

THE ROLE OF THE VISEGRAD COOPERATION IN EU FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Visegrad Group reflects the ongoing efforts of the countries of the Central European region to cooperate in a number of fields of common interest within the European integration. Despite the diverse roots of their religious and social backgrounds, particular economic and geopolitical interests, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have always been part of a common civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values. The V4 concentrates on such issues as the future of cohesion policy, strategic programming and the regional development policy. The major task is to promote the EU growth potential by pursuing the most important initiatives such as completion of the Single Market or governance of the Economic and Monetary Union. The Visegrad Group should serve to better coordinate the V4 positions with regard to EU policy towards EaP countries, in particular Ukraine, Belarus and the Western Balkans. Another important aspect of the V4 cooperation within EU foreign relations concerns not only Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, but also the collaboration with Japan, China, Israel or Egypt. Concerning the short-term challenges, it is essential to focus on networking and improving people-to-people contacts between Eastern and Central Europe through various national programmes and initiatives of individual V4 partners. From the Polish perspective, the aim of the Visegrad Group is to further strengthen the V4 position within international forums and to achieve a further EU enlargement. Concerning the issue of the V4 geopolitical position, it is natural that they will support the further sustainability of the EU project, the EU enlargement policy and the development of neighbourhood policy. The V4 should cooperate with the Eastern Partnership area in order to successfully complete the EU integration process which later requires further transformation.



1. INTRODUCTION

One of the priorities of the Visegrad Group (also known as the ‘Visegrad Four’ or simply ‘V4’) is to engage in regional activity through the European Union, which constitutes a unique form of regional and political cooperation. Each V4 partner has the same opportunity of potential for action during the rotating Presidency which runs from early July to late June the following year. The Visegrad cooperation started in February 1991 when President

of the Republic of Poland Lech Wałęsa, President of the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic Václav Havel and Prime Minister of the Republic of Hungary József Antall signed the Visegrad Declaration, which has been treated as a form of cooperation of the three, and later four, post-communist countries¹.

The Visegrad Group reflects the ongoing efforts of the countries of the Central European region to cooperate in a number of fields of common interest within the European integration. Despite the diverse roots of their religious and social backgrounds, particular economic and geopolitical interests, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia have always been part of a common civilization sharing cultural and intellectual values. Concerning institutionalization, the structure of the Visegrad Group is based solely on the principle of periodical meetings of its representatives at various levels.

All the V4 countries strived to become members of the European Union. Thus, it was perceived as a step forward in the process of mutual support in Europe. Finally, the goal was reached in 2004 by all of them joining the EU. The Visegrad Group has not come to compete with the existing Central European structures in the all-European integration efforts. Its cooperation is in no way focused on the weakening of ties with other countries, but instead, the Group aims at encouraging an optimum collaboration with all countries with the ultimate interest of democratic development in whole Europe. All the activities of the Visegrad Group are to build the European security and strengthen stability in the Central European region. This cooperation is perceived as a challenge to prove that the participating countries are able to integrate in the European Union structures as well.

2. FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

Within the foreign policy framework, the Visegrad Group focuses on current European affairs, holding the tradition of speaking with one voice in the EU area. The V4 concentrates on such issues as the future of cohesion policy, strategic programming and the regional development policy. The major task is to promote the EU growth potential by pursuing the most important initiatives such as completion of the Single Market or governance of the Economic and Monetary Union. By promoting solutions to overcome the sovereign debt crisis, the V4 partners, within both the euro and non-euro areas, are considered stronger, more unified and competitive actors in the global economy.

Within the scope of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) 2014-2020, the V4 countries are to have a consistent position in key decisions covering EU funds and policies in negotiations and the compatibility of undertaken activities². Concerning the coordination mechanism, the V4 has to support the Presidency of the EU Council in order to guarantee a final compromise, by which the V4 vision of Europe is meant. What is more, it is necessary

1 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Poland – Report of the Polish Presidency of the Visegrad Group July 2012 – June 2013 – Warsaw – 2013.

2 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Poland – Programme of the Polish V4 Presidency – Warsaw – 15th June 2012.

to cooperate with the European Parliament in the MFF negotiations with the aim of reaching the MFF political compromise. Moreover, the EU budgeting decisions for 2014 and 2015 are equally important to maintain support for cohesion policy funds and the general size of the EU budget for the next years. What is more, a major task of the energy security is to ensure broad-based support for the construction of a gas transport corridor, the security of oil supplies and the coordination of EU energy and climate policies.

The V4 Presidency of Poland³ focused on further promoting and enhancing cooperation to conduct projects which support the development and implementation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP). However, the long-term priority, though seen as the key issue only for the Visegrad Group, is not only to cooperate with the EaP but also to increase the number of its participants. It can be achieved by inviting other EU countries to participate in the development of the Eastern Partnership, such as sharing transformation experience and aligning law with EU standards.

The Visegrad Group should serve to better coordinate the V4 positions with regard to the EU policy towards EaP countries, in particular Ukraine, Belarus and the Western Balkans. For example, the Polish Presidency has intended to boost V4 cooperation with representatives of the Belarusian civil society. During the same key time of Poland's V4 Presidency, the EU accession of Croatia on 1st July 2013 has not only encouraged other Western Balkan countries to participate in the EU enlargement process, but the foremost has received a strong political support. In relations with Western Balkan countries, it is advisable to share the V4 countries' experience in matters relating to the EU accession and the initial stages of EU membership. An idea worth considering is an initiation of meetings between the Visegrad Group and Western Balkan states. The adequate example of such a project is being implemented by Poland's National School of Public Administration (KSAP) in cooperation with the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration (EPAPA) came into existence during the Polish presidency of the EU Council in 2011. The goal of this programme is to strengthen government administration in EaP countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) by organising specialized training programmes for civil servants. This constitutes an expert background essential for creating professional civil service in these countries. With the view of supporting the sense of regional ownership, the V4 continues to encourage Western Balkan states to strengthen their regional cooperation⁴. Such interactions in the field of development cooperation with an emphasis on development aid have to be achieved through better coordination, which Poland intends to build on the V4's development and transition experience initiatives. It aims to give them greater political and financial importance, particularly regarding Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. The V4 partners coordinate the discussions concerning the respective positions towards the EU development policy agenda.

3 This was Poland's fourth Presidency of the Visegrad Group from July 2012 to June 2013. Previous Presidencies: 2000/1, 2004/5 and 2008/9.

4 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Poland – „Eastern Partnership Academy of Public Administration” – www.polishaid.gov.pl – 13th December 2013.

Another important aspect of the V4 cooperation within EU foreign relations concerns not only Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, but also the collaboration with Japan, China, Israel or Egypt. It is essential to develop relations with all these countries in order to improve exchange in the fields of science, energy, culture, investment, trade and tourism.

3. POLAND IN THE VISEGRAD GROUP

Poland is by far the biggest member of the V4 group; however, all V4 countries have entered the EU family on the equal terms of a profound shared historical experience that shapes the societies and views today. They have brought a specific brand to the European stage. The decades under enforced Soviet communism have led them to a specific awareness regarding freedom, good governance and the willingness to make difficult decisions. Thus, they present certain unique expectations, and despite the “lost decades”, they are politically and morally entitled to their chance to attain progress. It is believed that the V4 has the huge advantage of being successful in today’s European Union. Its brand is worth developing because other, already established groups such as the Nordics or the Benelux are less represented in EU institutions. Building the specific brand refers to active cooperation, consultation and policy coordination. The voting power within the EU Council can be an adequate example, as they together have enough votes not only to exceed the numbers of France and Germany together but also are able to create powerful coalitions with other states.

Moreover, the essential task is to receive a fairer representation in international institutions concerning membership and the ratio of employees working there. It is worth mentioning that V4 partners are not interested in enhancing the overrepresentation of Western countries in EU institutions but are willing to motivate these countries to accept a joint EU representation at the Security Council or in international forums.

Poland’s V4 Presidency in the period 2004-2005 was supposed to bring a ‘renewed sense of joint action, especially in the framework of the European Union’⁵. To what extent have these assumptions been realized? The priorities of Poland’s V4 Presidency corresponded to the major challenges of Polish politics in the region in the following years. These were the issues that were at the same time on the EU agenda. Similarly, the same situation happened during the next Presidency of Poland in 2008-2009. Among the priorities were issues coincident with the direction of Polish European policy. In 2004, the Polish priorities were as follows: deepening the cooperation with countries covered by the European Programme of Neighbourhood Policy, increasing the involvement of the V4 in the intensification of negotiations of a new agreement between the EU and Ukraine, promoting the preparation of the pre-accession of Western Balkan countries, promoting free movement of citizens, implementing the idea of ‘Green Visegrad’.

Implementation of Polish interests through the Visegrad cooperation was facilitated by the fact that all partners within the EU appreciated the mutual cooperation. It was crucial

5 Prof. Adam Daniel Rotfeld – Government information on the Polish foreign policy presented by the Minister of Foreign Affairs – at the session of the Sejm in Warsaw – 21st January 2005

to identify the levels of common interest. The first level consisted of the negotiations of the new Financial Perspective for the years 2007-2013. During the negotiations, Poland's vision was based on the Visegrad cooperation, although not limited to the V4. The Visegrad Four was cooperating extensively at the working level during the entire duration of the negotiations, which resulted in the adoption of joint declarations and their submission to the various EU forums. The Visegrad Group countries also cooperated in the implementation of community law in terms of Schengen. The support of the V4 to the pro-European aspirations of Ukraine has been of particular importance. The position taken by the V4 members was consistent with the Polish policy. The V4 declared that they will support countries aspiring to enter the EU.

4. BENEFITS OF ENTERING THE EUROPEAN UNION

According to a report of the Erste Group, through participation in the EU, the GDP of the Visegrad Group has grown by about 1 per cent per year. Each of the four countries has also recorded a growth of GDP per capita – more than by double in Slovakia and Poland. National buying power (capacity) of the four countries has reached an average of 65 per cent for the old EU (EU 15). During ten years the pay gap has decreased by one third⁶.

The accession to the EU has provided companies from these countries with new opportunities to access a single market of over 500 million customers. This has brought benefits in terms of increasing exports with the growth noticeable in all four countries. Export of the Visegrad Group countries has been growing three times faster than that of the EU15. Export has become one of the most important assets of the region. Three of the four countries (Slovakia, Hungary and the Czech Republic) were ranked among the five most open economies in the EU. Currently, the Visegrad Group is the fourth largest exporter in the EU – an improvement compared to the sixth position of 2003.

The V4 performed well on world markets. The level of their exports to non-EU countries has increased fourfold since 2003. Together they have also become the second (after Germany) largest manufacturer of cars in the EU.

Quality of life in Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia has risen more than in the UK and Germany during last ten years. 'Ten years after the EU accession, the socio-economic progress in V4 is plain to see. The EU membership has boosted both the economic strength and the relevance of V4 countries.' – emphasizes Juraj Kotian of the Erste Group⁷.

5. CHALLENGES – CAN THE VISEGRAD GROUP SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE?

6 Artur Osiecki – Grupa Wyszehradzka silniejsza dzięki UE (The Visegrad Group stronger thanks to EU) – daily news paper „Rzeczpospolita” – Warsaw – 6th May 2014.

7 Erste Group – Research report of Visegrad countries – 10 years of EU membership – www.erstegroup.com – 23rd April 2014.

During the 10 years of EU membership, V4 countries have experienced economical growth and strong income convergence. In order to maintain the income convergence and utilize further benefits from the EU, the Visegrad Four needs to explore more possibilities in production and export, improve the quality of institutions and raise the share of EU funds. Moreover, there are several motivational factors toward which the V4 should orientate. The most crucial elements for Poland are the increase of spending on research and development and the transition to an innovative model of economy and administration. Slovakia should reform its public institutions and increase the flexibility of the labour market. Recommendations for Hungary are to increase the use of EU funds, reduce public spending and improve the employment rate. Czechs should reduce corruption and increase the efficiency of institutions, support the investment and diversification of energy sources⁸.

Concerning the short-term challenges, it is essential to focus on networking and improving people-to-people contacts between Eastern and Central Europe through various national programmes and initiatives of individual V4 partners. In order to facilitate the development of such networking, the V4 signed an agreement on a gradual and conditional exit of the visa regime during the Second Eastern Partnership Summit in September 2011. The V4 efforts of easing visas should be presented to the EU. These activities show that the residents of Eastern European countries are treated with more sensitivity and remarkable commitment on the V4 borders.

Speaking of the key projects in a long-term perspective, the Visegrad area needs an active agenda of effective, successful and efficient projects to extend the level of common interests and obligations. Even though the V4 has limited economic and financial tools, the idea is to encouraging the EU to include these needs in the scope of the EU's external financial instruments. Recently, there have been several projects focusing on the accession of the South Caucasus to the EU or the development of gas trade between Ukraine and Slovakia, Hungary and Poland.

Taking into account the current situation in Ukraine, the reason for continuing to strengthen the general EU policy towards Eastern Partnership countries and South Caucasus is even more visible, transparent and understandable. However, treating Ukraine and Moldova in the same way as Belarus or Armenia might be seen as quite risky and inadequate. The latter two have limited interest in Central Europe and the EU accession, contrary to Moldova with a fast pace of changes in progress. Such cooperation is mostly created to achieve free trade, democratic transitions, finalizing negotiations on Association Agreements, especially in the case of Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. Towards Moldova and Ukraine, the EU should make a much more joined effort to offer them more ambitious propositions which come up to the countries' expectations as reflected in the political declarations on future accession. Besides, the Visegrad Group can engage them more in the V4 cooperation which can also help to ap-

8 Dariusz Kałan; Marcin Zaborowski, Wojciech Lorenz, Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Roderick Parkes, Beata Wojna – East of Centre: Can the Visegrad Group Speak with One Voice on Eastern Policy? – Policy Paper of the Polish Institute of International Affairs – No. 5 (53), February 2013.

proach the EU and on the long run the V4 may serve as an EU group for the additional amelioration of the Eastern Partnership in negotiations with the EU.

Since a few more other countries from Central Europe have stated that they are interested in the Eastern Partnership, it should be a clear sign for considering a formation of a broader platform directed at east European countries. This would strengthen the position of the V4 in the EU and would also improve the ongoing Eastern Partnership programme of the new EU states. Bearing in mind the Visegrad Plus platform of cooperation, the V4 should promote the Eastern Partnership to a broader Central European structure⁹. Visegrad Four should cooperate within the European Union not only by consulting on current issues of common interests but also by actively contributing to the development of the 'Wider Europe – New Neighbourhood' policy and the EU strategy towards the new Member States.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Visegrad Four can be regarded as one of the most successful initiatives in Central Europe. It consists of mutual relations at all levels – from political summits to activities with non-governmental associations and numerous networks of individuals. Twenty years ago the Visegrad Group was seen by many European countries as a group of partners without significance. Now the V4 has a rightful place with one credible voice that affects not only the V4 group but also the European Union as a whole.

From the Polish perspective, the aim of the Visegrad Group is to further strengthen the V4 position within the international forums and to achieve a further EU enlargement. It is important to maintain both EU and intra-group cooperation in order to defend the achievements of freedom, deepen the single market, maintain the positive attitude towards the common EU budget and strengthen the enlargement policy. Despite the persisting crisis, the V4 states pursue the integration process regardless of the expenses of transformation and other problems which may occur in aligning with EU requirements.

Concerning the issue of the geopolitical position of the V4, it is natural that they will support the further sustainability of the EU project, the EU enlargement policy and the development of neighbourhood policy. The V4 should cooperate with the Eastern Partnership area in order to successfully complete the EU integration process, which requires further transformation during its progression. And this can be a key role for the Visegrad Group.

Since rejoining Europe, the V4 countries – isolated from the rest of democratic Europe for over half a century – have markedly shown the EU their growth potential and ability to cope with challenges caused by globalisation. This cooperation has reached an impressive degree of intensity based on the mutual bonds and common interests of V4 states. Owing to this situation, the Visegrad Group has earned an adequate place in the political, social and economic European stage. One cannot treat the Visegrad Four as a sole unanimity, as accord-

⁹ Dariusz Kalan; Marcin Zaborowski, Wojciech Lorenz, Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Roderick Parkes, Beata Wojna – East of Centre: Can the Visegrad Group Speak with One Voice on Eastern Policy? – Policy Paper of the Polish Institute of International Affairs – No. 5 (53), February 2013.

ing to the EU, this cooperation provides a valuable additional impact on the regional stability while being beneficial for the whole EU.

As far as the future areas of the Visegrad cooperation in the EU are concerned, the Visegrad Group is likely to effectively support the interests of Central European EU Member States in order to articulate policy ideas important to the region and the entire EU. The offered opportunities include communication, emphasis on the objective community of the common interests and the role of regional and V4 cohesion. Moreover, Poland as being a part of the V4 wishes to follow the examples set during the past Presidencies and carry on changes and transformation based on their experience. The 'V4+' format proved that it is advisable to include other partners in the cooperation for the next projects as a way to further consolidate the achievements of the EU enlargement process and the potential of Eastern Europe.

These days, the four Visegrad Group countries within Central Europe have become known as the summary of contemporary European success. Václav Havel came to the Polish Parliament in 1990 stating that: '(...) we have an opportunity to transform Central Europe from what has been a mainly historical and spiritual phenomenon into a political phenomenon ... we can offer the inspiration to consider swift and daring solutions'¹⁰. That was and still remains the challenge for the V4. By cooperating, together they represent a common powerful brand – they constitute the essence of the Europeans who have not given up on Europe and are determined to make Europe a success.

10 Václav Havel – Speech in the Polish Parliament (Sejm) – Warsaw, www.visegradgroup.eu – 25 January 1990.