

VISEGRAD--ARRIVAL, SURVIVAL, REVIVAL

The commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Visegrad cooperation brings an opportunity to assess both positive and negative aspects of the development of the Visegrad Group. The group's 20th anniversary was also the main reason to hold a number of different events organized by both governmental and non-governmental actors in 2011. From this point of view, the development of a bibliography of the Visegrad Group can be considered a very useful activity with which to conclude this period of celebration. The bibliography not only embodies the twenty-year history of the V4, it is also based on the same principles as the Visegrad Group: the equal participation of all involved partners and a sense of solidarity played an important role in its preparation.

The bibliography is of selective nature; nevertheless, it covers all of the most important areas of political and economic cooperation in the twenty-year long existence of the

Visegrad Group. The thematic focus of the study is similar, although due to its limited length it necessarily had to be shorter and even more selective than the bibliography itself. It aims to look at the V4 from the perspective of the three completely different, though complementary, periods. The first part focuses on the foundations of the Visegrad Group and creation of the basic pillars of cooperation. The second part analyses the period characterized by the slowdown of cooperation and summarizes some "lessons learned." The third part focuses on the role of the V4 in the pre-accession period, as well as on the process of finding a new position in the EU. The concluding part looks at prospects for cooperation, as well as assessing some of the most significant challenges for the V4 on the short- and long-term horizon.

Initial Steps

The idea of creating closer cooperation among Central European countries is closely connected with the idea of a "return to Europe." Political changes in 1989 enabled former Soviet Union satellite countries to start processes of political and economic transformation. The former was based on the transition from authoritarian rule to (liberal) democracy, while the latter could be characterized as a transition from a centrally planned economy to a market economy. The newly defined domestic and foreign policy priorities enabled political leaders of former Soviet bloc countries to start co-

operating on new principles. From a historical, geopolitical but also cultural point of view Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland were the closest countries and their cooperation only seemed to be a question of time. In addition, contrary to the former Soviet Union countries and Yugoslavia—with the exception of the three Baltic countries and Slovenia, which were facing disintegration tendencies and political instability—the three Central European countries opted for integration with the “West” and aimed to become part of European and Transatlantic integration structures as soon as possible. From this point of view the establishment of the Visegrad Group can be considered an integral part of the so-called European project.

In 1991, when the V4 was established, political leaders of the Visegrad countries faced several important challenges. First of all, they wanted to overcome their communist heritage and artificial division of the European continent. The “return to Europe” became one of the most important topics on their political agenda, though membership in the European and Transatlantic integration structures were considered more of a dream than a realistic political goal at that time. Secondly, despite the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, there were still Soviet troops on the territory of the Visegrad countries. Therefore, another important political goal was to withdraw these troops as soon as possible. Although integration into European and Transatlantic structures took the Visegrad countries longer than expected, the relatively

quick withdrawal of Soviet troops was important encouragement for the political leaders of all three countries. This success also helped convey that cooperation enables them to reach their national goals faster. In other words, they realized that besides using Visegrad cooperation as a platform for discussion, it can also serve as an instrument for better coordination of positions and articulation of common interests.

The first declaration establishing the Visegrad Group—signed by the representatives of the “Visegrad-Three” (Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland) in 1991 in Visegrád, Hungary—set up basic goals of this regional initiative and created the basis for the further development of joint activities, including “full involvement in the European economic and political system.”¹ This also implies that the V4 was dominantly a political project developed according to a “top-down” approach. Even though political leaders of the three countries were former dissidents and defenders of civil society, the Visegrad Group was not created as a response to any citizen movement.

It can also be argued that people in the three countries did not know their Central European neighbors well and felt alienated from them to a large extent. This was partly due to

¹ Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Hungary in Striving for European Integration, 1991. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412> (accessed on November 2, 2011).

the fact that the communist regime succeeded in transforming the oft-declared internationalism into isolationism. At the level of the masses, the enthusiasm related to the "return to Europe" completely overshadowed the symbolic "return to Central Europe." Though political leaders were more enlightened "Central Europeans," they were not particularly successful at passing their ideas to the population. As a result, the Visegrad Group lacked a civic dimension and it took the V4 almost ten years to open itself to non-governmental initiatives and civil society. The missing link to civil society and almost non-existent sense of regional identity also contributed to the slowdown in cooperation in the framework of the V4.

The Slowdown

Another important factor that contributed to the slowdown in cooperation in the mid-1990s was the weak institutionalization of the Visegrad Group. Roughly three years of otherwise intensive cooperation among the V4 countries was not enough to secure informal rules of cooperation and coordination. Visegrad cooperation then easily became victim to changing political developments in two V4 countries: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The split of Czechoslovakia in 1993 even strengthened the positions of political leaders who were not greatly in favor of the development of regional cooperation. While in the Czech Republic the increase in self-confidence resulted in the conviction that Visegrad co-

operation could hold the Czech Republic back (as demonstrated by the Czech government), in Slovakia the prime minister opted for an autochthonous state and a nation-building path, which, however, was not compatible with its Visegrad neighbors. The deviation of Slovakia from the so-called Central European path of political and economic transformation, which included increasing tensions with Hungary, resulted in the exclusion of Slovakia from the group of most advanced candidates for EU membership, as well as from the first round of NATO enlargement.

Despite its relatively young age, the V4 had already experienced significant achievements by 1994, of which the aforementioned withdrawal of Soviet troops may serve as an example. On the other hand, one of the weaknesses of the cooperation was that the V4 countries did not manage to make any significant progress in terms of their integration into the EU. It became obvious that the integration process would take longer than expected in 1991, when the V4 was founded. Also, despite the fact that Brussels seemed to appreciate cooperation among the V4 countries, no clear message highlighting the importance of regional cooperation for integration perspectives was sent to the V4 countries. The lack of a so-called regional approach, as demonstrated by the Czech and Slovak governments, also contributed to the decline in cooperation under the Visegrad umbrella.

The slowdown in cooperation did not, however, lead to total paralysis of collaboration. Cooperation under the umbrella

of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) continued to develop and—what is of particular importance— attract other countries. In 1996, when the V4 as such was in deep crisis, Slovenia joined CEFTA as a full member. Despite these successes it was obvious that CEFTA could not serve as a substitute for the Visegrad Group, as the V4 was multidimensional in its nature. As three V4 countries— Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland—moved closer to opening negotiations with the EU, it became obvious that in addition to its economic focus, closer political cooperation, including co-ordination of positions, would have been needed. This also led political leaders of the three countries to think about the revitalization of cooperation. Since Vladimír Mečiar was still ruling the country, the Visegrad neighbors reserved an empty chair for Slovakia.

It is worth mentioning that Visegrad cooperation, though in a reduced framework—without Slovakia—continued to work in a broadly defined field of security. The ambition to join NATO, as well as realistic prospects of membership (the latter was not the case for Slovakia at that time) led the leaders of the three countries to coordinate their activities and intensify exchange of information. So did the will to continue enhanced cooperation in the post-accession phase. Encouraged by their successes, the Czech, Hungarian and Polish leaders showed their interest in continuing to cooperate in the post-accession phase, as well. The change in government in 1998 allowed Slovakia to occupy its chair in

the “club,” so one of the priorities of the V4 in the area of security was to complete the integration of Slovakia to NATO as soon as possible.

At the Turning Point of the Pre-Accession and Post-Accession Periods

As mentioned above, the revitalization of Visegrad cooperation was driven rather by the pragmatic approach of participating countries than by sentiment. The Visegrad Group itself became an instrument to achieve the most crucial priority of all four countries—integration into the EU—while the representatives of the four countries realized they would not achieve their integration goals unless they co-ordinated their positions and activities.

After its revitalization the V4 became a strategic platform for discussing issues related to the pre-accession process.² Joint accession to the EU was in the interest of all four countries, which also strengthened the sense of solidarity inside the group. Exchange of information and experience

² The transfer of experience from EU integration, together with other substantive elements of cooperation, was embodied in the document Contents of Visegrad Cooperation, which was adopted by the V4 Prime Ministers in Bratislava in May 1999. The contents also included the basic structure of the Visegrad inter-governmental cooperation. Contents of Visegrad Cooperation approved by the Prime Ministers' Summit Bratislava on 14th May 1999. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412> (accessed on November 2, 2011).

was held on a regular basis inside the group, as well as with non-V4 partners.³

However, this does not mean that the V4 countries were always loyal to the interests of their partners in the group. For instance, in 2002, different interpretations related to the compatibility of the so-called Beneš decrees with European Union legislation resulted in a delay of the V4 prime ministers' meeting. Skeptical views of the future of Visegrad cooperation strengthened at the end of 2002, during its final phase of negotiations with the European Union. Each of the four countries fought for its interests alone, forgetting about solidarity within the group. The situation repeated itself one year later at the Brussels Summit of the European Union.

2000 marked an important step in the institutional development of Visegrad cooperation. The establishment of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) was a clear sign of a consensus among the V4 leaders to further intensify cooperation and extend the scope of activities. The primary aim of the fund was to bring the V4 closer to the people, especially through providing support for projects developed by non-governmental organizations, local governments, universities or other public institutions. The establishment of the IVF secretariat in Bratislava, accompanied by the employment of staff members, meant that the V4 had acquired its first institution.⁴ From a structural point of view, another important

contribution to the development of cooperation and deepening of coordination was the first presidency of the Visegrad Group. The idea to hold the presidency of the group on a rotating basis with a mandate for one year was adopted by the V4 Prime Ministers Summit in Bratislava in 1999 and was further developed in a separate annex in 2002.⁵

The achievement of a primary goal—accession to the EU—can be considered a great success of individual countries, but also a great achievement of the Visegrad Group as a whole. It did not come as a surprise that after the achievement of such a crucial goal, as was the EU membership, critical voices regarding the future existence of the V4 increased. To overcome any doubts the V4 countries agreed on a declaration in which they tried to highlight new priorities for the post-accession period.⁶ Despite all their efforts, however, new priorities and goals were formulated very vaguely in the declaration. Although a more precise list of priorities appeared soon in the guidelines of Visegrad cooperation,⁷ the lack of an important goal comparable to that

³ Joint meetings and cooperation with the Benelux countries can be mentioned as an example.

⁴ <http://visegradfund.org/about/basic-facts/>.

⁵ *Annex to the Content of Visegrad Cooperation*, 2002. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/annex-to-the-content-of> (accessed on November 2, 2011).

⁶ *Declaration of Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, the Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic on cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries after their accession to the European Union*, May 12, 2004. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1> (accessed on November 2, 2011).

⁷ Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412> (accessed on November 2, 2011).

of EU accession was still apparent. It also turned out that the V4 countries had to “swallow” properly the fact that they had become EU members, as membership brought them new opportunities on the one hand and commitments on the other. Accordingly, the process of defining new priorities, accompanied by Visegrad “enlargement fatigue” connected with the early years of experience with EU membership, characterized the V4 for at least two years after joining the EU.

As in the pre-accession phase, a certain diversity of views characterized the post-accession period as well. Examples of different positions from the post-accession period include, for instance, the EU Reform Treaty later known as the Lisbon Treaty, and attitudes towards Kosovo’s independence. This first example is mentioned due to its relevance to the EU, while the second concerns one of the most important territorial priorities of the V4—the Western Balkans. While the differences regarding attitudes towards the Lisbon

⁸ In the issue of the EU reform treaty/Lisbon Treaty the V4 was divided in two equal parts. While in the case of the reform treaty the Czech Republic and Poland presented rather negative attitudes, Slovakia and Hungary were quite strongly in favor of the adoption of the treaty. As the consequence, despite the formal agreement given by the prime ministers of the Visegrad countries on the benefits of approving the Lisbon Treaty, Poland and the Czech Republic found themselves in the category of countries seen as the bearers of Euro-sceptic ideas. However, it remains a fact that both in the Czech Republic and in Poland the Lisbon Treaty was used as a domestic political football, or in some cases as a symbol of the categorical disapproval some domestic political actors have of the deepening process of European integration. With regard to Kosovo’s declaration of independence, Slovakia remains the only Visegrad country that has not recognized the independence of this former Southern Serbian province. This difference of opinion, however, did not prevent the Visegrad Partners from finding a compromise on the issue of providing Visegrad scholarships to Kosovar students.

Treaty were successfully overcome, in the case of Kosovo’s independence Slovakia holds a different position than the other three V4 countries.⁸ Natural competition among the countries also appeared, for example, in the case of the seat of the European Institute of Technology.⁹ On the other hand, there were a few examples showing that solidarity is one of the leading principles of Visegrad cooperation.¹⁰

V4 Successes

When referring to the successes of the Visegrad Group in the post-accession period, one can distinguish between general achievements and concrete goals. General achievements would include the disappearance of bilateral tensions from the V4 agenda, the increased role of the V4 Presidencies, as well as the increasingly important role of the International Visegrad Fund. On the other hand, admittance to the Schengen zone, the precise development of

Despite the fact that Slovakia sees Kosovo as an integral part of the Western Balkans and assures it a “European perspective,” discrepancies regarding its final status certainly affect the engagement of the Visegrad Group in the region. However, this is also true for the EU’s policy in the Western Balkans.

⁹ Three of four V4 countries—Hungary, Poland and Slovakia—applied for the seat of the European Institute of Technology without reaching any kind of agreement at the Visegrad level. Slovakia even submitted a joint application with Austria.

¹⁰ The support of Poland and Hungary for the Czech and Slovak Republics’ joint application to host the European Nuclear Energy Forum in Bratislava and Prague can be mentioned as an example. Both the Czech Republic and Slovakia are well-known supporters of nuclear energy, while Poland and Hungary have demonstrated that they also recognize the importance of nuclear energy as one of the important energy resources. In this area the positions of the V4 countries sharply contradict the position of neighboring Austria, which also has an ambition to play a significant, if not a leading role, in Central Europe.

territorial foreign policy priorities and significant development of cooperation in the area of energy security could be seen as specific successes of the V4 in the post-accession period.

1) General Achievements

a. *Exclusion of Bilateral Tensions from the V4 Agenda*

It is a well-known fact that good relations among partner nations form the basis for the full-fledged development of regional cooperation. A positive aspect of this, which has been confirmed by the V4, is that cooperation ceased to be significantly affected by bilateral problems between the individual Visegrad countries. This concerns Slovak–Hungarian relations in particular, as these have been the most sensitive in the whole history of the V4. Although 2008–2009 proved to be among the most difficult periods in terms of Slovak–Hungarian relations, this did not manifest itself in the communication within the V4. Despite the changing political reality in Hungary and Slovakia, in light of past experiences, probably no immediate reversal in mutual relations may be expected.

b. *The Increasing Impact of V4 Presidencies*

Recent years also confirmed the growing interconnectedness between the efficacy of cooperation within the V4 and the presidencies of the different countries. Although the pre-

sidencies' agendas are approved by all the Visegrad partners, the institution of the presidency offers an individual country the opportunity to propose and carry out its own initiatives. Intensification of Visegrad cooperation therefore requires not only careful handling by the presidency, but also that the presidency be active in seizing the initiative. The presidency has therefore become an important coordinating and policy-shaping instrument.

Another important aspect to mention is continuity in priorities, regardless of which country holds the presidency. For instance, the 2009/2010 Hungarian Presidency introduced an informal tradition concerning summits of V4 foreign ministers. According to this tradition, one of the two summits is dedicated to the Western Balkans, the other to the Eastern Partnership.

c. *The Development of the IVF Trademark*

An increasingly important role is being played by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). Besides its importance for the V4—based primarily on strengthening the internal cohesion and support of relations among the Visegrad countries at the level of civil society—the fund plays an important role in developing contacts with countries outside the group. The development of the IVF and enlargement of the scope of its activities is closely related to increasing budget support.¹¹ Most of the funding goes to the so-called Small and

¹¹ Totalling six million EUR in 2011.

Standard Grants schemes, while support for cross-border and interregional cooperation is increasing, as well. Scholarship programs, particularly those aimed at students and experts from East European and Western Balkan countries, represent another important aspect of IVF activities.¹²

2) Particular Successes

Schengen. The V4 countries managed to enter the Schengen system according to plan, namely by the end of 2007. To a large extent this was truly due to close coordination of positions of the Visegrad partners and their joint opposition to the Austrian idea of implementing a four-month transition period and postponing the date of Schengen accession almost to the middle of 2008.

Development of Territorial Priorities. The V4 countries have demonstrated their positive attitude towards their Eastern neighbors and Western Balkan countries since their accession to the EU. Support for the intensification of relations between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus on the one hand and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and Serbia on the other has been one of the top priorities of the foreign policies of the Visegrad countries also in past years.¹³ Apart from stressing an open door

policy to any European country aspiring to EU membership, the V4 countries also declared their willingness to assist their eastern neighbors and Western Balkan countries in the process of implementing necessary political and economic reforms.

Energy Security. Mainly due to different energy mixes in the V4 countries, it was difficult to find a common strategy that would fulfill the expectations of all members. During the gas crisis at the beginning of 2009, however, the V4 countries fully recognized the importance of the issue of energy security. Since all of the V4 countries are—although to a different extent—dependent on foreign energy resources, the coordination of their positions in the area of energy, as demonstrated by the establishment of regular meetings at expert and political levels, is considered of particular importance.¹⁴

Common Challenges and Cooperation Areas

As already mentioned above, the accession of the V4 countries to the EU has created new challenges for the further

¹² For more details see www.visegradfund.org.

¹³ See, for example, The Visegrad Group and Germany Foreign Ministers Statement on the Eastern Partnership, Bratislava, March 3, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegrad->

[group.eu/2011/the-visegrad-group-and](http://www.visegrad-group.eu/2011/the-visegrad-group-and) (accessed on November 2, 2011), also Visegrad Group Ministerial Statement on the Western Balkans, Bratislava, October 22, 2010. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2010/visegrad-group> (accessed on November 2, 2011).
¹⁴ See Declaration of the Budapest V4+ Energy Security Summit, Budapest, February 24, 2010. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2010/declaration-of-the> (accessed on November 2, 2011), also Declaration of V4 Energy Ministers, Bratislava, January 25, 2011. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2011/declaration-of-v4-energy> (accessed on November 2, 2011).

development of Visegrad cooperation. These challenges are to a large degree inter-connected with EU policies. It can also be argued that the main European themes will dominate the Visegrad agenda also in the future. A brief list of the most important challenges would then encompass the following issues or cooperation areas:

Further development of cooperation with Eastern neighbors in the framework of the Eastern Partnership.

Launched by the Czech EU Presidency in 2009, the Eastern Partnership remains one of the flagship initiatives of the Visegrad Group and an important tool for communication with EU Eastern neighbors. It is also worth mentioning that prime ministers of the V4 countries agreed to establish a special V4-EaP program by allocating an additional 1 million EUR to the budget of the International Visegrad Fund as of 2012.¹⁵

Support to countries of the Western Balkans in their integration into the EU. There has always been a consensus among the V4 countries that the EU's door should remain open to the Western Balkan countries. Though the Western Balkans occupy a different position among foreign policy priorities of the V4 countries, the Visegrad Group expresses its support for the Western Balkan countries unanimously. The V4 countries, as EU members, can therefore

contribute with their own initiatives and ideas to actively shape EU policies towards the Western Balkans on the one hand and assist the Western Balkan countries in meeting EU requirements on the other.

Continuous cooperation in the area of energy security.

Despite the improvement in cooperation achieved since 2009, especially in the field of strengthening consultation mechanisms among the government representatives and experts responsible for energy security, the V4 countries still face a number of challenges that have to be solved in order to make cooperation in the energy sector more effective. Specific attention must be paid to the use of nuclear energy.

Further exploitation of the V4+ mechanism. This tool enables the Visegrad Group to develop cooperation with countries or groupings outside V4. Development of cooperation under the V4+ umbrella basically depends on the needs of the external countries and the interest of V4 countries in accepting their offers of cooperation. Despite the involvement of a relatively high number of external actors, including countries like Israel, Japan and Egypt, the potential of the V4+ instrument is far from being exhausted.

Transfer of know-how and the best practices. The area in which the V4 can provide added value compared to other regional initiatives in the EU—such as Benelux or Nordic cooperation or B3—is transfer of the best practices from

¹⁵ See "16/06/2011—the Fund's Budget Raised by €1,000,000." Available online: <http://visegradfund.org/2011/home/1-06-2011/> (accessed on 19 October 2011).

both transformation and integration processes. The target regions for this kind of assistance are identical with territorial priorities: the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans. Visegrad cooperation as such can also serve as an inspiration for other regional initiatives in neighboring regions. The example of the Visegrad Fund thus becomes increasingly attractive, too.

Establishment of joint consulates and other forms of representation. The project implemented in Johannesburg, South Africa, became the pilot project within whose framework common provision of different services was tested. The so-called Visegrad Houses are planned to be opened in other countries and regions, too. Their added value is that they provide all V4 countries with direct contact with countries or even whole regions where no diplomatic representation exists at present.

Development of the civil dimension of Visegrad Cooperation. Strengthening of the civil dimension of Visegrad co-operation was possible especially thanks to the establishment of the International Visegrad Fund. However, despite a systematic effort to bring Visegrad closer to citizens—especially through the support of civil society projects by the IVF—V4 remains a predominantly political project. Ways of spreading the Visegrad idea among the populations of the V4 countries remains another big challenge.

The Three No's

In addition to meeting particular challenges and fulfilling cooperation areas, the development of the V4 will most probably continue to be based on the three widely accepted No's: "no" to institutionalization, "no" to enlargement, and "no" to any slowdown in cooperation.

"No" to Further Institutionalization

For now, the only institution established within the Visegrad frame is the International Visegrad Fund, which is, however, to a large extent an independent entity. There is a consensus in the Visegrad Group not to institutionalize it beyond the level of the IVF, which means that the V4 will maintain its weak institutionalization. This is linked to higher flexibility and openness to new ideas and content, more efficient spending of financial resources and possibilities of organizing ad hoc meetings and coalitions with other countries.

In light of the above there is a prevailing tendency in the V4 to update existing mechanisms of cooperation and create new ones within the existing institutional framework. One of the examples of such instruments are the regular consultations that representatives of the V4 countries hold before the EU Council meetings. In general, stronger institutionalization is not a prerequisite for further development and intensification of cooperation, if some criteria are met. In particular,

values, principles and informal rules shared by all partners play an important role. One of the most important among these is the principle of solidarity, which—despite some divergence in positions of individual V4 countries—has remained the leading principle of the Visegrad Group. Another criterion for a viable regional initiative that the V4 has managed to meet is appropriate selection of common goals and aims.

“No” to Enlargement

Though there have been a number of suggestions to enlarge the Visegrad Four in the course of last twenty years—with Slovenia and Austria as the most frequently mentioned candidates—there is a consensus among V4 country representatives not to enlarge the group further. Enlargement as such would perhaps bring new issues to the agenda of the V4 and would strengthen the clout of the V4 at the level of the EU, on the other hand, however, it would complicate the process of decision-making, simply because there would be more opinions and interests to be taken into account. This does not imply that the V4 would be eager to exclude non-Visegrad countries from closer cooperation. The so-called V4+ formula has been used in order to intensify cooperation with other countries or groupings in selected areas of joint interest. From this point of view, it is more appropriate to explore new possibilities of employing this formula than to reopen the enlargement issue.

“No” to More Slowdown

As mentioned previously, the Visegrad Four experienced almost four years of slowdown in terms of cooperation. Following revitalization of the V4 in 1998 and 1999, political leaders of all four countries—regardless of their ideological backgrounds or party affiliations—have continuously considered the V4 a useful instrument. It is therefore foreseeable that they will make significant effort to diminish the possibility of repetition of a negative scenario.

The Next 20 Years of Visegrad Cooperation

If expectations related to Visegrad cooperation are realistic and if the current basis of institutions and agreements is taken into account, one may conclude that the twenty years of V4 existence have been connected with several important successes. These successes, among which especially EU and NATO accession play an important role, quite naturally generate expectations for the future.

The Visegrad Group has entered the third decennium of its existence as a respected and efficient regional initiative, with a steadily improving reputation. Despite the unfavorable attitudes of the Visegrad countries towards the possible enlargement of the group, the V4 has not become a closed club. On the contrary, the group has remained open to

cooperation with non-members and regional groupings. The V4 has not become a simple lobbying group either, although it represents the joint interests of four countries. It has rather developed into a very pragmatic form of cooperation that is exploited to fulfill the common objectives of the four participating countries. If the V4 manages to keep its profile, it will survive another twenty years.

What makes the V4 specific in comparison to other regional initiatives in the EU is its "soft power," which makes it attractive in neighboring regions of Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans. Such soft power is based on the transformation and integration experience of particular V4 countries, but also on the achievements of the group as a whole. In addition to neighboring regions, another level open to infiltration by Visegrad's "soft power" is the European Union. The EU itself offers Visegrad countries an important instrument to advocate their individual and regional priorities or policies. The attractiveness of Visegrad's "soft power" in neighboring regions and in the EU, however, depends on the further strengthening of cooperation mechanisms and creation of new ones. Although significant progress has been made in this field in the last twenty years, the possibilities are far from exhausted. It is worth mentioning that cooperation can be strengthened and new instruments introduced without the need for amending current levels of institutional

ization or the agreements that form the basis of Visegrad cooperation. As in the past twenty years, principles and values should and certainly will continue to play an important role in the future development of Visegrad cooperation. The principles of solidarity, continuity, flexibility and innovation will be of crucial importance in particular.

Solidarity is important from the point of view of the cohesion of V4 countries in terms of strategic interests and decisions. It helps protect the V4 from becoming a "multi-speed" regional initiative. Natural rivalry, for instance in the area of investments, is an indivisible part of any regional initiative, but should be distinguished from selfish national interests and the ambitions of particular countries, as these may have destructive impact on the quality of cooperation.

Continuity refers to the maintenance of existing rules and effective instruments of cooperation. In order to achieve sustainable development, the V4 must build on past experience, including achievements and lessons learned.

Flexibility allows the V4 to react promptly to challenges as they appear and to adapt to new circumstances. To maintain its flexibility, the V4 should avoid further institutionalization.

Finally, innovation is important from the point of view of updating existing forms of cooperation and introducing new

measures. Similarly important is the inclusion of new thematic priorities in the agenda. The V4 can keep its comparative advantage only if it remains open to new challenges and opportunities and handles them properly.

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VISEGRAD IN GENERAL