



Thirty years of Visegrád Group

By Ivan Iliev

Introduction

In February 1991, at a meeting of the Czechoslovak, Polish and Hungarian presidents, the decision to create an alliance of three Central European countries was made. In 1993, the division of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republics and the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic transformed the tripartite cooperation into a four-party alliance - V4. The name refers to a meeting, which took place near Budapest (at the castle in Visegrád), Hungary,

in 1335, attended by King of Bohemia, King of Hungary and King of Poland. Hundreds of years later, former Communist-bloc countries in Central Europe desired to overcome historical animosities between states and nations in this region, believing that joint efforts of relatively small countries would make their goals more achievable. The V4 was also established because post-Communist countries realized that they could together boost the socio-economic transformation and join the European Union.

Indeed, the V4 has accelerated cooperation and boosted the friendship among the Central

European states throughout the years. Today, V4 is a regional structure of four EU and NATO member states that in general share similar economic, cultural and social values. V4 members recognize it as the alliance that strengthens the coordination mechanism to find similar positions on European policy, foreign policy, economic or cultural cooperation, and regional development. Visegrád Group, or shortly called the V4, marks 30 years of existence this year. This unique sort of cooperation has achieved some crucial goals but also failed in reaching cooperation on some EU topics. In the following lines, we will look at these achievements and failures, but will also explain where Visegrád is today and what should be done in order to make this alliance of Central European countries functioning better.

V4 throughout the years

To prove the importance of V4, it is essential to ask what it has achieved during its 30 years of existence. Firstly, there is the “forgotten” achievement of the V4. It is the cooperation of four Central European countries. Throughout the years, this achievement has become less vocal, as collaboration is sometimes considered automatic. However, the fact that V4 still exists and members cooperate even after 30 years is notable. For example, Slovakia and Hungary have not always had good relations - these two nations were foes in the nineteenth

century and even in 1939 for a short period. Living under the communist regime partially weakened the tensions, but the V4 marked the fully established cooperation, and it is not just about Slovakia and Hungary. All four members have been cooperating as never before. Thus, it is a remarkable achievement of this unique formation of states. Some might argue that V4 members collaborated already during the communist era. That is correct, but they were somewhat forced into mutual cooperation by the Soviet Union.

The most significant achievements of V4 have been reaching the NATO and EU membership by all four members.

Indeed, it is necessary to mention the achievement of the V4 concerning the EU and NATO. As the V4 was formed in the 1990s, it was immediately expected to serve its purpose. All the four members started to seek common goals, which were the EU and NATO membership. V4 played a crucial role in the initial period of its existence. Visegrád Group was a significant representative of its members during the talks with NATO and the EU. Even today, politicians and experts from the V4 countries consider forming such an alliance as the crucial step for achieving NATO and EU membership, as both – the Alliance and the European Union recognized the joint effort of

the four post-Communist countries. Even in the Western world, such cooperation was admired and recognized. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the most significant achievements of V4 have even today been reaching the NATO and EU membership by all four members. What is of crucial importance, each country has proven to be a full-scale NATO member devoted to alliance in many occasions.

Unfortunately, the following years of V4 existence have also weakened the views and goals among the members, especially in the field of the EU policies. Firstly, it is due to the rising of politicians advocating that individual efforts are more efficient to reach the member states' goals. But these have been less vocal in the past years. What appears to be the real reason for weakening the V4 similarity in goals and values is the rising of nationalistic and populist politicians who do not share the same views as the EU or even other V4 partners. We have seen Poland and Hungary being involved in conflicts with the EU, but the Czech Republic and Slovakia have not had such a sharp attitude towards the Union at the time. Also, we observe Hungary and, until this year, Czech Republic to favor some Russian foreign policy actions. Understandably, this situation resulted in different views on European and international politics of V4 members and weakened the cooperation. However, the V4 has still accomplished the main goals, collaboration and EU and NATO membership from the long-term perspective.

The reason for weakening the V4 similarity in goals and values is the rising of nationalistic and populist politicians.

Many are asking whether V4 has gotten stronger over time. However, it is not a good question whether V4 is stronger or weaker today. Instead, we should ask whether Visegrád is more cooperative, stable, and politically developed as it was ten or even five years ago - the question is whether member countries are devoted to the core principles of the Visegrád Group. There are some political issues within each member state, and conflicts among the members did occur in the past.

V4's position in the EU

On the one hand, the V4's central idea - to cooperate, is still present and followed. From this perspective, Visegrád remains solid and stable, even though there are different positions of V4 members on EU policies - Slovakia and Czech Republic being more cooperative than Poland and Hungary, concerning the EU matters. Yet, the role of Poland and Hungary on values such as the rule of law, liberal democracy or equality, and the common stance of all the Visegrád Groups' members on the acceptance of refugees has not helped to gain respect and trust within the European community. Many

experts would suggest that Visegrád firstly needs more cooperation among its members on EU topics.

Hungary has produced signals and actions that pictures V4 as the opposition to the Western countries.

That might be facilitated by establishing institutions and mechanisms that would overlook respecting agreements within the group and the treaties between V4 and external factors. Secondly, V4 must realize that the only way to be stable and robust is to cooperate closely, not only inside the V4. By closer and smoother cooperation of some V4 members within the EU, the V4 would have a unique opportunity to regain power and respect it once possessed – considered the champion of European integration. V4 must be more prosperous, stable and more democratic, but simultaneously, more cohesive concerning the cooperation within the EU.

There are some doubts of the international community whether V4 countries can do so. However, the cooperation of V4 countries concerning the security issues and within the NATO proves that Visegrád countries can cooperate and are profoundly respected members of the Treaty. Therefore, the V4 is still relevant and necessary and has the potential

to be more essential and more stable relating to the EU. Being a unique form of cooperation in Central Europe, it needs to understand that its real strength lies in pro-cooperation, pro-development, and pro-EU attitude.

V4 members should look at the issues from the EU's view and not solely from a nationalistic perspective.

Today, the V4's position within the EU is as every other state's. All the Visegrád members are established within the EU and possess the same rights as all members. However, the V4 has not used all the EU opportunities—especially concerning the role that countries from Central Europe could achieve. Visegrád has failed to grasp the part of the decisive actor which supports the Union in development, be it socially or economically. Concretely, the behavior of Poland and Hungary in recent years undermined Visegrád's ability to prove as a democracy-oriented, trustworthy partner of the EU. Hungary especially has produced signals and actions that pictures V4 as the opposition to the Western countries. Therefore, the V4 states are equal EU members, but Western partners do not consider them supportive and devoted to the EU ambitions and values. As one former Slovak ambassador said, the V4 is not a problem-solver but instead a conundrum for the rest of Europe. However, it does not mean

that each V4 country is equally responsible for this situation.

To finalize this idea, we think that Visegrád countries can mature into fully-fledged members of the European Union - respecting their traditions and being proud of the achievements in the past, but simultaneously realizing the V4's importance for the stability and prosperity of the whole European Union, and realizing that domestic political issues and their solutions have a direct impact on the future of the EU. What is of crucial importance, the coherence within V4 on the cooperation within the EU would bring respect to the V4. Every country of the EU has the right to choose its path and decide its stance on particular issues.

Czech Republic and Slovakia could be expected to be more pro-EU based on the past actions.

However, some problems in the EU are transnational, and even if the decision is not convenient for domestic politics, it might help the EU deal with the issues and move on. That means that some V4 members should sometimes look at the issues from the EU's view and not solely from a nationalistic perspective. But this is instead a problem of particular V4 members' leaders rather than V4 itself. Therefore, to make the V4 stable and more developed, let's

even say stronger, smoother cooperation with the European Union should be established. But firstly, the political will of leaders to do so is necessary to make V4 the champion of European integration and cooperation again.

Conclusion - the future of V4

Concerning the future of Visegrád, it will depend on the members' ability to cooperate within and outside the NATO and EU in particular. The V4's plans are clear concerning NATO. All the countries cooperate, plan to collaborate and are supportive members of the Treaty. Also, V4 will probably try to boost economic cooperation after the COVID-19 crisis. The post-COVID-19 period might be a booster for collaboration with the EU, but still, the politicians hold the final decision. Therefore, in the best case possible, we might be seeing stronger cooperation with the EU. In the worst case, we will be observing the alienation of V4 from following European values and aims. Again, this does not have to be the scenario for all the four members, as the Czech Republic and Slovakia could be expected to be more pro-EU based on the past actions and attitude towards the Union. However biased this opinion might seem, the reality of Polish and Hungarian political leadership does not provide a reason to see the future of Visegrád-EU relations positively. We might expect the effort to change the situation, especially by the opposition parties in Poland and Hungary,

but it is difficult to imagine that Hungarian and Polish leadership would change their attitude. Thus, we can expect conflicts between some V4 members and the EU. If this alliance would not set common goals and follow them, cooperation within V4 will probably continue, as the economic interest of each member is to cooperate. However, in such a case, Slovakia and the Czech Republic will likely follow the pro-EU path, while Poland and Hungary would continue to look at national interests solely. That will prevent V4 from becoming a robust regional political unit that positively influences European politics. However, to finish this idea on a positive note, a change of leadership in some V4 countries could mean turning in relations with the EU. Leaders rise, and they also leave the politics. Thus, the fate of V4 will be dependent on the political leaders of each member country.

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