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The Institutionalization of the V4

Dávid Nagy

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The Visegrad Group (V4) was established with the common vision that regional cooperation of the Central-European countries will lead to effectiveness and expediency on the path to Euro-Atlantic integration. Through the years, without a tight bound agreement, common budget or a robust institutional structure the V4 not only led its participants back to Europe but after some revitalization it proved that it has more potential as an instrument of joint advocacy in the international arena. It proved that the development and the success of an organization does not necessarily depend on its level of institutionalization and with its own open, flexible and informal institutionalized initiative it could become a highly respected “brand” of cooperation.

Internal and external factors forming the V4

The end of the 1980s and the 90s brought several deep transformations internationally and regionally alike. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the cease of its institutions and organizations such as the Comecon or the Warsaw Pact meant the end of the bipolar world order and the beginning of a whole new long-awaited era by people, experts and politicians with optimistic excitement.¹

These international changes had a huge regional impact too. In Europe regional institutions and cooperation have already existed on several levels but in the 90s regionalism shifted to a higher speed. The European Community, the European Union strengthened and deepened the integration, also widened the fields of

¹ This then general feeling is greatly embodied in the book: The End of History and the Last Man by Francis Fukuyama

cooperation, while other formations disintegrated entirely like Yugoslavia (1991) or Czechoslovakia (1993).

But tectonic movements also given the opportunity, or even compelled in forming a new regional cooperation. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary became newly independent republics with a common geographical-historical-cultural feature which could mean a cohesion basis for a new regional interaction. Within the Comecom all three countries have had a more advanced economy and infrastructure and by all means the region meant the “west of the eastern bloc”. All three countries agreed on a peacefully negotiated democratic political transition, moreover transitioning to a market economy in the same phase, thus abandoning the Warsaw Pact and calling on Soviet troops to leave the territory immediately. Furthermore, these countries’ security, defense and foreign policy priorities unanimously were the integration into the Euro-Atlantic security-political-economic structure, namely into the NATO and EU.

Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall with views of mature and clear foreign and regional policy, moreover a historical approach realized the common past and present of the countries of the region, and mutual aspirations would mean a common future. In 1990 in the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) meeting in Paris József Antall presented his vision of a regional cooperation to his regional partners Václav Havell, President of Czechoslovakia and Lech Wałęsa, President of Poland who received the initiative with openness.¹

Framework of the Visegrad Group

In 15 February, 1991 in Visegrad (Hungary) the three leaders with a joint statement established the Visegrad Group, the regional economic, political, cultural cooperation between the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, the Republic of Hungary and the Republic of Poland.² The name of the statement clearly defines the main objective of the cooperation: “... *Striving for European Integration*”¹

² Visegrad (a city in Hungary) was chosen intentionally as an establishment place of the group with allusion to the Congress of Visegrád in 1335 between John I of Bohemia, Charles I of Hungary and Casimir III of Poland. Their object then came from a realization of how the small states and kingdoms could work together more successfully in the shadow of great empires from all sides. More than 650 years later the leaders of these countries came together, with almost the same realization and goal to articulate their mutual interests more emphatically. <https://www.visegradgroup.eu/the-visegrad-book/gawlas-slawomir-the-1335>

The memorandum of association properly recorded the functioning, the modus operandi of the organization addressing the common values and objectives - the bonding basis of the group.

The convergence objectives was inter alia the democratic, independent statehood based on the rule of law, respecting human rights, a modern free market economy and also the full involvement of the European political, economy, security system. *“Coordination of the efforts—with respect for national peculiarities—increases the chances of attaining the desired goals and brings closer the realization of their objectives.”* – sums up the ultimate objective and a very pragmatic meaning of the cooperation. As values the Declaration mentions the mutual cultural, spiritual heritage and common roots of religious traditions which also embody the European ideals.

But when comes the “how” the statement leaves just a small paragraph: “The cooperation of the signatories will be realized through meetings and consultations held at various levels and in various forms.” “...they shall endeavor to create free contacts between citizens, institutions, churches and social organizations”^{III} As we can see the main idea of the level of cooperation is a loose alliance, focusing on the similarities and mutual objects but allowing each participant to express its own interests and identity. The Ambassador’s Council was established but no institution has been named nor intentions were expressed from any side to form one. In fact, Hungarian PM József Antall explicitly emphasized that with the new cooperation they didn’t want to give an impression of a new international organization, an alternative for any European organization in any way.^{IV}

From this we can see the Visegrad Group is since its foundation a political, “top-down” project with pragmatic values and an objectives focused approach which does not exclude opportunity for institutionalization but leaves wide room for participants to maneuver.

Slowing down

The loose structured cooperation showed some of its weaknesses. Without any deep institutionalization and a lack of binding agreements or mechanism, the informal methods of cooperation and coordination seemed to be little to keep the cooperation

going and developing. After the split of Czechoslovakia (1993) domestic political changes occurred. The Czech Republic apparently saw its integration to the Euro-Atlantic structure not through the V4 framework, and considered the regional cooperation a hold back in its aspirations. Slovakia under Vladimír Mečiar broke with the European way of political and economic transformation focusing on more autocratic nation building for which Slovakia has been excluded from the first round of NATO enlargement and the advanced group of EU candidates.^V

An announcement from the EU from this time shown that the Union intended to negotiate the terms of full membership individually as regards of the countries of the Central European region has also weakened collaboration efforts.^{VI} Maybe a tighter, more institutionalized and organic V4 Group could have made the integration process quicker or made the EU handle them more unified.

However, all these issues slowed down the cooperation, the countries of the Group - except for Slovakia – became a NATO member in 1999 which can be considered as a great achievement from this period.

Revitalization

At the end of the 90s and in the beginning of the new millennium, as the EU integration was delayed the Visegrad countries recognized their cooperation again as an instrument of the joint aspiration to join the EU. V4 states started to work together more closely, coordinate their activities, shared information with each other and non-V4 partners in the pre-access period of the EU.

Rotating Presidency

In 1999 in Bratislava at the Prime Ministers Summit of the Visegrad Group, political leaders identified seven main areas of cooperation including migration, anti-terror, education, science and environmental protection.^{VII} New principles of cooperation and operational framework has been laid down as a mechanism for then current and future interaction.^{VIII} A rotating presidency system has been created which means the current country takes over the issues of cooperation for a year, capacitating the progress of common affairs and at the same time it is the hosting country for the annual political meetings. It's the president country that is accredited to negotiate with external partners after a joint standpoint has been established within the V4.^{IX}

Each president country makes a program in advance in which it specifies which areas of cooperation should be more emphasized according to its own priority and discretion and in response to regional and world political events. This agenda is evaluated after by the prime ministers and ministers of the member states in terms of what has been achieved. However, it is worth to note that a rotating presidency system still doesn't mean any institutionalization, just a closer and more systematic form of cooperation defined by clear mechanisms.^x

Visegrad Fund

In 2000 the Visegrad Group took a step forward in the path of institutionalization by bringing the political, "upper level" project closer to the people of the partner countries. The establishment of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF), - the first and only institution of the V4 - with the full consensus of the participants indicates that intensifying further the cooperation and extending the scope of activities in that way were (and are) a common intension of each country.^{xi} The IVF connects the civil society of the four countries, strengthening the non-political bonds between the participants supporting the cooperation in cultural and educational spheres, providing scholarships, exchange and joint programs between universities, non-governmental originations and other public institutions. The IVF works as a donor organization with the annual budget of €8 million contributed by each four countries equally, but other donor countries (Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States) have also contributed to the Fund, provided another €10 million through various grant schemes run by the Fund since 2012.^{xii}

The Conference of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (CM) is the supreme decision-making body of the Fund which approves the Fund's budget and the rules of procedure of the Fund's secretariat. Ministers of the Foreign Affairs meet annually in the current president country. The Council of Ambassadors (CA) consists of accredited ambassadors to the country which hold the presidency. It approves which projects should be supported by the Fund and assists the Conference of Ministers.^{xiii}

The IVF is also open to other participants through the V4+ framework and have a scope especially to Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership region which counts as a priority region for the V4.

Post-Accession period and the future of the V4

By becoming the members of the NATO in 1999 (Slovakia in 2004) and gaining full membership in the EU in 2004 the Visegrad Group has reached its main objectives. But the other c.a. 15 years after the successful integration proved that the V4 not just has relevance but it could develop and widened its scope. However, from the perspective of institutionalization no other institution has been formed than the IVF, but a more entrenched mechanism of cooperation of the V4 could have gone further while maintaining the flexibility and the open character of the cooperation.

Cooperation was implemented in concrete projects (Schengen, energy policy, security, EU battle group, R+D, agriculture), international or regional issues often made the V4 make joint statements, demonstrating common standpoints in the EU (on migration, quota system, EU budget.)

Through these events of the last years and the successful strengthening of the cooperation proved that development does not depend necessarily on the level of institutionalization. Representing a joint statement on such issues which concern and occupy the European Union for years like migration, contributed to the V4 becoming a respected and attractive “brand.”

Consensual “no” to institutionalization

However, institutionalization and enlargement always concern researchers and diplomats, in higher political levels the leaders of the Visegrad countries always said “no” consensually to these questions. With a more institutionalized form, V4 could lose its main virtue, namely that diverse composition governments are able to work together focusing on what connects them rather than the political differences or bilateral disagreements between partners.^{XIV} Furthermore, a more binding and formal institutionalized form of the V4 would be required from the participants to take a position and join statements on issues on which they otherwise don't have joint standing (e.g., Russia or China).^{XV} As all four counties are members of the NATO and EU the further institutionalization of the V4 would also carry the risk of duplication existing structures and forums without increasing efficiency of cooperation.^{XVI}

Conclusion - less institution, more benefits

One may think that institutionalization, and a more comprehensive, more regulated framework could mean a secure basis for a lasting cooperation, which is true for most of the international organizations. But in case of the V4 being a “regular” international organization with tight binding agreements and institutionalized form was never a goal. In fact, the key to a long-lasting and deepening cooperation between the Visegrad countries was the mutual vision of open and flexible interaction with a pragmatism approach focusing on common values and interests. This is how it could be revitalized after years of stagnancy – e.g after the split of Czechoslovakia – and switched its focus to other common issues after the Euro-Atlantic integration was realized. The Group was always seen as an instrument to reach common goals by means of advocacy, adding up the constituent small and middle-sized states’ interests and making their voices more emphatic in the European or even the international arena. This open cooperation makes the V4 a developing brand and an attractive option for others as well.

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