

## Visegrad as a challenge: successes and failures

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After acceding to the diplomatic post in Romania in 2002, one prominent Romanian politician told me with irony in his voice that his country will not continue to try for membership in the Visegrad grouping, “because when our countries acceded the European Union and North-Atlantic Alliance, this concept of regional cooperation will lose its *raison d’être* ... I did not agree with his opinion, but since the Visegrad four (V4) as a specific concept of central European identity was not planning to enlarge, I did not elaborate on the topic anymore. Yet the opinion of the Romanian politician kept echoing in my mind. Why does he perceive the V4 only on the level of integration into European and north-Atlantic structures? Why does he not understand that the Visegrad cooperation is also about something different?

Today I know that my Romanian partner simply could not identify that “something different” in the Visegrad cooperation. As a consequence of a different historical development in Romania, he could not perceive a variety of other factors, which for the V4 countries were a connection and motivation for a more intensive dialogue. If we accept that in international politics not only rational interests are at play, but also emotions and instincts, then an external observer could not understand that this grouping came into being on a ‘regional instinct.’ An instinct that is expressed in a regional self-preservation and also a shared understanding that an individual approach reduces the relevance of each country and the region as a whole. This urge was created by a history of regional co-existence in different forms of statehood and ideological arrangements, but also by harmful and destructive confrontations, shared culture, but also periods marked by intense non-culture, religious intolerance, as well as violence sanctioned by religion. This common experience, after the fall of the Iron curtain, having been wisely cultivated by national political elites, caused that citizens of Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia understood the idea of Visegrad and the spirit of the region very well and supported the idea spontaneously. And they understand it even today.

However, we cannot deny that the creation of Visegrad three in 1991 was also politically viable for all the actors. At a time when nobody in the region was secure, it was useful and great to feel that you belong somewhere, even despite the fact that it was, and still is an informal grouping of countries from Central Europe. Particularly Slovakia in the second half of the 90's got to know very agonizingly, how uneasy it is to be marginalized and isolated.

The region of Central Europe and particularly the governments of the post-communist countries can be blamed for some of the mistakes made during the development of mutual ties between the Visegrad countries. But for the citizens of V4, it cannot be denied that they still intensely feel the fellowship between Visegrad's nations. This feeling is apart from other factors also based on a shared bad experience with a communist regime, on a similar experience with a "brotherly military help" and dominance of the Soviet Union. The countries of V4 were confronted by the same question marks and ambiguities related to the process of gradually shifting from communism towards capitalism. The developed West perceived the central-European region - despite its divisions – as an almost uniform entity. If the region wanted to be relevant at least to a certain degree, cooperation was inevitable. But it is also proper to mention that the informal grouping of V4 served not only as a grouping of mutual assistance, but also as a format of mutual control, so that none of its constituent parts would lead too much or lag behind too much. From this point of view, Slovakia has since the mid-90's relied upon the understanding and help of the more successful three members.

When evaluating the successes and failures of the V4, we cannot base our assessment on simplified criteria according to which a good regional political structure is judged only on how successful it is in coordinating its affairs and interest void of mistakes and disputes... Nevertheless, a state of perfect bliss can hardly be found in international relations, and what's more, such a statement does not correctly reflect the purpose of the V4 existence. Rather, an evaluation of the V4 should be based on the extent to which its original ambitions and goals were fulfilled. Here it is important to look at the text of the original Declaration of cooperation of the three countries on a road towards European integration.

The Declaration states the following as the main aims of the grouping:

- *Renewing state sovereignty, democracy and freedom to the full extent and meaning;*
- *Elimination of all existing social, economical and clerical remains of the totalitarian system;*

- *Creating a parliamentary democracy, modern legally consistent state, establishing respect for human rights and basic freedoms;*

- *Creation of a modern market-based economy*

- *A full engagement with the European political, economic, security and legal system*

Today, after almost 20 year, we can state that these tasks and aims were fulfilled to a large extent. However, the importance of their transformational context is much broader and super temporal and does not end by the integration efforts. Despite a number of obstacles in their development, each of the V4 members has visibly moved forward in comparison with the year 1991. Knowing the difficulties of other regions in Europe, it should be acknowledged that the Visegrad countries showed in a relatively short historical time an exceptional performance and have achieved an unprecedented progress in every of the above-mentioned agendas.

At a different point, the Visegrad Declaration from 1991 states that, *“the key question of spiritual as well as material development of the central European region and an inherent assumption for creating a mutually advantageous cooperation with developed European countries and integration grouping is a consistent application of ideals that are inherent for a civic society. Stemming from the most important elements of the European heritage – universal human values, and based on an own national identity, it is important to create a human society that is mutually and harmoniously cooperating, is tolerant towards individuals, family, local, regional and national groupings that are not weighted down by hatred, nationalism, xenophobia and disputes with neighbors.”* Also this excerpt gives evidence that from the beginning the Visegrad community was aiming at more than just a mere process of integration into the European structures. The ideals of a civic society and harmoniously cooperating regional grouping represented a clear vision for the region. In applying this vision in practice, V4 countries have reached a remarkable level of societal advancement. But the tasks for each member of the grouping still remain equally valid today as they were then.

The super temporality of the aims are also supported by some of the specific practical steps on which all Visegrad countries agreed in 1991: *“to coordinate ... efforts in creating cooperation and firm ties with European institutions... aim at creating undisturbed relations among their citizens, institutions, clergies and social institutions ... develop economic cooperation on a market-based approach in favor of free movement of capital, workforce, mutual beneficial*

*trade with goods and services.. paying great attention to development of transport infrastructure ... mainly in the North-South direction, harmonization of energy systems ...broadening cooperation in the field of ecology ...* This being only a part of the original tasks outlined for the Visegrad region, nevertheless it is clear that their fulfillment will require at least a few more decades.

Today Visegrad cooperation is governed also by additional newer basic documents than just the Declaration from 1991: The Bratislava declaration of V4 Prime Ministers from 1999, Ostrihom annex from 2002, and the Kroměříž declaration of V4 Prime Ministers from 2004, to name a few. These documents have confirmed and elaborated on the basic principles, values, aims and tasks of the grouping. Despite the obvious progress of the whole region, it is possible to quite often hear and read reservation such as “even after 19 years the V4 was not able to institutionalize itself ... V4 is a formal and completely sterile grouping without any future prospects...” Why is it that in scholarly press this skepticism prevails and why is it that the intention to institutionalize cooperation among the countries is brought forward so much? The V4 alone has never had the ambition to be a perfect and all- solving grouping with a permanent secretariat. Real politics and diplomacy are often forcing us to perceive the state of affairs in V4 from the position of a glass half-full, from a position of capitalizing on chances that present themselves, even from a position of coordination and institutionalization opportunities unfulfilled.

For a citizen from the region, the answers to questions such as “would the development in the central European region be more favorable in the last 20 year without the existence of V4” are in the negative. For a rational onlooker, the development had it not been for the Visegrad Group would have been a bit more complicated, especially for Slovakia, considering the country’s near failure to join NATO. Thus, the grouping’s successes are hardly attributable to a solid institutional basis. In the end, not even the notoriously famous informal French-German tandem in Europe has its solid structures, and despite that it is capable of addressing and influencing the fundamental questions of European politics. What’s more, the Weimar triangle, a loose grouping of Poland, Germany, and France also is not institutionalized and tries to have a say over the development in our region. Similarly, the G20 does not have a secretariat and still deals with important questions on the global agenda.

Indeed, the informality of cooperation, along with focus on not only positive, less conflicting agendas by the V4 is at the same time the weak and strong side of this grouping: weak,

because it cannot guarantee to solve all the problems in the region and in bilateral relations, and strong, because it enables great flexibility when selecting topics and accepting decisions and enables to review different agendas and select from various levels of dialogue. Perhaps the most important advantage of V4 is the psychological factor – the fact that countries are communicating in the region satisfies their citizens, makes the region more legible for its allies. Europe focuses its attention exactly on this factor when it tries to solve the situation in Western Balkans. Inter alia, this is what Eastern politics of EU is about today. Therefore V4 is perceived positively in the international arena and this is also why Slovakia often refers to the Visegrad Group as the region's "family silver."

The positive view of the V4 functioning is not by any means reflected in how well they can sweep under the rug hardships and problems in mutual cooperation of its members. Even though to an extent mutual discords were until recently to extent shrouded in a 'cloak of EU integration' now that this has been accomplished, opinions inside the V4, seem to be more accentuated at present stage. The global crisis, uncertainty of international relations, inner processes of the EU have all contributed to a general nervousness in the political life in the region, as well as Europe as a whole. The V4 is through everyday political experience showing that the interests of the region are important and most of the common agendas inside the V4 are successfully progressing.

One of the intentions of this essay is to briefly summarize the successes and failures of the Visegrad cooperation. I will restrict myself only to mentioning the selected successful moments and biggest failures of this grouping up to date.. In this context of enumeration of milestones, one question comes to mind: why did the failures and 'silent periods' in Visegrad cooperation occur in the first place? The experience indicates that the collaboration of the V4 is highly susceptible to the quality and responsibility of the political representations in individual member states. The cooperation is simply too dependent on inner politics and the political cycles. The V4 is not concerned with historical ill wills, which to a greater or lesser extent act as a brake on the cooperation. If even one country starts to perceive the V4 as a "lift" for its national interests at the expenses of its partners, it has the potential to disrupt the balance and effectiveness of cooperation among the grouping. Visegrad cooperation has also gone through these kinds of periods. However, this has not changed the reality that in the end, the spirit of cooperation in the region outweighed the negativities. This is the road for the Visegrad grouping also at times when it faces new challenges. It is the main way how to sustain and develop the clout of the Central European region in European and global politics.

*Summary of main successes of V4:*

- Integration of the four countries into the most successful and powerful groupings of the world. V4 created a very favorable external environment for focusing on fulfilling “homeworks” in integration processes.
- For Slovakia, a remarkable success was catching up with the other V4 members in the EU integration process. The principle of mutual help in the V4 was effectively demonstrated in this case.
- An important step of the countries of the Visegrad grouping was the foundation of the Central-European free trade agreement (CEFTA) in 1992. The main aim of CEFTA was to make mutual trade between the four member countries easier after the disintegration of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance. This aim was successfully achieved by CEFTA, which was later extended to Slovenia, Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Macedonia.
- Creation of a functioning mechanism for political and expert consultation on all levels of the state apparatus and often also on the local governmental level. Each V4 country has realized that without a stable development in any one country, long-lasting stability and security cannot exist in the other V4 countries.
- In the international environment, the V4 has created a positive brand that helps all the V4 members, as well as the region as a whole.
- Setting up the Visegrad fund which financially supports cultural, sports, youth activities in order to intensify “Visegrad” communication and cooperation also in a wider region of Central Europe.
- V4 as a good practical and positive example of regional cooperation for countries from the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe.

*Summary of V4 failures:*

- Slowing down or almost stopping cooperation in the period of 1993 – 1998 as a consequence of internal political changes and direction of foreign policy in Slovakia.
- In the period 2003 - 2004 V4 countries left the platform of regional solidarity in the final phase of the negotiations on EU accession and finalized their accession criteria on an individual basis. They also proceeded in a same manner when trying to push through their interests when the financial framework of EU for the period 2007 - 2013 was formed.
- Countries of the V4 were not able to agree on a united approach in the question of Common Agricultural Policy of the EU.
- V4 countries inconsistently coordinate their nominations of national candidates to EU institutions and other international organizations, as well as candidatures o for leading structures of international organizations.