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VISEGRAD RECONSIDERED – THE PROSPECTS OF THE MOST EFFICIENT REGIONAL COOPERATION FORMAT IN CENTRAL EUROPE AT THE TIME^[1]

ABSTRACT

By employing the perspective of international relations, the article focuses on the development of subregional cooperation in Central Europe. The emphasis is on the Visegrad Four format consisting of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. The V4 is analysed due to a long track record and significant efficiency in the past. Since the V4 is in political crisis and therefore faces significant challenges related to a low intensity of cooperation, none of the participating countries plans to withdraw from it. The article tries to answer the question whether it is still beneficial for participating countries to cooperate in the V4 framework. It also analyses in a detailed way previous stages of cooperation in the V4 format. Strengths and weaknesses are also considered, as well as the relationship of the V4 with other regional cooperation formats in Central Europe. Finally, the article aims to identify both possibilities and constraints that would frame cooperation in the V4 format in the foreseeable future, as well as suggest particular areas of cooperation.

For the purposes of this article, the approaches of Alexander Wendt's social constructivism are employed. The Visegrad framework of cooperation can be understood as a social structure with shared ideas, which subsequently create their identities and interests. The is perceived as a social structure that changes over time, as its identities and interests gradually change – according to the principle of mutual, constantly ongoing constitution of the structure and actors. The actors are the individual V4 countries, so the article aims to analyze the formation of cooperation between them and their mutual interactions. The constructivist approach will also allow to explain the behavior of individual actors (V4 countries) in different periods of the functioning of the Visegrad Group, including the current one, when the V4 is experiencing a significant decrease in the intensity of cooperation.

KEYWORDS: *International relations, regional cooperation, Central Europe, subregional cooperation formats, Visegrad Four*

The Visegrad Four had been the leading regional cooperation format in Central Europe for many years. While prior to the accession of the V4 countries to the European Union it was perceived predominantly as an instrument to speed up their integration, after the big bang enlargement of the EU in 2004 there appeared multiple goals on the agenda. The imprint of V4 was visible in several sectoral areas. Though the V4 always was a political initiative, built in the top-down direction, a strong focus on the

non-governmental sector resulted in unique balance between the so-called political and practical Visegrad.

The years 2015-2019 were marked by the intensification of political cooperation. This was largely due to the opposition of the prime ministers at the time to the European Commission's proposal of mandatory quotas for relocating asylum seekers, which was intended to solve the Europe-wide migration crisis. V4 was often referred to as a "block" of Central European countries that were against the mainstream solutions proposed by other members of the EU. The domination of the so-called political Visegrad over practical/technical cooperation marked the new stage of cooperation, different from the previous era.

The first cleavage among the V4 countries leaders appeared with the intensification of tensions between Hungary and Poland on the one side and European Commission/institutions on the other. With the change of the government in Slovakia in 2020 and Czechia in 2021 political cooperation in the V4 format started to loose steam. The escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 resulted in further weakening of V4, due to the worsening of Polish-Hungarian relations. The creation of the new government in Slovakia in the aftermath of September 2023 elections further deepened the divisions in the grouping, putting the V4 close to an existential threat.

As of now, even Hungary and Slovakia's political leaders believed, who even in 2023 believed in the restoration and strengthening of V4, have lost their enthusiasm. The V4 is in deep political crisis (Marušiak, 2025) and though political cooperation is just one dimension of this regional format, it is a substantial one. In addition, new regional initiatives started to appear in the last decennium and some new might appear in the foreseeable future. For any of the V4 countries the Visegrad Four is considered "the" format, they rather incline to look at other possibilities of regional cooperation, including ad hoc coalitions with like minded countries.

Taking into the consideration the poor state of Visegrad cooperation, the article tries to answer the question whether it is still beneficial for participating countries to cooperate in the V4 framework, also by considering different approaches to regional cooperation. It also analyses in a detailed way previous stages of cooperation in the V4 format. Strengths and weaknesses are also considered, as well as the relationship of the V4 with other regional cooperation

formats in Central Europe. Last but not least, the article aims to identify both possibilities and constraints that would frame cooperation in the V4 format in the foreseeable future, as well as suggest particular areas of cooperation.

Research on subregional cooperation at the level of the V4 countries in all its complexity requires the application of interdisciplinary approaches incorporating knowledge from neighboring disciplines such as history, economics, political science, sociology, political geography, international relations. Individual research aspirations attempting a partial interpretation of the phenomenon of cooperation within the V4 are based on and at the same time limited by the chosen perspective and selection of relevant information. In the presented study, we focus mainly on the perspective provided by international relations.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

Traditional theories of international relations present the importance of regional cooperation in different ways, taking into the consideration their theoretical pillars. The realist school holds reserved and skeptical positions and emphasizes that regional cooperation is essentially important only if it helps to promote national interests (power and security), as well as contributes to maintaining or increasing the influence of a state (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). The liberal school points to the advantages of international cooperation at both the global and regional levels, as well as the potential of states to cooperate on the basis of common interests, rules and institutions (Keohane, 1977). Though according to A. Wendt, social constructivism is not a full-fledged theory, but only an instrument for viewing social reality and, in contrast to traditional individualistic and materialistic views of international relations, it points to a structural and idealistic view of the world. Constructivist approaches focus on the importance of values, normative frameworks, shared identities, while approaching the causes of differences in the intensity of regional cooperation based on the formation of a common identity and not just interests (Wendt, 1999).

Representatives of functionalism and neo-functionalism (Mitrany, 1944, Haas, 1958) underline the importance of connecting states on the basis of

cooperation in specific areas. This cooperation has its own dynamics and cooperation in one area is transferred to several areas (functionalists call it ramification, neo-functionalists spill-over effect). Supporters of new regionalism (Hette, 1999, Gamble & Payne, 1996) promote regional cooperation as an effective tool reducing the negative impacts of global processes. Such a close connection of states will make wars impossible, because by damaging another state, the state would primarily damage itself. This approach understands regional integration as a *multicausal phenomenon in which individual processes [economic, political, security, social] cannot be separated* (Waisová, 2009). According to one of the main representatives, Björn Hettne, a region is a *social construct* (Hette, 1999), which can be understood as a territorially unified space, similar to a space connected by language or religion.

A large part of the theoretical schools is devoted to integration as such, or European integration. Other, lower forms of integration, or cooperation, are addressed by relatively few authors, with the exception of E.B. Haas. The European continent also includes a number of smaller, integration or merely cooperative structures, which offer inspiring research topics on their significance, causes of origin, mode of existence, and their more cooperative or economic-integration character. Other theories define regional cooperation in terms of regional proximity and homogeneity of states (Evans & Newnham, 1998). This homogeneity is understood in four dimensions: social, which includes race, religion, culture, and history; economic, which includes economic level and the possibility of integration; political, where the emphasis is placed on the type of political system; and external, which includes cooperation in the field of foreign policy and common institutions. After applying the given criteria to the Visegrad Group countries, it can be concluded that the V4 countries have the prerequisites for developing cooperation at the regional level, as they tend to converge in most categories.

Our view of integration and cooperation at both regional and subregional levels is based on a macro-system approach to international relations, which understands these processes as elements of a system with shared values and interests. For the purposes of this study, the approaches of Alexander Wendt's social constructivism are employed. According to the specific focus of the research, it is necessary to choose the relevant level of investigation, identify

the actors and structures in which they are embedded. The level of investigation of the social system is the V4 subregional cooperation, the relevant actors of the system are the four V4 states – the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia. After identifying the key actors, we will examine how they are socially constructed. According to A. Wendt, the structures are determined by shared ideas rather than material forces, and these construct the identities and interests of individual actors (Wendt, 2007). Subsequently, it is possible to form judgments about mutual interactions and relationships within the system. In the past, the Visegrad cooperation framework could be understood as a social structure with some shared ideas that influenced the formation of their identities and interests. The central link in both cases was the idea of shared belonging and a sense of a common history and path toward a *better future*. This simultaneously co-created the identity of the shared region and a sense of responsibility for its development. We can also identify a common interest in the form of integration into the EU and the development of the EU as an area of democracy, freedom, security, stability and prosperity. The process of building the region's own identity and defining it as a *Central Europe* is also important.

Sub-regional structures, such as the V4 cooperation, are dynamically developing and to a large extent dependent on the development of higher structures at the European level. Shared ideas, identities and interests of individual actors are the result of constant social interaction within the entire system. This consideration also leads to the idea of the existence of a mutual relationship and interactions between the V4 and other forms of international cooperation in the region. We assume the existence of a mutual relationship as a result of mutual interactions between individual social constructions and mutual influence on the formation and transformation of identities, shared values and ideas. The V4 cooperation shapes its identity, values and goals in interaction and in direct dependence on the European Union, reflecting the dynamics of the political, security and economic environment.

In light of the above, a combination of several methods appears relevant to achieve a complex picture of the examined relationship. The historical approach can be captured in the chronological description and subsequent analysis of individual key events in the context of a given historical reality.

The chosen approach is applicable due to the significant impact of important events on shaping the character of subregional cooperation. Given the longer-term historical processes that generated a number of documents of various content, we also use the method of documentary analysis, i.e. the analysis of primary sources. We also apply the descriptive method when presenting events, dates, facts that determine the intensity of cooperation within the V4. We bring elements of discursive analysis to the analysis of documents, especially when monitoring changes in the vocabulary of elites when formulating positions and texts. The aim is to identify effectively ideas and interests of the V4 countries in subregional cooperation. For a deeper understanding of similar and different processes and tendencies within the V4 cooperation, it is also necessary to apply the comparative analysis. The pan-European integration architecture includes unique cooperation structures that contribute complementary to the stability and prosperity of the entire EU. Subregional cooperation is based directly and indirectly on the values, interests and direction of the EU. We believe that subregional cooperation is formed depending on more complex cooperation and integration structures. Constructivism, as an analytical tool for examining social reality, is based on the belief that ideas construct social reality and that reality constructs the nature of subjects (Wendt, 2007). Actors act on the basis of norms and values and the so-called logic of appropriateness. Norms and ideas shape the identity and interests of actors (Fearon-Wendt, 2006). The process of socialization, or rather Europeanization (the incorporation of states into the normative framework of the Union), is also key (Kratochvíl, 2008). From the perspective of social constructivism, we understand the European Union and its member states (but also the V4) as social structures that change over time, as their identities and interests gradually change – according to the principle of mutual, constantly ongoing constitution of the structure and actors. However, based on a rationalist approach, it is appropriate to examine reality from the bottom up, which means to start at the level of individual actors – in our case the V4 countries. As part of the analysis, we identify the process that we want to examine – the formation of cooperation between the V4 countries and their interactions. Thinking according to the principles of constructivism will be based on the question of how objects and social practices are constructed – in our case, we will focus on the existence of sub-regional structures. Researching

the role of ideas in constructing social reality means showing what role the sense of belonging, similarity, and uniqueness of the Central European region plays in creating regional cooperation and its involvement in more complex structures. This means that we will also focus on other factors than geography, geopolitics, size, resources, etc. From a constructivist perspective, we will point out the nature of the actors – the V4 countries and will explain why the V4 countries decided to cooperate with each other in the Visegrad framework. This will also allow us to explain the behavior of individual actors (meaning countries) in different periods of the functioning of the Visegrad Group, including the current one, when the V4 is experiencing a significant decrease in the intensity of cooperation.

The current weakening of political cooperation can be considered from various perspectives. Considering the link between domestic and foreign policy, research on the correlation between illiberalism and decreasing trust between member countries (EU or V4) is particularly relevant (Schmidt, 2016; Balogh et al., 2022). In the long term, illiberal tendencies have become apparent in Hungary and Poland (since 2015), as well as Slovakia (particularly since the 2023 elections). In many ways, the governments' pursuit of illiberal policies contests the EU's mainstream policy, which is based on a liberal model. Some analysts argue that the decline in V4 cooperation is due to the reluctance of certain members to participate in a project where the other members repeatedly give the impression of being a counterweight to the trend of European integration (Poznar & Havlík, 2025). Hungarian (and, more recently, Slovak and, previously, Polish) attitudes have become incompatible with the V4's original self-presentation as a sub-regional platform that complements the EU and the European integration process. Hungary and Poland's activities until 2023, and Hungary and Slovakia's activities since 2023, present a long-term protest against EU politics and Western Europe in general, thus implicitly rendering V4 cooperation dysfunctional (Lamour, 2022).

VISEGRAD THEN AND NOW

The insight into the past can be structured according to three subsequent periods. The first one refers to the times when the V4 started to exist and V4 countries had prepared for their accession to the EU. The second period is the post-accession one and ends roughly in the year 2015. In this year, the so-called current period begins. A look into the history of the Visegrad Four allows us to reflect on the common successes and problematic moments of cooperation.

PRE-ACCESSION PERIOD – V₄ IN THE YEARS 1991 – 2004

The Visegrad cooperation was one of the first cooperative structures in the post-communist bloc after 1989. After the breakup of Yugoslavia and the outbreak of unrest in its territory, the Czecho – Slovakia, and Hungary decided not to limit themselves to cooperation within the Hexagonal. This was one of the impulses for the creation of the Visegrad Group. The first meeting of representatives of the Czecho-Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland took place in April 1990 in Bratislava on the initiative of Czecho-Slovak President Václav Havel. After a subsequent negotiations at ministerial level, a summit was held in Budapest in February 1991 and then in Visegrad. There, on February 15, 1991, the Declaration on Cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Poland, and the Republic of Hungary on the Road to European Integration was signed (Declaration on Cooperation..., 1991). The venue was not chosen by chance. Almost seven centuries earlier, Polish King Casimir III, Czech King John of Luxembourg, and Hungarian King Charles I Robert had met at this location and agreed to cooperate to reduce tensions and conflicts in the region. Although the Visegrad Agreement of 1335 failed to secure long-term peace in the region, it united the efforts of Central European leaders to put aside their differences and strengthen cultural ties between their peoples. The meeting in the early 1990s had similar goals. According to the Visegrad Declaration, the fundamental objectives are, above all, the restoration of state sovereignty, democracy and freedom, the elimination of the remnants of the totalitarian system, the establishment of parliamentary democracy and a modern legal state, the development

of a modern market economy, and full integration into the European political, economic, security, and legal systems (Declaration on Cooperation..., 1991). In the year the Declaration was signed (1991), cooperation between the Visegrad Three countries was particularly important in the areas of security and the economic situation, as the The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON) and the Warsaw Pact had ceased to operate in these areas. This act essentially marked the culmination of security cooperation and coordination within the Visegrad Group, as the member states synchronized their security and defence policies (Terem, Lenč, 2011).

During problematic periods the Visegrad cooperation (1994 – 1998) was either suspended or went through critical moments. In December 1992, the Visegrad Three signed the Agreement on the Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA). However, the intensification of cooperation was blocked by the policy of the Czech prime minister Václav Klaus and later also by his Slovak counterpart Vladimír Mečiar. Czech prime minister Václav Klaus described the Visegrad Four as an *artificial creation of the West*. The Czech Republic took a negative stance toward greater policy coordination within the Visegrad Group and demanded individual assessment of readiness for accession to NATO and the European Union. Compared to Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, the Czech Republic was the most advanced and successful in terms of economic indicators during the transition. The Czech government hoped that independent negotiations would lead to faster and smoother integration into Western European structures. At the beginning of 1994, after the Partnership for Peace summit in Prague, the Czech government distanced itself from the Visegrad cooperation. The Czech Republic only later recognized the necessity of regional cooperation, mainly under pressure from the economic situation and the state of negotiations on membership in the European Union.

Slovakia had three governments during 1994, which also prevented active participation in the group's activities. After the creation of the government of the prime minister Vladimír Mečiar in the same year, Slovakia started to drift away from its Central European neighbours (Fawn, 2024). The reason was an increasingly authoritarian and isolationist policy of the Slovak government, which stopped to be implemented only after the 1998 elections.

An example of a crisis moment comes also from February 2002, when former Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, during his own election campaign, proposed to examine the compliance of the so-called Beneš decrees, which essentially affect the Czech Republic and Slovakia, with European Union law (Irmanová, Kopeček, Kunštát, Vykoukal, 2003). In both cases, it was evident that the Visegrad cooperation was largely dependent on specific political leaders in individual countries and their will to cooperate. It cannot be denied that Visegrad cooperation also reflected bilateral relations between individual countries, be it, for example, Czech-Slovak or Slovak-Hungarian relations.

The turning point and return to the Visegrad idea came after the parliamentary elections in Slovakia in the fall of 1998, when shortly afterwards the new coalition government in Bratislava put forward an initiative to bring together the prime ministers of the Visegrad countries in this city, which took place on May 14, 1999. This meeting was also supported by the new Czech political leadership, which placed greater emphasis on regional cooperation. However, the summit of the prime ministers of the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary, which took place on October 21, 1998, in Budapest, can be considered the official sign of the renewal of Visegrad cooperation. This meeting was significant for the Slovak Republic in that the Budapest Declaration expressed the support of the three Visegrad countries for the newly formed Slovak government, its membership in the V4, and their interest in helping Slovakia catch up with the delayed integration process into Euro-Atlantic structures (Terem, Lenč, 2011).

The revitalization of the Visegrad Group in 1998 was evidence that Central European political leaders realized the advantages of closer coordination for the benefit of all participating countries. The Czech, Hungarian and Polish elites were convinced that the stability and future prosperity of the Central European region was not possible without Slovakia's active involvement in the integration processes into both the EU and NATO. The solidarity of the other three countries, which were more advanced in the integration processes, towards Slovakia was also manifested in very concrete steps in the form of the transfer of information, experience and advice, primarily from the Czech Republic and Poland.

Compared to other regional groupings in the EU, such as BENELUX or Nordic cooperation, the V4 has been characterized by a low level of

institutionalization since its establishment (Schmidt, 2016). There are also only a few framework documents on which cooperation within the V4 is based. The first declaration on the creation of the Visegrad Group was signed by representatives of the *Visegrad Three* (Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland) in 1991 in Visegrad, Hungary. The Declaration set out the basic objectives of this regional initiative and created a basis for the further development of joint activities, including integration into the political and security structures of the West (Declaration on Cooperation..., 1991).

After revitalising cooperation, in 1999 the Visegrad countries agreed to specify the areas of mutual cooperation. The content document focused on eight areas of cooperation, including foreign affairs, education, culture, science, the environment, infrastructure and cross-border cooperation (Contents of Visegrad Cooperation, 1999). Another important element of this document was the description of the structure of Visegrad intergovernmental cooperation, as well as the involvement of other stakeholders, including parliaments and civil society organisations. The role of the Visegrad Group Presidency was defined in a separate annex (Annex to the Contents..., 2000), with the annual rotating presidency being seen as another step towards closer coordination of the V4 countries. An important moment was the establishment of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) in 2010, which opened the V4 to the non-governmental sphere. The IVF is the only permanent institution of the V4 and plays a key role, especially in the non-political dimension of Visegrad cooperation. It applies the principle of *equal contribution, equal rights*, which does not favour any of the participating countries, which is of particular importance, as the V4 countries differ in their size and number of population.

POST-ACCESSION PERIOD – 2004-2014

If the cooperation of the Visegrad Four before joining the EU was defined by the strategic interest of a common *return to Europe*, the meaning of the cooperation of the V4 countries since May 2004 has been accompanied by the question of the extent and specificity of common interests across the entire spectrum of political activities at the European Union level (Fawn, 2024). The importance of the Visegrad was to be confirmed not only by its role in the

accession of the individual V4 countries to the EU, but also by the *survival* of the format in the post-accession period (Irmanová, Kopeček, Kunštát, Vykoukal, 2003). In this context, the question of defining the foreign, security and European policy priorities of the individual V4 countries, and of the group as such, was naturally discussed (Lukášek, 2010). The main areas of cooperation in the post-accession period were identified in the so-called Kroměříž Declaration (Declaration of Prime Ministers, 2004) and the related guidelines (Guidelines on the future areas of Visegrad co-operation, 2004). The latest declaration was adopted in Bratislava in 2011 on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Visegrad Group, which, in addition to evaluating previous achievements, also focused on future commitments in the EU and the wider transatlantic space (The Bratislava Declaration..., 2011).

The *weight* of the V4 on the EU level also underwent significant changes. According to the Treaty of Nice, the V4 countries had a voting potential comparable to that of France and Germany combined. The V4 lost this advantageous position only in the context of the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty, which placed emphasis on the creation of broader coalitions of member states in enforcing decisions. In the past the V4 also served as a core for the creation of broader regional coalitions, or initiatives, in which other EU member states participated. An example is the issue of the future EU budget, within which the V4 countries shared positions with other *new* EU member states that joined the Union in 2004, 2007 and 2013, and which were the largest beneficiaries of cohesion funds. The V4 position supporting the enlargement of the EU to include new members, with an emphasis on the Western Balkans, was also well-known, and was also shared by selected other EU countries.

In the context of the development of territorial priorities, the V4 countries had been pointing out the priority position of the EU's eastern neighbours and the Western Balkan countries. Supporting the intensification of relations between the EU and Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia and previously also Belarus on the one hand, and Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (despite the non-recognition of its unilaterally declared independence by Slovakia) on the other hand, was one of the main foreign policy (and European) priorities of the Visegrad Four countries in the post-accession period. In addition to emphasizing the open-door policy

to any European country aspiring to EU membership, the V4 countries have also declared their willingness to assist their Eastern neighbours and the Western Balkan countries in the process of implementing the necessary political and economic reforms. In relation to these reforms, the attractiveness of the Visegrad countries, in connection with their successes in transformation (especially economic) and integration (primarily into the EU) and the Visegrad model of regional cooperation, began to be associated with the *soft power* of the V4 (Marušiak, 2013). The issue of energy security had also played an important role in the context of the priorities of the post-accession period. Especially due to the different energy mixes in the V4 countries, it was difficult to find a common strategy that would meet the expectations of all members. During the gas crisis at the beginning of 2009, however, the V4 countries fully realized the importance of the issue of energy security. Since all V4 countries still are – albeit to varying degrees – dependent on foreign energy sources, the coordination of their positions in the field of energy, regular meetings at the expert and political level pointed out the fundamental importance of this issue. The V4 countries began to consider the interconnection of energy networks or the interconnection of gas pipelines.

Although the integration of all four states into the EU and NATO was by far the most important goal that has been achieved, the V4, despite the voices of sceptics, had retained its *raison d'être* even in the post-accession period. Cooperation in various sectoral areas had developed, other non-V4 partners had entered into cooperation with the Visegrad countries through the V4+ format, including from beyond the geographical borders of Europe, and the activities of the International Visegrad Fund had also developed dynamically (Strážay, 2014).

From a political point of view, the V4 was primarily a platform for exchanging opinions, or rather positions, which had also applied to the meetings of V4 representatives before important EU summits. In case of agreement, their positions could have been coordinated and subsequently enforced, which sometimes led external partners to perceive the V4 as an interest bloc speaking with one voice. However, the V4 has never been one. From an institutional point of view, the V4 was certainly more of a club than an international institution or organization with hierarchically built structures. Regular summits

at the level of experts in individual sectors, as well as ministers, prime ministers and presidents, testified on the viability of this regional initiative. On the other hand, individual countries had maintained their own positions on several issues, even those of a strategic nature. The diversity of the V4 countries' positions has been evident in such strategic European policy issues as the EU Constitutional Treaty and the financial perspective for 2007–2013. In both cases, Poland's ultimatum stance stood out. After the V4 countries joined the EU, some analysts even believed that Poland found itself in a position of weakening V4 cooperation (Pehe, 2004). This was based on Poland's ambition to play a more important role within the enlarged Union than its Central European partners. The prioritization of national interests over those of the group or its other members cannot be ruled out also in the future. In the past, Visegrad cooperation has been sensitive to domestic political pressures in the participating countries, which have been transferred to bilateral relations between individual states and subsequently to the level of multilateral cooperation within the region. All four countries have been, albeit to varying degrees, marked by political instability and the presence of undemocratic elements such as clientelism and authoritarian tendencies in their political culture. Populist trends are relatively widespread throughout the region and could be observed among several relevant political actors, often with a strong nationalist accent (Terem, Lenč, 2011).

CURRENT PERIOD (2015 – 2023)

The current period begins in 2015 for several reasons. First of all, it is the year of the outbreak of a massive migration crisis in the EU, the consequences of which are still felt by member states today. The position of the V4 countries on the proposed quotas for refugees not only increased the visibility of the V4 within the EU, but also contributed to the creation of the V4's reputation as a blocking coalition. In this context, a change of pace occurred within the V4 – the foreign ministers were replaced by prime ministers, who also used the issue for populist communication with domestic voters. While until the outbreak of the migration crisis in 2015 we could more or less speak of maintaining a balance between the political and non-political aspects

of Visegrad cooperation, after this year Visegrad became significantly political, or more precisely politicized. The image of the grouping also began to change due to the victory of the conservative Law and Justice party in Poland in 2015 and 2019 elections and its promotion of controversial reforms (especially in the area of the judiciary and media freedom). After Hungary, Poland became the second V4 country to face criticism from EU institutions for failing to respect the rule of law and for strengthening the authoritarian tendencies of its government. Both governments have also begun to undermine the unity of the EU by threatening to use their veto power. Since its establishment, the Visegrad Group has been profiled as European – the leitmotif of its creation was *return to Europe*. Coordination of positions in the area of European policies, could therefore be considered one of the most significant achievements of the V4 in the post-accession period. The positive reputation, which the V4 had after its revitalization in 1998, began to change after 2015. The change in the group's reputation also had and continues to have an impact on the coalition potential of the V4, which can be considered a significant problem for the V4.

The period of the increased political visibility of the V4 after 2015 became an inspiration for both Viktor Orbán, the prime minister of Hungary, as well as for the old-new Prime Minister Robert Fico of Slovakia several years after. Both of them spoke about the need to return to a strong Visegrad (Program Statement..., 2023). This idea, however, did not find an adequate response from any of the other Visegrad prime ministers. The escalation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2022 deepened even more the cleavages among the V4 countries, due to their different foreign and security policy priorities. Before the September 2023 elections in Slovakia, Hungary occupied significantly different positions regarding support for Ukraine and cooperation with Russia than the other three V4 countries. However, after the creation of the new Fico government in October 2023, Slovakia moved closer to Hungary. This shift is also evident Slovakia's domestic politics, as Hungary is considered a model to follow in different areas, including judiciary, media policy, as well as ethical issues. As a result, the Czech Presidency of the V4, which ended in June 2024 did not bring much more than the so-called mandatory trips in the form of meetings of ministers, prime ministers and presidents. The absence of a more fundamental initiative, or rather maintaining a *low profile*, also characterizes

the 2024-25 Polish Presidency of the Group. Although the positions of Slovakia and Hungary have become closer in many ways after the 2023 elections, it is inappropriate to speak of Slovakia as a second Hungary, at least for now, also given Slovakia's constructive position on supporting Ukraine at the EU and NATO levels compared to Hungary. However, this does not change the reluctant position of the traditional partners of the Slovak Republic, the Czech Republic, as well as Poland, to cooperate more closely with the current government in Bratislava. The Visegrad Group thus remains fragmented, sometimes it can really resemble the 2+2 formula, at other times 1+1+2 or even 1+1+1+1. The dividing lines in the V4 caused by differing views of the V4 countries on their foreign, security and/or European policy have a significantly more damaging impact on the V4 than bilateral tensions, which occurred temporarily in Czech-Slovak, Slovak-Hungarian, Czech-Polish or Polish-Hungarian relations (e.g. the case of the Czech government's decision to halt intergovernmental consultations with Slovakia, the dispute between the Czech Republic and Poland over the Turów mine, the Polish-Hungarian conflict over the granting of political asylum to a former Polish deputy justice minister, etc.). Consequently, the Visegrad Group cannot offer the EU any added value. On the contrary, the controversial policies pursued by individual V4 governments directly undermine the unity of the EU.

FUTURE VISEGRAD

In more than three decenniums of the existence of the Visegrad group the V4 countries constructed the identity of the group in different directions, depending on their self-identification with the region, but also considering their political preferences, as well as influence of external actors and environment. The first, pre-EU accession phase was clearly dominated by their shared interest to become full-fledged members of the EU. The second, post-accession period was characterized in terms of identification with common EU goals and policies or opposition against them. The current period reshaped again the regional geometry. The escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine from 2022, was the main trigger behind the worsening of bilateral relations between the Hungarian and (previous) Polish governments. The development after 2023

parliamentary elections in Slovakia strengthened even more existing divisions lines in the V4, putting Warsaw and Prague on one side and Bratislava with Budapest on the other. The consequences on the V4 have been serious and lasting until present. Besides low intensity of political relations between the V4 countries, the reputation of the V4 as an efficient model of regional cooperation has been damaged. Last but not least, the identification with the V4 trademark dropped in all the countries.

Still, it can be argued that more than 30 years of its existence the V4 proved its durability, flexibility and versatility. The V4 helped to amplify the voice of the region in the EU, also through the V4+ format with third countries or even groups of countries. Though the V4 is a weakly institutionalized initiative, the role of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) for the cohesion of the format needs to be highlighted. The wide range of informal institutions, ranging from the meetings of the high representatives of the V4 countries to experts in various fields had also contributed to the effectiveness of the V4 in the past. Last but not least, the positive influence of the V4, and particularly of the International IVF in bringing the four societies together must also be mentioned. This positive development was also reflected by the public opinion – public awareness of the V4 has increased between 2016 and 2021 in all Visegrad countries (Gyárfášová, Mesežnikov, 2016). Slovak respondents were in the second place, right behind the Hungarians (Gyárfášová, Mesežnikov, 2021). Nevertheless, between 2021 and 2023, the positive view on the future of the V4 decreased in all the countries but Slovakia. While in 2023 positive view on the future of cooperation was shared by 79 % of Slovaks, followed by 60 % of Czechs, 55 % of Poles and 46 % of Hungarians, in 2021 the leaders were the Hungarians (82 %), followed by the Slovaks (78 %), Czechs (71 %) and Poles (59 %).

On the other hand, deficiencies are difficult to be overlooked. While previously the V4 was immune to political changes in government in participating countries (Strážay, 2018), currently it is the opposite. The V4 turned out to be increasingly dependent on political cycle and domestic political development in particular V4 countries. Differing threat perceptions is also one of the key reasons why the cooperation has been downgraded. This is particularly visible in terms of the diverging V4 countries approach to Russia and China. Hungary and Slovakia could be mentioned in particular, as both the Orbán and Fico

governments pursue a cooperative policy towards Russia and consider the future economic prosperity of their countries to depend on investments from China. Similarly divisive are foreign and security policy interests, as well as positions towards some EU-related agendas, with rule of law playing an important role. Although all the V4 countries are considered supporters of EU enlargement, this support is limited to the Western Balkan countries, as Hungary continues to oppose Ukraine's ambitions to join the EU.

The constructivist approach might also be helpful in drafting future development of the V4. We suggest that the development of the V4, as well as its cohesion, will be framed by the four factors, which can be either opportunities or constraints. These four factors include common geography, domestic political development and its impact on foreign policy priorities, institutional factors, with particular attention paid to EU and NATO membership, as well as coexistence with other regional formats.

Common geography factor can be considered as an asset, particularly when projects related to infrastructural connectivity and practical cooperation are concerned. The practical issues, which also include joint response to natural disasters, will further enforce a need for selective cooperation, also on political level. Geographical factor also has a positive impact on the dynamics of trade relations and investments.

As mentioned above, internal political developments in the V4 countries did not influence significantly cooperation on the V4 level in the past (the period between 1994 and 1998 might be an exception, though). Increasing differentiation of the V4 countries in terms of their foreign and security priorities, as well as European policy, however, have made cooperation in the V4 format more sensitive to internal political developments. The war in Ukraine and different positions of the V4 countries towards the support of Ukraine and cooperation with Russia further deepened existing divisions. Political differences will continue shaping the Visegrad group, which can lead only to a selective cooperation.

The membership in the EU (and NATO) will continue being an influential factor. It might provide the opportunity for strengthening the V4 on a sectoral basis, particularly when the issues related to EU decision making are concerned. Areas, in which the V4 countries policies converge are several (e.g. enlargement policy, migration, cohesion policy of the EU and related funds etc.).

More likely, though, is the scenario when the V4 countries would prefer to create broader, ad hoc coalitions on selected issues with other member states, which not necessarily would include all V4 partners. Similar pattern could be applied to cooperation in NATO.

The coexistence of the V4 with other regional cooperation formats – both already existing and emerging ones – will be based on the idea of complementarity. The informal character of the V4 cooperation does not exclude cooperation of the V4 countries in other regional formats, bilateral relations or ad hoc coalitions (Marušiak, 2025). In the narrowly defined region of Central Europe the V4 represents the most viable format, despite all the divisions and other weaknesses. Other formats are even looser, be it Central 5 (C5) or Slavkov Triangle (S3), significantly bigger than the V4 (Three Seas Initiative – 3SI, Bucharest Nine – B9) or focus on the partners outside the V4 region (the Weimar Triangle).^[2] Besides differences in their geographic scope, regional cooperation formats differ in their form – while some of them are presidential formats (e.g. 3SI and B9), others are strictly limited to the ministerial level (S3 and C5). In comparison to the V4, other regional initiatives have quite narrowly set thematic focus (B9, 3SI, S3, C5). It also needs to be taken into the consideration that all V4 countries perceive new, emerging formats of cooperation and ad-hoc coalitions with other than Central European countries as an important tool to pursue their interest. Poland focuses mostly on the Baltic and Nordic countries, particularly due to their closeness in security policy, while Czechia prefers new or long-tested issue-based and like-minded coalitions with the EU and NATO partners, including those from Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as from Benelux. Hungary and Slovakia are more open to cooperation with partners outside of the EU and NATO, particularly with Serbia. While for Hungary a closer cooperation through the Central European Defence Cooperation (CEDC), which links it to Serbia, Austria (and potentially Slovakia) might be attractive, for Slovakia the recently organized “migration” summit with Hungary and Serbia might – in a longer run – be the basis for a new type of regional cooperation (Office of the Government, 2024).

When future opportunities for cooperation are concerned, these can be seen on the EU, regional, as well as broader international levels.

On the EU level, the V4 countries will most probably find common grounds in the issues like strengthening the EU competitiveness, deepening of the single market, preserving budgetary priorities in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (especially in the area of the cohesion policy), as well as shaping of the EU energy and climate policy (particularly in the area of the nuclear energy). Migration could be named as another issue in which the positions of the V4 countries converge, and the same applies to EU enlargement (though Hungary's position on the integration of Ukraine differs to some extent from other V4 countries). Cooperation in several non-political issues could become more intensive, particularly in broadly defined technology and innovation areas.

When institutional and procedural aspects are concerned, the V4 countries are reluctant to a more profound reform of the European Union, which also includes the extension of the Qualitative Majority Voting (QMV) procedure. In this regard, the maintenance of the status quo, which also translates into the preference of the inter-governmental approach, might be the uniting platform for the V4 governments, at least in the short-term perspective.

On the regional level, further support to the International Visegrad Fund and its activities could be mentioned (International Visegrad Fund, 2025), as it provides the instrument for the engagement of non-governmental actors, including academia, think tanks and NGOs. Development of transport infrastructure, as well as regional crisis management could be mentioned as areas where the presence of the V4 will be felt.

The possibility of the engagement of non-V4 stakeholders remains open through the V4+ formula. This formula could be applied on the *traditional partners* from the Western Balkans or Eastern Partnership countries, as well as to the actors from more distant regions (Japan or the Republic of Korea could serve as examples here). A potential opportunity might be the strong transatlantic agenda, especially in the area of security and defence.

CONCLUSIONS

The article analysed the Visegrad Group as an interesting example of a subregional cooperation format from the point of view of international relations. The constructivist approach, which was employed, enabled us to identify different phases of evolution of the Visegrad cooperation in the past, as well to suggest possible ways of development in the future. The positioning of the V4 countries in the EU and international relations in general, formation of their foreign and security policies, as well as their mutual interaction will play a major role. The impact of external environment and influence of external stakeholders also cannot be neglected.

In light of the above, it is nevertheless quite difficult to predict the future of the Visegrad Group. The willingness of individual countries to cooperate remains to be an essential condition for the functioning of the Visegrad cooperation. The positive thing is that none of the V4 countries is considering its abolition, they rather want to preserve this format for possible more intensive use in the future. Long-term cooperation at the expert level is valuable, in number of sectors. The International Visegrad Fund plays an irreplaceable role, supporting professional projects, civil society, and cooperation between institutions and academic actors. The low level of its institutionalization, which does not push the four participating countries to agree on common positions, also speaks in favour of the continuation of the V4. In other words, the countries cooperate only in those areas where they find common interests and nothing forces them to take common positions on topics where their positions diverge. Although at first glance this may seem like a weakness of this format, it is paradoxically its strength. It allows it to survive even in such problematic periods as it is currently facing. It can be stated that if Visegrad were an institutionalized regional format, it would no longer exist today. Fortunately, no movement towards a greater degree of institutionalization is observed in any of the V4 countries, and this also applies to its expansion to include additional *members*. The latest public opinion poll by the Institute for Public Affairs also speaks in favour of the continuation of the V4, according to which in all four countries, supporters of the continued existence of the V4 prevail over its opponents (Gyárfášová, Mesežnikov, 2024).

Even though the Visegrad Group may exist in a *survival* mode for many years, practical cooperation without an adequate political umbrella or cover has and will have its limitations. Given the existing differences of positions on some crucial issues, above all on the support of Ukraine and cooperation with Russia, it will not be easy to find a common idea or a new narrative to which all four countries could subscribe. Nevertheless, in addition to the generally formulated need for cooperation and strengthening relations, the V4 could find inspiration for the future in the past. The idea of returning to Europe continues to have its relevance, which should be remembered not only on the occasion of anniversaries, but also filled with concrete content. The message is clear – the Visegrad Group will be truly meaningful when it brings added value to the entire EU.

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ENDNOTES

^[1] The article is published in the framework of the project VEGA č. 1/0661/23.

^[2] These regional cooperation formats include different numbers of Central European countries. However, only the Bucharest Nine (B9) and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI) include all four Visegrad countries.