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11

The Visegrad Group on the Threshold of Its Third Decade: A Central European Hub?

Michal Kořan

11.1 Introduction

The Visegrad Group (also the Visegrad Four – V4) is a subregional group consisting of four Central European (CE) countries – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia. The V4 was established on 15 February 1991 when the Presidents of Czechoslovakia and Poland and the Prime Minister of Hungary met in Visegrad, Hungary.¹ In February 2011, the Visegrad Group celebrated the twentieth anniversary of its existence. Looking at the recent scope and depth of its activities one has to admit that the V4 made the first step into its third decade as a self-confident and by far the most important subregional group in Central Europe even though the potential still exceeds the actual outcomes (CEPA 2011). The picture of the V4 has not always been so bright, however. Only eight years ago the V4 faced tough questions about its meaning; even its very survival was at stake. Thus, the main issues that this chapter seeks to address are the following: First, what were the conditions that had to be fulfilled for the Visegrad Group to become as ambitious and recognized as it is today? This question arises from the surprising ability of the V4 to overcome long and recurring phases of justified scepticism and concerns about the meaningfulness as well as the future of the group. In this chapter, six conditions that – from a contemporary point of view – were necessary for the V4 to withstand the challenges² are defined. Second, the chapter aims at describing how the process of 'becoming and stabilizing' of the group affected the in-group feeling of the V4 members, and how this in-group feeling in turn affects the relations of the V4 to the other countries in the region. Finally, the chapter will look at the role and the position of the V4 in Central Europe as well as in a larger European setting.

The chapter will first elaborate on the main argument to be discussed here. It will then move to a brief overview of the historical conditions and context of the creation of the Visegrad Group. Afterwards, it will list the six factors

that were necessary for the V4 to succeed during its two-decade journey to becoming a stabilized and recognized subregional group. The final part of the chapter will analyse what the V4's goal of becoming a distinguishable albeit informal group within the context of Central Europe means, and what role the V4 plays in the context of European affairs as such.

11.2 Points of departure

The V4 has gradually become a recognized regional trademark and a pivotal messenger of broader regional points of view in the matrix of Central (and Central-Eastern – CEC) European relations. In certain agenda (like, for example, the eastern and southeastern dimensions of the European Union's (EU's) neighbourhood policy or energy security) the V4 acts as a hub which, through various means of cooperation with other countries or with other subregional groupings, serves as a bearer and promoter of the CE views in the larger European context. Before the V4 could have assumed such a role, though, it had to make the long journey from its unconvincing origins at the beginning of the 1990s, through its vegetative state between 1993 and 1998 and the deep scepticism about its meaning around the time of the V4 countries' EU accession in 2004, and finally to the ambitious and accomplished status it has today. Many observers argued that the V4 would become irrelevant after the four countries joined the EU in 2004 (see, e.g., Pehe 2004, 2006; also Vykoukal 2004). The argument was that under the diverse conditions of intersecting interests and variable interest coalitions that constitute European politics, it makes no sense to stick to the idea of a regionally defined group.³

The cautious stance in regard to maintaining (not to mention deepening) the V4 cooperation was also based on theoretical observations. In his theoretical account on the prospects of the future of the Visegrad cooperation, Druľák (2002) offered six conditions for its success that were based on a blend of rationalist and constructivist approaches to international cooperation. These conditions were (1) a degree of interdependence; (2) the sharing of a common threat; (3) a similarity in political, historical, societal, and cultural terms; (4) a will to self-binding; (5) an institutionalization of relations among the V4 countries; and (6) the existence and development of a shared identity. When he looked at the V4 cooperation through the prism of these conditions in 2002, Druľák rendered the future of the group in quite dim colours (Druľák 2002: 61–3). On the other hand, these conditions should not be read as determinants of regional cooperation in the long term, especially with regard to the possible reflexive development of conditions 4 and 6 (a will to self-binding and identity development), as the reflexivity of the actors' conditions might have a decisive impact on the perception of more material factors (such as interdependence) (*ibid.*: 63). It is this line of argument that will be further developed and used for explaining

the recent successful state of V4 affairs. The key explanatory concept used in this regard is 'a gradual socialization of the bureaucratic and political elites within the V4 framework': socialization helps to redefine one's identities or at the very least one's perceptions of both himself/herself and his or her others. Siding with constructivism the chapter uses both identities and perceptions as unavoidable concepts in explaining preference building in (international) behaviour (Wendt 1987: 369). According to constructivist symbolic interactionism people act towards other objects or actors on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to these objects or actors. No object or human activity has an 'objective' meaning outside the particular (inter)subjective interpretation. The ascribed meanings do not permanently stay the same. Instead, they get created, changed, or modified during the subject's interactions with the society or other actors (Blumer 1969/1998: 2). Thus, thanks to social interactions the normative characteristics and identities of actors can (and do) change over time (Wentworth 1980). Based on this perspective the chapter argues that during the two decades of the V4's existence the continuous and growing interactions of the V4 actors contributed precisely to this kind of interactionist socialization, which in turn affected the actors' perceptions of the utility and value of the V4. It is needless to say that this change was the one that rendered the V4 as a useful and valuable club and that this change pushed the preferences of the V4 countries closer to mutual cooperation and, for that matter, to self-binding in projecting their foreign policy ambitions.⁴ As a result, today the four countries are bound together by ties that exceed merely rationally defined interests (in fact, the V4 countries lack rationally defined interests in many respects). The Visegrad socialization also led to something that we can call Visegrad quasi-identity. This quasi-identity hardly reaches into the societies of the four countries but it finds itself embedded deeply in the mindsets of politicians, diplomats, and other officials that have something to do with foreign policy. The quasi-identity not only reinforces the very inclination of the member countries to cooperate in the V4 format. It also means that the V4 countries perceive the group as an entity with distinguished features and a specific nature, perhaps as a 'club' that seeks fruitful interactions with other actors but at the same time maintains its touch of exclusivity.

This is not to say that the socialization of the V4 actors was a natural and/or inevitable development. It was but a part of the two-decade-long story of the V4 group. Also, the V4 has had to fulfil several other conditions on this journey. These conditions will be explained in depth below and they are – in one way or another – also related to Druľák's six conditions, which are mentioned above. But it is important to say that without the recent level of the actors' socialization and without the Visegrad quasi-identity, those material factors that potentially set the V4 countries apart (as, for example, their lack of an institutional framework, their conflicting interests, and their differing geopolitical ambitions) would have (had) a rather destructive effect.

11.3 The long journey from 'four' to a 'group'

11.3.1 Historical context and points of departure

First, it is necessary to lay out a general argument that would put the creation and initial development of the V4 into an appropriate context. Central Europe's centuries-long history does not by far suggest that a cooperation among its states is something natural or inevitable. Quite to the contrary, the history of the region was marked with ethnical, national, political, social, and other clashes, which rendered the region a continuous potential source of European destabilization (Hroch 2000; Irmanová and Vykoukal 2004; Irmanová 2004: 57–77). Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, some of the Western countries stared at Central Europe with a great feeling of ambiguity (e.g., Great Britain) and even with fears that an abrupt change of the political regimes with the parallel withdrawal of the Soviet power might cause a 'balkanization' of Central Europe (Šedivý 1997). Thus, the region's traditional conflict potential was actually perceived as a security threat to the rest of Europe. The prevailing atmosphere of misunderstanding and clashing interests was clearly felt during the historically first 'Visegrad' meeting, which took place prior to the actual establishment of the group in April 1990 in Bratislava, which was a sheer disappointment (Dančák 2002: 21–3). These clashes of interests came from many sources – differing opinions about the future role of the Warsaw Pact, about the pace of the withdrawal of the Soviet armies, about the path towards the EC /EU, and so on. Thus, the second meeting in Visegrad in February 1991 was prepared with much greater care in order to anticipate and overcome these differences (Šedivý 1997). Also, the violent and shocking response of the Soviet armed forces to the Baltic Republic of Latvia, which was then going through a recession, in 1991 helped the three CE countries to realize that there is a need for a regional approach that would reinforce the potential of the singular countries (Grabiński 2006). However, it took almost 20 years for the V4 to attain its current self-confidence and meaningful state of cooperation. Thus, what follows is a list and a characterization of the conditions which have been gradually fulfilled during the course of the two decades and which were necessary for the V4 not only to endure, but also to develop into its current ambitious form. These conditions are political determination and support; flexibility and the 'Art of Disagreeing'; institutionalization, inner cooperation, and socialization; the substance of cooperation and strategic goals; focusing, prioritizing, and extending; and self-confidence with broader responsibility.

11.3.2 Political determination and support

The political determination and support from the highest political levels was a necessary (yet insufficient) condition to launch such a project because there were no conditions for this project to be built in a bottom-up manner.

Thus, to withstand the fearsome potential and the reluctant West's perception of the Visegrad countries, a strong political will and a strong political determination were preconditions to establishing and sustaining a close cooperation among the three countries that made up the V3 – Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland – along with sufficient support for this pursuit. These factors were of the utmost necessity when it came to overcoming the countries' real mutual problems, lack of common interests, and lack of experiences with subregional cooperation without the arbitrary power of the Soviet Union. Considerations about a closer cooperation among the three countries were no strangers to this region ever since the autumn of 1989. The rationales for a closer cooperation were both ideational and pragmatic. On the ideational level, the then Czechoslovak president Vaclav Havel stated that a closer cooperation between the three Visegrad states has the potential to have a positive influence on the overall European development. The aim would be for them to get closer to Europe not as 'poor renegades' but as countries that could contribute to it with their own spiritual and moral impulses (Kopeček 2004: 128; Dienstbier 1999, 2001, 2006). On the pragmatic level, there was a need to coordinate the dismantling of the Warsaw Pact and the negotiations over the Association Agreements with the EC and to carry out other tasks of this sort. Yet, while there was a general agreement about the need for cooperation, every country had its own conception about its particular nature, and the majority of the issues were dealt with bilaterally. Thus, there was a potential pragmatic and ideational hunger for CE cooperation on the one hand and differing views on its actual nature on the other. To overcome this schizophrenic situation, it was necessary to constantly support the idea of V4 cooperation from the highest political offices, which was what gave birth to this group in February 1991. The extent of the potential damage that the lack of political will and determination could cause to the nature of the cooperation was outspokenly revealed during the period 1993–98. During this period, the V4 found itself in a state that can be described as 'vegetative', at best. There were various reasons for this downturn in the cooperation but their common denominator lay in the lack of political support for the Visegrad idea. In some cases, the bilateral problems dominated over the efforts to cooperate, which was the situation between Slovakia and Hungary.⁵ In other cases, the domestic disinterest or even contempt for the V4 put this agenda far out of the foreign policy priorities, which is what determined the Czech position under Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus (1993–97). The nationalist and authoritarian leaning of the Slovak government under Prime Minister Vladimír Mečiar excluded the possibility of V4 cooperation almost by definition. Poland supported the idea of Visegrad cooperation even under these conditions, but it is fair to say that its conception of the V4 was dictated more by its geopolitical considerations and narrow national interests than by the merit of the CE multilateral cooperation (Fitzmaurice 1998). Further still, the overall context in

Central Europe was strongly influenced by the competition among the V4 countries on their way to the EC/EU (Ágh 1998; Brusis 2002; Bukalska and Bocian 2003; Rhodes 2003: 10–11; Vykoukal 2004; Irmanová 2004; Lang 2004; Kopeček 2004; Druľáková 2007). Thus, just as in 1991, when the V4 was established, it took plenty of political determination and support to revive the V4 in 1997–98.

11.3.3 Flexibility and the 'Art of Disagreeing'

This factor can be loosely linked to the 'will to self-binding' condition mentioned above (Druľák 2002) and it refers to the principle that the V4 countries are willing to go on with their cooperation and communication when one or more of the countries express their disagreement with the others on a particular issue. Despite all the political efforts made towards the renewal, it is important to bear in mind the argument (stated above) that the V4 has not been endowed with a set of naturally shared interests. On the contrary, the interests of the V4 countries do clash in many important aspects. These clashes were palpable in the differing levels of prioritization of the V4 in the foreign policies of the individual Visegrad countries. Also, there were differences among the countries with respect to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the transatlantic relations in general, Russia, and the eastern neighbourhood of the EU (Vykoupil 2004: 232). Besides this, the competitiveness and rivalry among the V4 states that were moving towards the EU also existed. The differences and clashing interests could have proved to be fatal for the V4. Yet, gradually the V4 has developed a mechanism which represents the second condition for the group's persistence: a sense of flexibility and a system that can be termed as an 'art of disagreeing'. In this system, when one or more countries of the V4 club do not share the opinions of the others, it does not mean an end to the cooperation. Instead, it is possible to further communicate about the issue even when the different sides know that an accord is simply not possible in the given case. In other words, a disagreement is not a sufficient reason for a clash in this system (Kořan 2008: 123, 2009: 102; Lukáč 2002). Thus, for example, for many years, it was possible to discuss matters of regional energy security in the V4 even when the V4 countries held different views on this issue. Roughly between the years 2003 and 2007 it was precisely this feature of the V4 that helped it to keep going despite the lack of a broader common interest or strategic goal (Růžička and Kořan 2006).

11.3.4 Quasi-institutionalization and inner cooperation

These two factors are akin to two of the conditions listed in the introduction – interdependency and institutionalization (Druľák 2002: 62–3). Obviously, the mere ability to discuss issues where different interests were clashing was far from sufficient for the V4 to progress to being a full-fledged subregional grouping. What the V4 was severely lacking in the

1990s was a civic and regional dimension of the cooperation (Dangerfield 2008: 640), face-to-face contacts among lower-rank officials, and any sense of a structured framework of interactions. At that time the structure of V4 cooperation and communication was limited almost exclusively to the highest levels (Presidents, Prime Ministers and Ministers of Foreign Affairs) and only very seldom, if ever, did it transcend this level to that of other departments or ministries. From a contemporary point of view it is clear that without a dense and broad network of contacts on the level of desk officers and other officials and also on the level of civil society, and without goal-oriented practical cooperation among particular ministries, V4 cooperation would still be limited to meaningless declaratory meetings at the highest political levels. Also, the V4 would remain in a state of constant risk of being dependent on domestic political changes, as was the case during 1993–98. The V4 managed to overcome this deficit by creating a regular framework of interactions and a pragmatic lower-level cooperation. In 1999, firm procedures and principles of cooperation were set out. We are speaking, namely, of the rotating presidency, the structure of the annual meetings on the highest and ministerial levels, and the posts of the 'national V4 coordinators', who are responsible for the day-to-day agenda of the V4 (Visegrad Group 1999; Kořan 2009: 102; Kořan 2008: 115). Thus the V4 developed a quasi-institutional framework (Dangerfield 2008: 645) which supports it in times of domestic political difficulties or bilateral issues.

No less important was the gradual evolution of the pragmatic day-to-day inner cooperation among the various ministries and even among the ministerial departments (Růžička and Kořan 2006). Traditionally, the collaboration and communication among the ministries of defence and also among the V4 armies work very well (Strážay 2009). Similarly strong is the cooperation among the ministries of the interior, education, culture, transport, industry and trade, and environment (the cooperation among the ministries of environment being more recent). The V4 managed to create a strong and dense network of interactions ranging from diplomats and state officials from various administrative bodies to academics and politicians as well as civil society organizations. A considerable part of this progress took place thanks to the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), the only formal institution within the V4. The IVF was established in 2001 to promote contacts on the civic level. All in all, since the EU accession in 2004 there has been an almost gradual increase of the numbers of V4 meetings, consultations, and projects at political, diplomatic, bureaucratic, and public levels. We can say that during the last decade, the V4 countries increased the level of their mutual interdependency because of the multiple channels of inter-ministerial cooperation, and also that they increased the level of institutionalization because of the formalization of the framework of the V4's interactions.

11.3.5 The substance of the cooperation and strategic goals

These factors can be very vaguely aligned with a 'need to share a common threat' (Druľák 2002: 62). While the V4 countries did not find a common threat they surely were able to find a common and unifying goal after EU accession, and this common goal is based on a shared perception of their mission and role in the Central Eastern European region (and the EU itself). Up to some five years ago, the V4 seemed to face a dilemma as to whether to remain a rather comfortable discussion club without much substance or ambition to work towards real cooperation (Bilčík and Stražay 2006) or declare for itself the risky goal of identifying several core issues for cooperation. The goal-oriented approach is risky because any failure to attain the goals will shed a negative light on the entire group. Therefore, till roughly 2009, a compromise between these two approaches was favoured. But especially since 2009, a strong tendency to favour the second approach, which is more ambitious despite its riskiness, can be detected. Thus, the V4 was able to secure the fourth condition of cooperation: defining (and sticking to) the core substance of its cooperation, without which, in the long term, the V4 would likely be destined for oblivion.

At this point, the most visible core issues are threefold (and interconnected): the backing of the eastern and southeastern enlargement of the EU, the support for the eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy (and for the Eastern Partnership (EaP)), and the shared vision of regional energy security (Stražay 2008, 2009). The V4 is in the difficult position of balancing the EU's interest in stressing conditionality and the need for domestic transformations in the Eastern European countries on the one hand and the clear EU membership perspective demanded by the Eastern European countries on the other. Energy has been a long-time issue for the V4 countries (Lukáč 2004; Leška 2003; Palata 2006). But a new interest in moving further with the energy agenda was stirred up by the January 2009 gas crisis between Russia and Ukraine. The gas crisis was the main topic of the Prime Ministers' meetings in January and June of 2009 as well as of the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs in May 2009. In 2010 and 2011 this priority really gained on importance, and as a result the V4 tried to directly influence the European Commission by issuing two letters to the EU members with the aim to introduce the V4 priorities into the overall European energy discussions. Other areas of cooperation range from sharing the consulate services and mutual support for common candidates for positions in international organizations through cooperation among various resorts (as mentioned above) to common positions towards environmental and climate measures (Kořan 2011b; Gajewski 2005, 2006). This is not to say that the V4 is free of problems and setbacks, though. Some important and divisive clashes of interest still remain, for example, in the area of the EU budget, defence policies, and the Common Agriculture Policy. Likewise, the important bilateral problems related to the Hungarian minority in Slovakia

between Hungary and Slovakia also persist. But under the conditions of the above-described mutual flexibility and the 'art of disagreeing', these features do not present a danger to the V4 as such.

11.3.6 Focusing, prioritizing, and extending

These factors are once again linked to the question of institutionalization (Druľák 2002: 63). True, the quasi-formal framework of interactions was set up already in 1999. Yet, it took a decade to figure out how to make this framework work effectively. The stabilization of the mechanism of meetings at various levels has been a long-term process which found firmer ground only under the Hungarian V4 presidency in 2009. The Hungarian presidency decided to devote each of the highest political meetings (at the level of Ministries of Foreign Affairs or Prime Ministers) to a single issue and to concentrate fully on this selected topic during the given meeting. Thus, in October 2009, there was a meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs almost exclusively aimed at the Western Balkans.⁶ This approach was also chosen for the meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs in March (devoted to the EaP)⁷ and, more importantly, for the February 2010 Prime Ministerial meeting devoted to energy and energy security.⁸ This trend continued in 2011. This approach proved to be more effective than the previous one, in which multiple issues were discussed without much of an outcome, as these meetings were always in danger of being melted down due to the participants paying attention to an overly broad set of issues.

11.3.7 Self-confidence and a broader responsibility

After the slow and painful process of fulfilling the above-characterized conditions, the V4 in recent times seems to be just about on the brink of adding one more important ingredient that would render it an effective and powerful subregional group. This ingredient is a sense of self-confidence which would also lead to a newly acquired sense of co-responsibility for the development inside the EU and Europe as such. This sense is especially embodied in the redefinition of the V4's stance towards the EU and transatlantic relations. Strikingly, the self-consciousness is not displayed by some hyper-assertive approach towards, say, other countries in Europe or the EU. The V4 has been conceived as (among other things) a tool for promoting rather narrow regional interests within the EU. And, true, in 2009 the V4 leaders agreed to meet prior to each European summit or other important EU event. But the real self-confidence of the V4 is characterized by its dropping of the too often present tendency to delimit itself against the rest of Europe, most notably against the so-called 'old member' countries. Instead, the V4 countries recently opted for a greater adherence to the idea of shared responsibility for the future fate of the entire European project. Thus, the V4 switched from a defensive approach to a more proactive one, stressing the task to become one of the needed energizing factors for the EU project,

which seems to be lost between the political post-Lisbon treaty fatigue and the serious economic and financial threats and uncertainties of recent times.⁹

Should this change prove to be deeper and structural rather than only temporal and accidental, it might cause important shifts in the role of the V4 not only in the EU politics, but also in transatlantic relations. During the past two years or so, many observers have pointed at the process of the 'fading romance' between the CEC and the United States (Gati 2008; CEPA 2010). This process should not be overestimated, as a strong interest in preserving the US involvement and presence in the CE region persists among the CEC's elites. Yet, it is true that several important changes became clearly visible in the past several months. In July 2009, Poland made an important and progressive decision to include the ESDP/CSDP (European Security and Defence Policy/Common Security and Defence Policy) among the priorities of its EU presidency programme, and as of today the Polish government still holds on to this priority. Consequently, Poland successfully started to build a Central and East European (CEE) coalition in order to gain support for its decision (Hynek *et al.* 2009: 271; Central Europe Digest 2009). In the same vein, the V4 made a historic move towards the creation of the V4 Battle Group under the CSDP heading. Already in April 2007 the ministers of defence agreed to create a Visegrad Battlegroup consisting of 1,500 troops which was planned to be a part of the European rapid reaction forces. After months of evaluation of this plan in 2007, it was decided (in 2008) that the preparations would be postponed until their renewal in 2013 (Kořan 2010a: 124). Yet, already during 2010 it became clear that the plans are more real and closer than originally anticipated (Kořan 2011b: 135) and, indeed, in May 2011 the Visegrad Group announced the formation of a battle group that would be in place in 2016 under the Polish command. This step represented a real breakthrough as it was a sign of the readiness of the V4 countries to participate more actively in the European defence project.

We could sum up that the V4 is well on its way to establish itself as an important EU subregional grouping. However, the dramatic developments in European affairs in 2011–12 due to the global financial crisis alert us to a potentially big problem. The uncertain situation in the EU seems to accentuate existing differences in the positions of the individual V4 countries in relation to the future of the EU. The rush of unfolding events within Europe exposes the indecisiveness, defensiveness, and peripheral position of the three smaller V4 countries. The Czech government seems to be politically motivated to steer the country to the verge of the EU's periphery, where Hungary already lingers, albeit for mostly economic reasons. Slovakia is the only V4 Eurozone member, but, nonetheless, due to its marginal – and indeed quite unpredictable – role it cannot be expected to play any active part in this respect. On the other hand, Poland advocates a proactive approach that differs from the approaches of the rest of the V4. It is becoming evident that

the Visegrad countries have different answers, strategies, ambitions, potentials, and limits within the present-day EU framework. It is no exaggeration to state that a furthering of the division over the fundamental questions of Europe's future might give birth to deep difficulties for V4 cooperation.

11.4 The Visegrad Group as 'Central Europe'?

As explained above, the dense interaction network among bureaucratic and political actors contributes to socialization. This socialization, in turn, leads to a formation of a certain sense of Visegrad identity which further enhances the conditions for V4 cooperation (Kořan 2010a: 117). This process of socialization helps to evoke a feeling of the naturalness of the cooperation among the Visegrad countries and a tendency to prefer this format of regional cooperation over others (e.g., the Central European Initiative¹⁰ or the so-called Regional Partnership, which includes the V4 countries plus Austria and Slovenia). Those involved in the networks often feel it is natural to first turn to their 'Visegrad' counterparts or communicate their issues within the V4 before addressing other actors (Kořan 2010a).

This in-group feeling also partly explains why the V4 is careful to maintain the impression of certain exclusivity when communicating with its partners. True, whenever possible and useful the V4 seeks to establish channels of communication with other countries or groups. But these relations never exceed the V4+ format 'the Visegrad group and the others'. This approach is easily understandable with regard to non-CE partners of the V4 because when the V4 deals with them, one can hardly expect more than pragmatic and outcome-oriented interactions. But it is quite remarkable when it comes to relations to those countries that are traditionally perceived as CE because these relations seem prone to be based not only on shared interests but also on identity. However, the record of the V4 external relations suggests that the V4 developed its own 'Central European' political identity, which is not necessarily in conflict with other concepts of Central Europeanness but certainly differs in such a way that it can be considered as exclusive to the V4 members. 'Central Europe' is a volatile and versatile term affording for even quite substantial transformations in a relatively short span of time. The historical development and previous functions of the concept have little to say in regard to the most recent state of affairs. The 'V4' version of the concept 'Central Europe' stems from the current political understanding of it and its current purpose (for the general argument, see Hurrell 1995: 38–9). Already a decade ago some observers agreed on a political (as opposed to, say, a cultural or geographical) understanding of 'Central Europe' according to which 'Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic utilised the culturally expressed idea of Central Europe for political purposes' (Todorova 2000: 226). This idea of 'Central Europeanness' penetrates its political practices, visions, and priorities. The V4 also projects its 'Central Europeanness' to

the outside 'non-Visegrad' space. Slovenia is a prime case to support this assertion. Austria and Slovenia are probably the two countries beyond the V4 that are the most often referred to as being 'Central European'. There is also a tradition of coupling the southeastern part of Europe (Slovenia, Croatia) with the term 'Central Europe', and this tradition offers various interpretations of the 'natural connectedness' between the V4 countries and Southeastern Europe (Cviic 2000). Also, Slovenia is sometimes referred to as a 'strategic partner' of the V4 (Strážay 2008). It is without a doubt that the majority of the regionally defined interests of the V4 coincide with those of Slovenia. However, a mere correspondence of regional interests – as we could learn from the above – is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for a country's inclusion in the politically defined region of Central Europe. Thus, Slovenia actively participates in many (if not the majority) of the important initiatives of the V4, be it in the format of the V4+, the Salzburg forum, or the Regional Partnership. Yet the extent and nature of the interactions and cooperation are based mostly on pragmatic considerations rather than on the unique blend of a shared identity feeling, socialization, political support, and – of course – shared interests which makes up the Visegrad Group's background. Indeed, around 2000 there were even suggestions (made namely by the then Czech Prime Minister Miloš Zeman) to contemplate the inclusion of Slovenia into the group. Similar proposals are indeed not so unusual and emerge from time to time (Pehe 2011). But these ideas have always been either swiftly buried or even refused consideration, on both the administrative and the political level.¹¹ The relationships are pragmatically oriented and not identity based. Thus in the last couple of years – and for various reasons – the geopolitical preference of the V4 has even partly shifted towards the Baltic countries, the Nordic Council, and the EaP (Kořan 2011a). This is yet another example to show that the V4 has developed its own sense of 'Central Europe' as a political concept which, on the one hand, excludes other 'Central European' countries from the V4 on the grounds that the V4 is an identity-based club, but, on the other, as will be seen in the next part of the chapter, does not prevent the V4 from developing and maintaining an extensive network of interaction with non-V4 partners.

11.5 V4 and the region

The ability of the V4 to become better organized and focused, and more harmonious, self-confident, and effective interestingly coincides with the growing recognition of the group from the outside. The V4, for example, maintains regular contacts with Japan, Israel, Egypt, and most recently (and remarkably) the United States. However, of course the most important and vivid interactions take place in Europe. It was mentioned that the V4 found its priorities in focusing on the Balkans and on the Eastern dimension of the

EU neighbourhood policy with the efforts to keep the EU's attention on the EU enlargement process. It goes without saying that it would be unthinkable for the V4 to promote these regionally defined ideas without discussing them and carrying them out jointly with other countries, other regional groupings, or the European Commission itself. The most usual platform for the V4 communications with other actors is the so-called 'V4+' meetings. 'V4+' meetings are meetings of the V4 representatives to which politicians or officials of other countries interested in cooperation with the Visegrad Group are invited. The V4 learnt to pragmatically combine three different types of the V4+ meetings, depending on the particular agenda. The first type consists of meetings with other Central, Eastern, or Southeastern European EU members (mostly the Baltic countries, Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria), that is, with countries that essentially share the same priorities with respect to the Eastern and Southeastern European neighbourhood. The second type consists of meetings with the 'old member' EU countries (mostly Germany and Sweden), the EU presiding country (or countries) at the given time, and EU officials (namely those from the European Commission). These contacts are necessary for the V4 to keep their agenda within the focus of those actors that do not necessarily or fully conform to the 'Central European' points of view. The third type of V4+ meeting aims at communication with the 'target countries', that is, with the countries of the EaP and the Western Balkans. This platform is necessary for the V4 to convey its support to the non-EU partner countries and also be able to stay informed about their needs and issues. Over the years, there have been certain dynamics in the nature of the V4+ mechanism. Especially during 2003–05 there were efforts to establish closer links for the V4 with Benelux and the Nordic Council. These efforts stemmed from the attempts of the V4 to find some inspiration for their efforts to progress towards becoming a successful subregional group. After the countries' EU accession and the V4's work towards better defining its mission, roughly since 2007, the V4 shifted its attention to the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), which was an idea that was supported mostly by Poland (Gniazdowski 2009: 172). Since then, there were numerous meetings and consultations between the V4 and the Baltic countries, and the agenda ranged from the Eastern EU policy to security policy, energy security, and climate change. Also, as has already been mentioned, the V4 traditionally maintains close contacts with Slovenia, with which it shares a strong interest in the Western Balkan region.

Since 2010 the V4 has opted for a broader and more ambitious and comprehensive approach to the V4+ meetings in an attempt to interlink all three of the dimensions depicted above. In March 2010 the Hungarian presidency organized a large meeting of the foreign ministers of the V4, the EaP partner countries, Spain, Belgium, and Sweden, and EC representatives. The common declaration referred to several priority areas for cooperation, such as energy security, energy and transport infrastructure, and visa

liberalization. The ministers also agreed to establish the 'Group of Friends of the Eap'.¹² During 2010 and the first half of 2011 the V4 attracted more attention and recognition from extremely important actors like Germany and the United States. For the past several years the V4 stood on the margin of the interest of these two countries. Yet the developments in 2010 and 2011 brought about an important change in this respect with a peak in the relations occurring in February 2011 when the German chancellor Angela Merkel met with her V4 counterparts during the V4+ summit in Bratislava. This shift is also the result of the long-term efforts of the V4 to convince the EU to devote more attention to its eastern and southeastern neighbourhood as well as to energy security. Thus, it almost became a rule that the V4 had to invite the representatives of the European Commission and the EU presiding country at the time to the top V4 summits.

None of these V4+ formats would be possible if the V4 did not enjoy substantial recognition from its partners. The actual outcomes of the meetings might often be more symbolic than real but the fact is that the V4 serves as an unparalleled interconnection and hub between the Eastern and Southeastern European countries, CE countries and, the EU and its 'old members'. This makes the V4 a remarkably unique vehicle of transmitting ideas and interests across a number of countries and several regions. In this regard, it is set to play a new dual role as both a promoter of the CE views and an interconnecting bridge between the EU, Central Europe, and the Eastern and Southeastern European neighbours.

11.6 Conclusion

The Visegrad Group has made the long journey from being a narrow and loose circle of top statesmen at the beginning of the 1990s to being a recognized, multi-level, complex, and relatively effective subregional group two decades later. If we go back to the list of the six conditions for a successful subregional cooperation drafted by Druľák (2002) it becomes clear that the most important conditions in the case of the V4 are those that work with the reflectivity and long-term changes in the actors' identities and perceptions. This chapter has tried to demonstrate that there was nothing natural in the V4's progressive development as the V4 only very gradually and painfully fulfilled the six conditions. But its fulfilment of the six conditions partly changed the foreign policy identities of the V4 countries, and this, in turn, led to their current success. The V4 maintains a growing number of contacts with other countries in the region with an aim of promoting the wider CE interests and points of view. The V4 also serves as a hub to connect, aggregate, and mould the intersecting interests of the other actors, which sets the V4 into the centre stage of CE politics. In this sense, the V4 indeed represents a form of subregional cooperation that is unparalleled anywhere in the region. However, having the overriding impact of reflective changes

on foreign policies in mind, one should add that there is no guarantee that the V4 will necessarily remain in such a fit condition especially because of the recent centrifugal tendencies in the EU that might overcome the gained shared V4 identity. Notwithstanding these justified reservations, the two decades of V4 development have shown that with its strong political determination and its socialized and skilled administrative background, the V4 might be able to find a unified and powerful voice (CEPA 2011). The most important lesson to be learnt from the two-decade story of the Visegrad Group is that no matter what structural conditions for international cooperation exist at the given moment, the actual outcome is dependent mostly on the minds, abilities, and preferences of the actors.

Notes

1. This meeting created an imaginary link between itself and a similar meeting which took place in Visegrad in 1335 and was attended by the King of Bohemia, the King of Hungary, and the King of Poland.
2. Having said that, it is important to stress that the chapter does not attempt to offer a full-fledged history of the Visegrad Group. However, readers interested in this topic would probably find useful Vykoukal's highly comprehensive analysis of the Visegrad Group's historical development, which also includes national positions towards the V4 and reflections from other CE countries (Vykoukal 2004). For a (mostly) non-scholarly collection of highly informative and complex texts about the V4, see Jagodziński (2006). Another thorough and informative overview of the V4's history (in this case, its history for the period 1991–2004) can be found in Lukášek (2010).
3. However, even in the pre-accession period there were voices pointing at the fact that the EU might be likely to accommodate and facilitate cooperation among the Visegrad states after enlargement (Brusis 2002: 81).
4. This argument is based on an author's own long-term research, whose origins date back to 2006. As this research is still under way the only published outcome so far can be found in Kořan (2010b).
5. The Slovak–Hungarian relationship is deeply burdened by the complicated histories of both nations and by the fact that a large Hungarian minority lives in Slovakia.
6. Available online at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2009/the-visegrad-group> (accessed 25 January 2012).
7. Available online at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2010/joint-statement-of-the> (accessed 25 January 2012).
8. Available online at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2010/declaration-of-the> (accessed 25 January 2012).
9. Author's notes from Minister M. Dzurinda's speech.
10. Available online at <http://www.ceinet.org/>.
11. This argument is based on the author's series of interviews with Czech and Polish diplomats during September 2006.
12. Joint statement of the foreign ministers of the Visegrad Group at their meeting in Budapest, 2 March 2010 (available online at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2009/the-visegrad-group>, accessed 20 October 2011).

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12 Europeanization of Foreign Policy: Whither Central Europe?

Jozef Bátora

12.1 Introduction

The entry of Central European (CE) countries into the European Union (EU) has been characterized by Europeanization understood as deep, broad-based, and regionally relatively coherent adaptation processes and socialization into a set of EU standards of policymaking and governance (Agh 1999; Schimmelfennig 2001; Sedelmeier 2001; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005; Fink-Hafner 2007). This chapter argues that foreign policymaking constitutes an important exception from this pattern, which not only calls for a rethinking of the concept of Europeanization, but also alerts us to the need to think of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as a policy domain characterized by local and varying patterns of adaptation in the member states.

Comparative research on Europeanization of foreign policy in CE countries is relatively limited. To the extent this process was studied, analyses focused mostly on specific aspects in foreign policies of individual CE countries such as their role in the formation of the EU's neighbourhood policy (Pomorska 2007; Copsey and Pomorska 2010) or more broadly on individual country case studies (e.g., the analyses featured in Wong and Hill 2011). Comparative approaches have focused on various aspects of CE countries' foreign policymaking in the EU context such as the role of strategic ideologies (Druľák *et al.* 2008), the role of EU presidencies (Druľák and Šabič 2010), and/or more broadly the role of CE countries in EU foreign policy (Šedivý 2003; Bilčík *et al.* 2009). Yet studies of Europeanization of CE countries' foreign policymaking from a regional comparative perspective are still virtually missing. This may have to do with the problematic nature of the very concept of Europeanization when applied in the context of foreign policymaking. We need to get a more proper analytical grip on what is referred to as Europeanization of foreign policy and what lessons can be drawn from the CE experience of this process so far. This chapter seeks to address this, first, by introducing a learning perspective on foreign policy Europeanization;