the EU, as this could endanger the flexibility of the decision-making process.

Instead, Berlin has been focusing on a policy of EU expansion. Germany's diverse but strong bilateral relations with each V4 country and contacts via international forums have in fact hampered the progress of a more multilateral approach that concentrates exclusively on the V4 and the Federal Republic. On top of this, Visegrád has failed to present itself as a single actor or as a fixed sphere of

activity that could act as a focus for German policy.⁴⁵ The Visegrád Group has been lacking in political weight. The V4 countries seemed to have been competing to have good relations with Germany while being quite unable to agree on any kind of united action.

So what opportunities will this bring for the V4 and Germany in the future? It should be possible to work together in a project-oriented way, but the particular issues and interests that are targeted must be relevant. A good first step would be to identify common areas of interest. The eastern dimension of the ENP could be an example of this. Germany has traditionally supported this policy and

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could benefit from the experiences of the V4 with respect to the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. General foreign policy issues could also be brought into the spotlight. As Germany borders the V4 area, and these countries are now responsible for guarding the EU's borders, it should be in Germany's interests to cooperate more readily on issues relating to migration, justice and the interior. Other common areas of interest could also include the resolution of border problems such as goods transit, energy security and environmental protection.

However, there are many areas where the two sides have very different approaches. These include discussions about past history, basic attitudes towards the EU and its institutions and, most particularly, freedom of movement for workers and the German desire to introduce harmonised tax rates.⁴⁶ Recently the V4 states have been regarding Germany's phase-out of nuclear power with growing amazement and concern. Some observers in the V4 would have liked this decision to have been clearly explained to the Visegrád states. These kinds of information shortfalls could be remedied by setting up a discussion mechanism where regional issues can be debated and information exchanged. A good starting point could be to encourage interactions within civil society, particularly in the areas of

45 | Kai-Olaf Lang, "Anatomie einer Zurückhaltung – Deutschland und die Visegrád-Gruppe", *Osteuropa*, n. 1, 5-15.

46 | Josefine Wallat, "Alte Lasten, neue Chancen – Deutschlands Blick auf Viségrad", *Osteuropa*, n. 1, 77-89.

youth and culture. In this respect it would make sense for think tanks in the Visegrád states to work together in order to make contacts with German partners. One step along this path could be the call by the IVF to submit proposals for a regional V4 think tank by June of this year. In the medium-term, this could lead to dialogue between experts and the forging of contacts at political level.

There are areas where the V4 and Germany could therefore work together more closely. Closer relations between Germany and the Visegrád Group could produce useful synergies that could also help to speed up decision-making at EU level. But if Germany is to make a greater commitment in this respect, then the Visegrád Group will have to bring some unified and constructive proposals to the table. At the end of the day, if relations between the two sides are to be strengthened, they both have to demonstrate that they possess the political will.

OUTLOOK: DOES THE GROUP HAVE A FUTURE?

Over the years, all kinds of different recommendations have been made for the Visegrád Group. The debate has particularly revolved around the pros and cons of institutionalising and expanding the Group. Its current low degree of institutionalisation has led to flexibility and openness towards new ideas and topics; the possibility of holding ad hoc meetings, both internally and with other countries; and to efficient management of spending. But it has also brought disadvantages such as the lack of an institution to coordinate and set clearly-defined rules for communication and mechanisms for cooperation; the difficulties inherent in creating a common Visegrád identity; and the problem of decisions not being binding.⁴⁷ Whatever happens, the individual actors will not be institutionalised. The same applies to expanding the Group, as this would be problematic for domestic decision-making which would be viewed as simply part of the overall V4+ format. But despite these drawbacks, the Group has survived for more than twenty years, so there is no great sense of urgency to make fundamental changes in the immediate future.

Instead of this, any optimisation should concentrate on how to deal with the obvious inherent shortcomings of the V4, such as its political volatility and bilateral tensions and rivalries. The former Executive Director of the IVF, Urban Rusnák, has suggested some ways of tackling these issues:⁴⁸ Firstly, specific areas of cooperation must be determined. Secondly, expectations of what can be achieved should not be set too high, e.g. it should not be expected to reach agreement on questions of national sovereignty or the introduction of the euro. Thirdly, objectives and mechanisms should therefore be closely matched. This has so far been a problem in terms of promoting democracy, with management, promotion and the involvement of local partners not being matched to the objectives. Fourthly, there should be greater solidarity, which requires trust and clearly-defined goals. In the past the V4 was characterised by its lack of solidarity, as was variously demonstrated by its inability to field joint candidates for EU positions and to attract institutions to set up their offices. The V4 should start off by concentrating on practical areas where they can quickly and easily communicate their successes. This would increase their support at home and create a positive ethos. The IVF is keen to pursue this course, so it is important for the V4 to carry out a regional agenda at grass-roots level.

And last but not least, a limited and realistic agenda should be pursued in the EU context. Examples of this are the Eastern Partnership, energy security and the Western Balkans. But these will only achieve success if mature, realistic proposals are put forward and unilateral action is avoided.

The author would like to thank the following people for their valuable assistance: Jiří Čištecky, head of the Central Europe department of the Czech foreign ministry, and V4 coordinator for the Czech Republic, Adéla Denková, junior analyst at the Association for International Affairs (AMO) Prague and member of staff at EurActiv.cz, Vít Dostál, analyst at the Association for International Affairs (AMO) Prague, Vladimír Handl, research fellow at the Institute for International Relations (IIR) Prague, Petr Vágner, executive director of the International Visegrad Fund.

48 | Urban Rusnák, "Is there any Future for Visegrad Cooperation within EU?", http://www.europeum.org/doc/arch_eur/EPF_future_of_Visegrad.pdf (accessed 12 Jul 2012).