

## Visegrad at 25:

# The future of the Central European regional cooperation

### *Event report*

The Visegrad Cooperation, launched in 1991, is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. On this occasion, the [CEU Center for European Neighborhood Studies](#) (CENS) has brought together opinion leaders and experts from the Visegrad countries to take account of the achievements and shortcomings of the V4, and to discuss the future priorities of the regional cooperation focusing on what sectoral areas could foster the development of the region; the future directions of the Visegrad Group's foreign and security policy priorities; and finally the role the V4 can play in the European Union in the future. The international conference took place on May 12, 2016, at the Central European University with the support of the [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Budapest](#). The conference was opened by Professor Péter Balázs, director of the CENS, and Jan Niklas Engels, head of the Budapest Office of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The event report summarizes the key messages put forward by the speakers of the conference.

### *Keynote Address*

As the keynote speech of the conference, *Jiří Sýkora*, strategic relations coordinator of the [International Visegrad Fund](#) (IVF) delivered the speech of Ms. Beata Jaczewska, executive director of IVF, whom he replaced at the event. He noted that the 25th anniversary of the foundation of the Visegrad Group, the most stable regional cooperation, is a remarkable milestone in many aspects. At its foundation, the countries shared a vision about the future of the region to fill the geopolitical vacuum that appeared in the after the Cold War with something genuinely meaningful. This later developed into a strategic friendship among the four participating countries and a meaningful cooperation between, among others, governmental agencies, ministries, local governments, towns and municipalities. This top-down governmental Visegrad that set political goals and coordinated policies led the four countries into the EU, and it was what managed to make the story of the region heard both in the positive and negative sense: as the region that successfully underwent a post-communist transformation, but also that appears as a blocking power in the EU.

There is, however, an equally important component, the civic or bottom-up Visegrad that is based on contacts between people. These are the many and diverse CSOs, but also public institutions, e.g. schools, that the International Visegrad Fund also had a chance to support across the region. This dimension predates the foundation of the IVF. We should not forget that Visegrad was created on the shared ideas of various dissident groups, in other

words, Visegrad's modern CV starts with civic protest, the idea of freedom and the struggle for it, as well as solidarity with those who share the same values based on human rights.

The most visible segment and only institution of the Visegrad Group is the International Visegrad Fund, which by being primarily demand-driven, can be seen as the representation of the voice of the people. It funds projects that complement, and sometimes contradict, governmental policies. Established 15 years ago, the Fund has become a reliable and accessible source of funding for the non-governmental organizations of the region, hence contributing to the development and empowerment of civil society which many believe modern democracy cannot exist without. In its 15 years, the IVF have facilitated thousands of contacts and new partnerships between regional actors who would likely not have reached out to each other if it was not for the Fund. It has become a promoter and facilitator of regional cooperation supporting projects that contribute to regional cohesion, drive debate and engage youth (e.g. through summer schools).

The V4 governments have also relied upon the IVF as a supporting tool to their joint foreign policy goals in the neighborhoods. The Fund supports Visegrad-based NGOs to share their skills and know-how with partners – CSOs, governmental bodies and public administration – in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans. Thanks to the long-term cooperation, the Fund and the region as such are in a unique position among international donors and still have a lot to offer. A long-term dream, the establishment of the Western Balkans Fund based on the experience of the IVF has recently come true with the signature of its statute in December 2015, in Prague.

Concluding his speech, Sýkora expressed his hope that the Visegrad Cooperation would endure based on its solid foundations, shared values and friendships as well as the solidarity among the citizens of the region.

### *Panel I – Visegrad Within: Future priorities for the regional cooperation*

The first panel of the conference focused on the regional cooperation of the Visegrad Group, on sectoral policies as well as the internal cohesion of the V4. Introducing the panel, **Zsuzsanna Végh**, research fellow of CENS, argued that the Visegrad cooperation has come a long way and successfully developed into a multi-level and multi-sectoral cooperation. She supported this claim via results of the recently published [Trends of Visegrad Foreign Policy 2015](#), which examined the views and opinions of foreign policy trend setters (politicians, diplomats, journalists, experts) from the Visegrad Group. The research showed that the V4 has high approval rating among the policy community, it is perceived to be important and useful in all the V4 countries to pursue their national interests. Végh stressed that the most positively perceived area within the V4 cooperation is indeed the civic sphere, while perceptions vary regarding the achievements in the area of e.g. defense or energy.

According to **Michal Kořan**, deputy director of the [Institute for International Relations](#) in Prague, the narrative of internal cohesion and trustful cooperation is something new, and in fact only one of three competing meta-narratives which try to define what the Visegrad Group is and what it is good for. From the late 1980s, there has always been some sort of meta-narrative surrounding Central Europe and Visegrad. Right at the regime change, the idea was the creating of a united Europe and ending divisions on the continent, which soon shifted to a “return to Europe” narrative, which focused more concretely only on Central Europe and was thus narrower. When Visegrad was revived in 1997/98, the narrative became that of helping each other even if the content was largely missing. After joining the EU, Visegrad was

portrayed as a great trademark, which in 2006/07 was turned into a great platform for communication. Following this era, the narrative about helping the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan countries to get closer to the EU was the last strong one, which held itself until about 2013.

The current competition for another interpretation is something that we have not experienced so far and as such it can be dangerous. The current Czech Presidency's slogan "V4 Trust" is not benign either and it was, in Kořan's view, an attempt to exclude external policy elements from the agenda, as they were much contested. Two competing narratives are also on the scene: the one about the V4 as a geopolitical entity that can fend off Russian influence pushed by Poland and the one about the V4 being an emancipator vehicle vis-à-vis the EU argued by Hungary. The latter can be potentially dangerous as it can hijack the V4 from its original narrative.

One needs to look behind the narratives, argued Kořan. Concerning internal cohesion, four key elements should be taken into account. First, Visegrad has a socialization effect and a strong attractiveness for civil society and also for governments and administration that is exposed to it. Second, its flexibility in the art of conduct allows for cooperation even if there are existing differences, and this should be kept. To support internal cohesion, with the help of the International Visegrad Fund, plurality should be infused into the cooperation. Finally, there are more and more misconceptions about Visegrad also in the external world, which should be overcome, especially in the case of Germany, through interconnectedness and channels of socialization.

Discussing the achievements of the Visegrad Group, *Andrzej Sadecki*, research fellow of the [Center for Eastern Studies](#) in Warsaw, argued that while some of the key founding objectives of the V4 had indeed been met, the goal of increasing cooperation and connectedness among the Visegrad countries especially in terms of infrastructure and telecommunication is still unfulfilled. According to Sadecki, the mountains and rivers between the states still form a barrier, and although trade has increased among the four countries, it did so rather despite and not due to the infrastructural connectedness of the region. Some initiative, e.g. the High Level Working Group on transport infrastructure, have been launched in the past 5-6 years, but progress is still lagging behind.

Talking about energy cooperation, which has become a landmark area of the Visegrad Group by now, Sadecki noted that some achievements have been made. Although it is also a relatively new sector for cooperation, launched only in the aftermath of the Russian-Ukrainian gas disputes in 2009, the interconnectedness of the region has increased significantly. The Polish-Czech and the Hungarian-Slovak interconnectors are already in place, while the Polish-Slovak is underway, he added. The major challenge in the sector will be the integration of the regional energy markets, which requires both much technical work and also political will. The protectionist approach of all Visegrad states and their competition to become a regional energy hub both hampers progress in this field. While this now looks like a long-term challenge, the region is not without short term challenges either. Sadecki mentioned here the Nordstream-2 pipeline between Russia and Germany, which is dangerous to the region both from the aspect of security and due to prospective economic losses caused by potentially reduced income from transit fees.

Discussing cooperation in the security and defense field, Sadecki underlined that its importance is recently growing predominantly because of the increasing instability in the neighborhoods of the EU: Russia in the East and ISIS in the South. He considered the Visegrad Battle Group, which is on stand-by since January as a key achievement of the cooperation, but noted that the question now is how it can be prolonged and how it could form a part of future cooperation as well. In his view, the key challenge for cooperation in the

sector is the differing threat perceptions of the four countries and their approach to security policy. As long as Poland spends three times as much on defense as the other three combined, and is much more involved in NATO as well, it is difficult to advance cooperation in the field.

Discussing what brings together and what divides the Visegrad countries, **Gábor Túry**, research fellow at the [Institute of World Economics of the Centre for Economic and Regional Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences](#) in Budapest, underlined that similarities and differences determine the strength of the cooperation among the four countries in the region. He noted that economic factors play an important role in moving the cooperation forward, while social and political components rather seem to appear as diverging factors hampering the progress. He argued that sustainable economic development and competitiveness will be key to determine how successful the Visegrad Cooperation can be in Europe. In terms of economic cooperation, he underlined the strong involvement of the V4 countries in the global value chain and their economic cooperation being based on the role of multi-national companies in Central Europe.

While the economic growth and the catching-up of the countries as well as the narrowing gap between them bring the four countries closer, Túry emphasized that political differences and social challenges – albeit similar – push the countries apart. At this point, only ad hoc political coalitions exist across sectoral affairs among the four within the EU. For example, while the common agricultural policy is important rather for Poland and Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic put emphasis more on regional developments. The absorption capacity of the countries concerning EU funds is also different and there is no platform that could bring together the best practices of the V4 on the use of structural funds. Among the social challenges, Túry mentioned the lack of sustainability of the countries' health care and pension systems in the context of aging societies and low level of migration that could support the workforce.

*Gábor Túry's presentation is available [here](#).*

**Tomáš Strážay**, research fellow of the [Slovak Foreign Policy Association](#) in Bratislava called for reviewing the origins of the cooperation including its founding principles and values, among them solidarity, which he stressed still plays an important role both in the V4 and the EU. Nevertheless, he observed, the solidarity pursued by the Visegrad countries currently and the solidarity as understood on the level of the EU does not seem to be complementary to each other at the moment. In the case of the migration crisis, the Visegrad countries have deviated from the position of Brussels and even if there were reasons for these actions and the erection of the border fence in Hungary can be understood as an act of solidarity, the perception in Brussels and in several bigger member states, e.g. in Germany, is that the V4 did not show solidarity with the EU. This should be taken seriously, in Strážay's view, as this can weaken the V4's position in the EU. Touching upon the values vs. pragmatism debate, he added that the V4 was founded by visionaries but is currently ruled by pragmatists, whom however, cannot create a long-term vision for the Group without building also on its values.

Strážay understood the lack of institutionalization as the strength of the Visegrad Group, which enables it to cooperate and to occupy different positions in the European Union. A secretariat and institutionalization resulting in legally binding decisions would make cooperation more difficult in his view. It should, however, be discussed how cooperation in sectoral areas could be made more effective without necessarily setting up new institutions for it. While there is a consensus that the V4 should not be enlarged, Strážay cautioned that a better balance should be found between the internal and external dimensions of the cooperation. As the European integration deepens, the V4 can still form a core, but will need to find coalition partners more and more among member states. In this regard, sectoral

cooperation will be an important element on the Visegrad Group's agenda, where infrastructural development should receive particularly high attention as the state of physical infrastructure directly impacts cooperation in other areas as well.

Finally, Strážay called for moving beyond reacting to short term challenges and using the anniversary as an opportunity to define not a vision but concrete mid- and long-term priorities for the Visegrad Group, which are also building on the values of the Group. He concluded by saying that without concrete goals and values, Visegrad will only be able to pursue blind pragmatism.

## *Panel II – Visegrad+: Where should Visegrad's external priorities lie?*

The second panel, chaired by **Hana Semanić**, research fellow at CENS, focused on changes and improvements that can be made in the policies of the Visegrad Group targeted to the Eastern Partnership and Western Balkan regions as well as in the field of security and defense cooperation, especially in connection with the upcoming NATO summit in Warsaw.

**Vít Dostál**, director of the Research Center of the [Association for International Affairs](#) in Prague, focused on identifying the primary partners of the V4 within the V4+ format based on the review of presidential, prime ministerial and ministerial meetings listed in the annual reports of the V4 presidencies between 2007 and 2015. In the studied period, a more and more extending geographical focus of the meetings could be observed, while starting with the 2010/11 Hungarian presidency two standardized formats have also appeared: meetings of foreign ministers of the V4 and the Western Balkan countries and the countries of the Eastern Partnership. With the Polish presidency, the V4+ Nordic-Baltic meetings also appeared on the agenda. When looking at the meetings of the foreign ministers, the frequency of the meetings suggests a picture of where the external priorities of the Visegrad Cooperation lie. Visegrad countries met most often with Ukraine, Lithuania and Sweden, then with Latvia and Moldova, and finally with other countries of the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkans including Croatia. The frequency of meetings and the circle of countries in sectoral policy areas, however, show a different picture from the area of foreign affairs. In sectoral policies, the main partners seem to be rather Romania, Bulgarian, Slovenia, and in the recent years Croatia, that is, the newer member states of the European Union.

Finally, based on the review of the already existing Visegrad + formats, Dostál concluded that the current ambitions of Poland to build the so-called ABC or Intermarium cooperation would be in fact the reinvention of the wheel since especially in the sectoral Visegrad + formats cooperation with the countries in this circle is already there.

*Vít Dostál's presentation is available [here](#).*

The geopolitical priority of the Visegrad Group in the field of security and defense policy is supporting the approximation of the countries of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership to NATO and the EU, stated **Róbert Ondrejcsák**, director of CENAA in Bratislava. He argued that there had been a broad consensus on this issue both on domestic and V4 level across the region up until the Maidan in Ukraine, and in the Western Balkans one can even regard this strategic priority successful. Since the Maidan, this consensus has broken down in all Visegrad countries but Poland, which sends a bad message to Ukraine in the current situation.

According to Ondrejcsák, despite the declarations, there has not been any successful common Visegrad project in the field of security and defense cooperation that was carried

through with the recent exception of the Visegrad Battle Group that is on stand-by in the first half of 2016 under Polish leadership. A good example for cooperation with external partners is that Ukraine has been incorporated into the project providing strategic airlift capabilities for the BG that Visegrad would otherwise lack. Beyond the end of the stand-by period, however, the sustainability of the cooperation is still doubtful which could lead to losing what has been achieved in this format.

Another challenge for the V4 in this field, Ondrejcsák noted, is the complete lack of strategic vision toward the Eastern Partnership countries. While there would be opportunities to cooperate, this would require serious political will which is currently missing. There is interest from the Ukrainian side for example, but the V4 does not react to it as a group. Similarly, the V4 also ignores Georgia's ambitions although the country cooperates extensively with partners like France, the UK or Poland individually going even beyond the frameworks a potential MAP status would suppose. Concerning the upcoming NATO summit, Ondrejcsák expressed his doubt whether Georgia could get the MAP status and was confident that there would not be readiness to take any political step or make symbolic gestures to Ukraine either.

The initial external priority of the Visegrad Group, that is joining the Euro-Atlantic institutional structures informed and should continue to guide the external policy priorities of the V4, argued *Zsuzsanna Végh*, research fellow of [CENS](#). As now part of the EU and NATO, the Visegrad countries' strategic interest is to contribute to the stability and democratic development of their immediate neighborhoods, the Western Balkans and the Eastern neighborhood of the EU. One channel to do so is to contribute to the transition and Europeanization of these countries with continued support through the Visegrad countries international development assistance and democracy support policies. The success of these policies, however, lies not only in the developing partner state, but also in the efficacy and effectiveness of the donor countries' policy practices.

Based on recent results of her research, Végh argued that in order to improve the contribution of the Visegrad countries to their neighbors' transition, their own international development assistance and democracy support policies should be revised through three entry points: alignment, coordination and evaluation. While the Visegrad experience seems to be relevant and welcome in the partner countries, the alignment of the content of the support with the local priorities is rather by chance than by design for the moment. Intra- and inter-donor coordination as well as coordination between donors and recipients have to be significantly improved in order to increase effectiveness and avoid duplications, while the evaluation practices have to be expanded and systematically incorporated into the development policies of all V4 countries.

Through alignment and coordination, she argued, the Visegrad countries need to develop a strategic approach toward the two neighborhoods. Considering the limited financial and human resources available, Visegrad countries should consider approximating their individual development planning at least in these two neighborhoods which could increase the impact of their activities as such. Their approach in turn should be kept relevant and effective through evaluation.

According to *Anita Sobják*, senior research fellow of the [Polish Institute of International Affairs](#), the Visegrad countries have both a responsibility and an interest to keep engaged in the Eastern Partnership region and help keep it on the European agenda. While two years ago there was much talk about the EaP on the European level, by now we can rather observe a "neighborhood fatigue" in the EU, and to make matters worse, domestic developments in some of the countries are also not encouraging. In Ukraine, the new government could be seen

as a compromise between President Poroshenko and the oligarchs and willingness to reform is lagging behind. Nevertheless, the changes that happened in the civil society after the Maidan give ground for hope and momentum. In Moldova, we now see an authoritarian turn after 5 years of an – at least nominally – pro-European government, where one oligarch is having more and more control over state institutions.

Nevertheless, it is the Visegrad countries responsibility, in Sobják's view, not to lose sight of the region. Diplomatic support for the EaP countries' European aspirations should be kept on the table, but also practical support should be stepped up. The V4 Roadshow – in which the four countries have shared their transition experiences with Ukrainian stakeholders in four areas in the aftermath of the Maidan – might have been a good start and was at least a joint V4 effort. Coordination, though, has its limitations among Visegrad countries' development efforts too, argued Sobják. For this reason it would also be beneficial for the Visegrad countries to coordinate, but at least consult with more mature larger donors active in the EaP countries (like Canada, Sweden etc.). The development assistance policies of the V4 countries are still in their infancies, they are on different levels of development and the countries are not even among the 10 biggest donors in these recipient states. While the V4 generally portrays itself as transition supporter, it is surprising to see that they are hardly participating in EU missions, twinning and TAIEX programs implemented in these countries, observed Sobják. Governments should be more active in these areas, she suggested. Finally, she concluded, the Visegrad countries engagement in the EaP region should not be negotiable; it has to remain in the focus.

### *Panel III – Visegrad in the EU: How to contribute beyond protest?*

The final panel of the conference, chaired by **Miklós Haraszti**, director of research on human rights at CENS, concentrated on the current position of the Visegrad Cooperation raising questions about the emerging political trends and narratives in the region and their compatibility with narratives present in Western Europe, whether they provide an alternative. It discussed how and under what conditions the Visegrad countries can contribute to a common European project: what areas would be the best entry points and how thinking itself about Visegrad should be rethought in order to make the cooperation more effective internally and at the European stage.

**Péter Balázs**, director of [CENS](#), argued that the fact that Visegrad is still here even after the NATO and EU accession of the four countries is a success which reflects the strength of the common foundations of the Group he identified as the common moral background stemming from the upheavals of these states against the Soviet rule, their place in the Euro-Atlantic integration and their geographic location which influences some of their interests. He noted that while the EU membership could have led to the dissolution of the Group, the four countries resisted and maintained this form of regional cooperation – even in the presence of competing regional formats such as Slavkov, the Central European Initiative or the Weimar Triangle.

The temptation of working in a V4+ format is always there, according to Balázs because within the EU, the V4 still needs partners, their cooperation is not sufficient in itself. Balázs sees the maneuvering margin of the V4 within the various structures of the Council and in specific areas like the common budget, transport and transportation, energy supply. There would be potential, in his view, in the joint use of EU funds, should politicians look further ahead. He also mentioned FDI optimization as potential area for cooperation, which

is currently done but only by the market. The implementation of the European Roma Strategy could be a natural platform to unite on in the European scene considering that three out of the four countries have a significant Roma population. Finally, when foreign services generally are cutting costs, Visegrad countries could consider the establishment of joint representation outside the EU.

Discussing the current state of the Visegrad Cooperation, Balázs argued that it is still below the necessary intensity of organization and the cooperation should be fueled further. Institutionalization should not necessarily mean over-institutionalization, but a reasonable number of people could launch initiative, mobilize politicians, follow-up on policy. This would require a political consensus, which is not present now on the issue, but one day it might, and it could increase the efficiency of Visegrad.

Sharing key points of the report of the V4 panel of eminent personalities [Visegrad 25 Years After](#), [Pavol Demeš](#), non-resident fellow of the [German Marshall Fund](#), argued that being part of the EU is an uncontested interest of the V4 countries. He was also on the position that V4 should not be extended and instead of institutionalization it should remain flexible, but its focal points should be moved from the MFAs to the Prime Minister's Offices. The role and functioning of the International Visegrad Fund should be equally reconsidered in his view. He noted that while we as Visegrad tend to think that we contribute to the stability of the European Union, the current prevailing notion among Western partners is rather that we undermine and problematize Europe, especially throughout the refugee crisis. The upcoming Slovak EU Presidency just as the NATO summit in Warsaw both serve as a good occasion to showcase how we can instead contribute as constructive partners.

According to Demeš, the internal political developments in the region are raising questions. We see a shrinking space for civil society and independent media, and in this context it is questionable whether we can pose as role models for the countries of the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe. At a time when extremism, anti-EU and anti-US anti-systemic parties are on the rise, more self-critical thinking is necessary. It is also striking, he argued, how receptive the population of the Visegrad countries to narratives propagated by Russia. With regards to the trend of re-nationalization of politics in the region he argued that internal EU dynamics have a lot to do with it. Something that is not the fault of the Visegrad countries.

Demeš called for the upgrade of Visegrad, and questioned whether there is real public-private partnership when discussing the cooperation. In his view, Visegrad is too much driven by politicians and from top-down. To make Visegrad work, Visegrad should communicate in a smarter way with the outside world weighting its own position realistically. Meetings discussing the present and the future of the Group should be inclusive with politicians, diplomats and analysts participating alike, while analysis should not shy away from sending messages when things go wrong and providing advice how to make things better.

The Visegrad countries have been demanding institutional and financial solidarity for long from the EU and even treated it like an ATM to finance their modernization and transformation, stated [Wojciech Przybylski](#), editor-in-chief of [Eurozine](#) and chairman of [Res Publica](#). He argued that solidarity was the underlying dream present at the beginning of Visegrad and the political symbolism of Europe is built on this notion as well. Over the years, Visegrad countries have learnt how institutional solidarity works which is both infused and enforced in the European integration. The group itself has gone through a rising trends which lead to leading European politicians vocally criticizing their cooperation: like Jacques Chirac when noting that new Europe lost an opportunity to be quite, or Nicolas Sarkozy speaking up against the Visegrad coordinator meetings ahead of the Council meeting in the EU.

The rising trend of the group has now been stopped thanks to the language of ‘no solidarity’ coming from the Visegrad countries. This political message resulted in disbelief that we as Visegrad are deserving of reciprocal solidarity even if this debate is based on politics of symbolism and does not reflect reality. All that Visegrad has accomplished has now stopped because in terms of symbolical politics we could not level up, said Przybylski. While politicians have become braver and more outspoken challengers on the European scene, the language of the public sphere and of society also legitimizes their policy. The public is opposing of solidarity as polls show. Even if the Europe is now catching up, Visegrad is still the frontrunner of this policy of ‘no solidarity’.

Referring to Alexis de Tocqueville, Przybylski concluded in an optimistic tone that it may take another, the third generation to reach the phase of European democrats in the Visegrad region.

The current division in Europe embodied in the migration crisis just as the discussions around sovereignty and national identity are all stories that had been told 10 years ago, according to *Michal Vít*, research fellow of [EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy](#) in Prague. The migration crisis and its political implications should prompt us to think about the political developments in the region, among others about the relation between the societies and the political parties and ask which constructs which?

The refugee crisis, an emotional topic which easily moves people to identify with a certain position, is just an occasion to bring to the fore various political narratives that have been present across Europe. In the case of Central Europe, however, the positive input of our development, the higher aim that we want to achieve, is missing, argued Vít. The current Fidesz and PiS position tells a story where parties that are unwilling to adapt to and accept European norms can still function in the European arena, noted Vít. In his view, this outcome is contrary to what the European integration aimed at, yet these actors consider it as a success.

So why even be attracted by European norms, asked Vít, when we also see that it does not work in the Western Balkans either. According to him, the background of the political leaders is crucial, yet little studied. Have they been trained to be Europeans or to accept coalition building? If they do not even speak foreign languages, they cannot advocate European ideas. In this context we need to consider what kind of Visegrad Cooperation we want to build? Something based on the new Central European political narrative which is not compatible with the Western European? What should be the political meta-narrative we want to spread?