

Perspectives of Central Europe Cooperation within the European Union

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Abstract

The article deals with the issue of economic and political cooperation in the region of Central Europe, focusing mainly on the Visegrad Group (also known as V4) and its perspectives for European union. The author describes the main pillars on which Visegrad cooperation was established - the non-governmental structures (and in fact zero institutionalism) as well as the dependence on political willingness for reaching a consensus. Article presents weakening and revitalization phases of cooperation and a comparison of the pre-accession and post-accession period with the year 2004 as a turning point. The author also identifies the existing limits of the cooperation within the framework of V4 and points out on the fact that despite the aims and priorities stipulated after 2004 the Visegrad Group did not succeed to determine any priority of such an importance as was the integration into the EU and the NATO during the pre-accession period. Finally the prospects of V4 cooperation were drafted as well as the urgent need to redefine common priorities and interests.

Keywords: Central Europe, Visegrad cooperation, limits, prospects of cooperation, European union

Democratic revolutions pointed the way for the countries of Central Europe to undergo the radical change of political and economic systems. In general, the term, transformation process, indicates the transition of the counties of Central Europe and Eastern Europe from centrally planned economy to market economy, and the building up of plural democratic systems and opening up to the world (Rýsová, L., Kosír, I., Terem, P., 2008).

The Visegrad Cooperation as a pillar for further cooperation in the Central European Region

The Visegrad cooperation was one of the first cooperative structures in the post-communist bloc after 1989. After Yugoslavia disintegrated and disturbances started all around its territory, Czechoslovakia and Hungary decided to have connections also within another framework. On February 15, 1991, the Declaration on the Cooperation on the road to European integration was signed by the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary. The place of meeting was not chosen at random. Almost seven hundred years ago, there the Polish king Casimir III., the Czech king John of Bohemia (Luxembourgish) and the Hungarian king Charles Robert I. met and they agreed on cooperation to limit tensions and conflicts in the region (Čajka, P., Iždinský, D., Terem, P., 2008).

The meeting at the beginning of the ninetieth followed similar goals. According to Visegrad cooperation, the fundamental goals specifically include: the restoration of country's sovereignty, democracy and freedom, the liquidation of totalitarian system's residua, the building up of parliamentary democracy and modern legal state, the building up of modern market economy and the full integration into the European political, economic, security and legal systems.

Visegrad partners understood the benefits stemming from mutual cooperation and finally closer ties were established. The non-institutional approach was after this period likely to continue and was considered as one of the main Visegrad group cooperation pillars. This type of mutual cooperation could in fact be viewed as a flexible instrument for reaching important goals of all four member states.

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The highest risk is the fact that any of the highest representatives of Visegrad Four may ignore the cooperation, and thus to say goodbye to the possibilities of mutual progress, for example with respect to their acting in the EU. The Visegrad space with its area of 534 thousand square kilometers and with more than 60 million inhabitants is comparable with the size of France; This community could create a certain common platform for the negotiations within the framework of the EU, as four countries, based on an agreement, may reach better results during negotiations compared to individual and separate negotiations (Horváth, 2004, p. 14).

The Limits and Prospects of Cooperation within the Framework of V4

The will of individual countries to cooperate is the prerequisite of Visegrad Group cooperation. The attitude of the Czech Republic from the beginning of the nineties, or the authoritative tendencies of Slovak government resulting in increasing isolation of the Slovak Republic weakened and later even stopped the Visegrad group cooperation. After the accession of V4 into the EU, Poland found itself in the position of weakening the cooperation of V4 (Pehe, 2004). This attribute resulted from the ambition of Poland to play a more significant role in the enlarged European Union compared to its Central European partners.

One of the main reasons for Polish aspirations to regional leadership stemmed from the understanding of Poland's advantages comparing to its Visegrad partners, where Poland itself has bigger population and economy than its three Visegrad partners can put together. As a beautiful example of Polish independent approach were attitudes towards EU constitution and Ukraine's „Orange revolution”. This ambivalence cannot be viewed only in the area of diplomacy, but also in the field of economic policies, where Poland together with Slovak republic were able to see themselves more realistically, comparing to Czech republic and Hungary, as countries with much to improve and not able to support a relatively costly European social model (From Visegrad to Mitteleuropa, 2005).

After the enlargement of the EU in May 2004, the variety of V 4 countries' attitudes was manifested in the strategic issues of European policies, such as the EU Constitution and the Union's Financial Framework for 2007 – 2013. The ultimate attitude of Poland was apparent in the both cases. In December 2003, the Republic of Poland insisted on the preservation of the system of voting based on the Treaty of Nice. Furthermore, Warsaw requested to increase funds for the development of backward regions in Poland during final negotiations on the budget prospects of the EU. The Czech Republic, Hungary and the Slovak Republic manifested their strong will to compromise in the strategic issues of the EU's political and financial future. However, their real priorities differed and they were contradicting sometimes. For example, the Republic of Hungary vehemently supported the clause on the rights to minorities in the EU Constitution. The same clause was firmly refused by the Slovak Republic. Another reason for different priorities and policies of Visegrad countries was the fact that EU accession increased the number of possible alliances through which countries like Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia got an opportunity to directly influence the policy of the entire Union. Therefore, the preference of own interests to the interests of group or its members cannot be excluded in the future, and not only in case of Poland, but also in case of the other countries of V4.

It is important to point out pros and cons of the further possible V4's institutionalization. Since its establishment in 2000, the International Visegrad Fund has been the only official institution of V4. Any further institutionalism might result in wider centralization of the Visegrad Group, which might be contradictory to the development of so called civic dimension of this cooperation, or the cooperation of smaller regional units, municipalities and bodies, whose work is focused on decentralizing the state administration.

The “weak” institutionalization of cooperation is advantageous for better flexibility of the Group and for extending the function of cooperation to lower; i.e. regional or local levels. On the contrary, the benefit of institutionalism might be represented by the creation of mechanism requiring the strict keeping of agreed rules and agreements, which might result in increasing trust with respect to the Visegrad Group cooperation in the eyes of the inhabitants of individual countries as well as in the eyes of European political elites and institutions. However, any further institutionalization at present, apart from establishing “state in state” (the V4 in the EU), might result in too many problems that might have a negative impact on the functioning of individual members’ internal rules.

Despite the aims and priorities during so called post-accession period stipulated in “Kroměříž Declaration” and its relevant directives, it can be said that after the accession to the EU, the Visegrad Group did not succeed to determine any priority or priorities of such an importance as was the integration into the EU and the NATO during the pre-accession period. The member countries did not succeed to determine the other „Idea“ of Visegrad cooperation despite their declarative statements about the need to continue with the cooperation during the post-accession period.

The policies and national agendas set up by Visegrad countries in the pre-accession period can be characterized by one big common challenge – the desire to join European club. The European integration was by these countries viewed as a process with no real alternative – and so remained as a main foreign policy priority for all the countries since the creation of Visegrad group in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union (with the exception of authoritative tendencies in Slovak republic till 1998). In order to fulfill this aim, Visegrad countries were able to cooperate in such a manner that there were proposals for realizing referendums on joining the EU through the method of spouts, at first in the country with the highest support for integration. Such a proposal came from the Head of State’s meeting in Častlovice 2002 and was later supported by Prime ministers of Poland and Czech Republic (Pástor, 2002). As a result first referendum took place in Hungary on April 2003 (turnout 45,56 / for accession 83,76%), then in Slovak republic on 16th and 17th May (turnout 52,15 / for accession 92,46%) and Poland on 7th and 8th June (turnout 58,85 / for accession 77,45%) and as a last was referendum carried out in Czech republic one week after the one in Poland (turnout 55,21/for accession 77,33%) (Euro Info, 2005). After the successful entry into the EU and NATO came to dissolution of interests of particular Visegrad Group countries. As a result new agendas and goals were defined, but any of the priority could successfully reach the importance of most visible pre-accession period goal – integration into the Western structures of EU and NATO.

The most of the current issues of Visegrad Group countries are dealing ad hoc, although there is a framework of policies. One of the biggest challenges for vital cooperation of Central European countries remains the need to redefine these common priorities and interests. Drawing lessons from their own experience Visegrad countries officially declared that they are ready to promote the integration of the Western Balkan countries throughout the next presidencies of the EU. As significant step towards tangible results can be viewed the efforts made for providing visa-free access for Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro (The Visegrad Group stands..., 2009). Another important priority for V4 was the enhancement and deepening of sectoral cooperation in order to better promote common V4 interests within the EU. Another priority in the area of civil society of individual V4 countries was further supporting of V4 scholarship programs by the means of the International Visegrad Fund.

But what seems to be considered as real threat V4 countries cooperation, is another shortcoming represented by the problematic fulfillment of determined priorities that very often remain at declarative level. Despite the will to coordinate attitudes and activities, either in case of support or sharing experience for the countries aspiring to the membership in the

EU (for example Croatia), or in case of negotiations on the selected policies and mechanisms of the EU (the case of the negotiation on the Union's Financial Framework), individual countries preferred separate to common presentations.

The issue of the enlargement of V4 for the other countries from the region of East and Southeast Europe was specifically topical during the period after the revitalization of Visegrad cooperation in 1999. The most frequently mentioned candidates were Austria and Slovenia, but so required consensus has never been achieved. It is an open secret that the participation of Austria in the activities was in particular supported by Hungary, and the attitude of the Czech Republic and the Republic of Poland was more or less negative. Specifically, Poland tried to focus on the East – Lithuania and Ukraine. The implementation of format “Visegrad Plus“allowing the participation in chosen projects for the countries not participating in V4 (specifically Ukraine and Slovenia) as well as the establishment of Regional Partnership under the leadership of Austria, including not only the V4, but also Austria and Slovenia, put off the idea about the further enlargement of Visegrad Four (Bilčík, Strážay, 2006, p. 20-21).

The Visegrad Group can fulfill the same tasks as were the tasks determined by V3 in the beginning, though many concrete tasks were shifted to different levels during the previous period. Four Central European countries have more in common than before, and their economic level shifted them to the group of transitive economies. The reasons for a further cooperation are also practical – the West tends to perceive this Sub-Region as one unit; and therefore, the ability to cooperate has always been some kind of test – the Visegrad Group proved its ability to cooperate during the process of the EU enlargement to the east, it also could be a tool for the harmonization of interests for working out the strategy for the negotiations with the EU or a forum for the mutual cooperation in all the relevant spheres. (Paličková, 2006). With respect to the fact that some common interests of V4 still exist, this Group – under specific circumstances – gives rise to hope that the cooperation will also continue seven years after the accession of its members to the EU.

Therefore V4 countries should not miss their historical chance to fully promote their jointly shared objectives within the EU in a situation where two of the V4 countries are chairing the EU in a period of 12 months. According to this fact, Hungary and Poland, which will hold the EU Presidency in the year 2011, can build on some of the achievements of the Czech EU Presidency and by these means keep issues important to V4 region on the EU agenda.

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