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# Thirty years of Visegrad

*Summits, meetings and themes of a  
Central European cooperation*

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March 2021

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## Summits, meetings and themes of a Central European cooperation

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The constellation known as the Visegrad Group has been widely regarded as the political success story of Central Europe, and even though it has experienced temporary setbacks as every long-term political project does, the V4 has been able to grow in scope and relevance even after its initial goals had been met. In the following chapters we will take a look at the major topics and themes which preoccupied – and gave purpose to – the V4 in different periods of its existence, the most important meetings and summits it held over the past thirty years.

### **The decade of foundation (1990-1998)**

#### **A vision of Central Europe (1990-1991)**

As soon as the walls of Soviet empire started to crumble and new democratic governments began to take shape in Central Europe, the representatives of the former underground opposition forces joined in a series of meetings to help each other navigate through the power vacuum left by Moscow. The Central European ‘*troika*’ – as they were called that time –, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary entered negotiations as soon as January 1990, and they based their initial cooperation on the foremost goal of dismantling of the remnants of Russia’s institutionalized grip on them once and for all.<sup>1</sup> Finally, after meetings in all three countries, at the invitation of the Hungarian prime minister, József Antall, the leaders of the *troika* gathered in Visegrád Castle – the highly symbolic site where the 1335 Congress between the kings of Hungary, Poland and Bohemia took place – where a formal declaration of mutual trust and cooperation was signed. On February 15, 1991, PM Antall, Czechoslovakian

President Václav Havel and Polish President Lech Wałęsa signed the *Visegrad Declaration*, officially establishing the Visegrad Group.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the most important common goal of dissolving the remaining Russian-led institutions (Warsaw Pact and Comecon), the declaration contained three other pillars of cooperation as well: one, to overcome historical animosities between the signing countries; to join efforts not only during the transformation period into democracy and free-market capitalism, but also in the European integration process; and to hold up a proximity of ideas of the ruling political elites.<sup>3</sup>

### Initial period (1991-1992)

The first two years of the existence of the Visegrad Group was regarded as quite an active period in terms of initiatives and common actions taken by the member countries. The first and foremost goal of dismantling old Soviet institutions started just days after signing the Visegrad Declaration: on 25 February the meeting of foreign ministers in Budapest – at the initiative of the V3 – declared the Warsaw Pact disbanded, and later on 1 July, 1991, President Havel (then chairing the Pact) formally disestablished the Soviet military organization, 36 years after it came into being.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, to the fate of the Warsaw Pact, the V3 played a key role in formally ending the Comecon (*Council for Mutual Economic Assistance*), the Moscow-led economic organization of Soviet satellite-states. After the Central European countries agreed to switch to international ‘hard’ currencies in trade between them in early 1991, the organization quickly became dysfunctional and its role “no longer relevant” among the emerging free-market states. The formal resolution to dissolve the Council was adopted at its last meeting, held in Budapest on 28 June 1991.<sup>5</sup>

In the following months, the representatives of the V3 were able to present the seriousness of their cooperation to the international community, even in matters not falling directly under their domestic interests or initial goals. The Krakow Summit in October – apart from agreeing on joining efforts in the Euro-Atlantic integration processes – ended with a joint resolution on the Yugoslav conflict, which was essentially a warning to the West about possible violations of human rights and the right to self-determination, and the strong condemnation of these acts symbolically established the V3 as a prestigious regional entity. Similarly, the way the representatives of these countries met with the US Secretary of State in New York or

the Benelux foreign ministers in Brussels in September 1991 – together, representing a coordinated policy plans – sent a strong message of unity and viable future prospects. Amid the general uncertainty of the time, the Visegrad Group was widely regarded as a successful regional model for all post-communist countries to follow, and its endorsement by the EU is also shown by the fact that the V3 countries became the first to sign the *Europe Agreements* on 16 December, taking the first step on the road of European integration. A year later, on 21 December 1992, the V3 countries established the CEFTA (*Central European Free Trade Agreement*), which served as a ‘lobby’ not only for them but for every other post-communist country to enter the EU later.<sup>6</sup>

### Visegrad ‘Four’ and a step back (1993-1994)

The dissolution of Czechoslovakia on 31 December 1992 had left the leaders of the Visegrad Group questioning the future of their cooperation. Since the Euro-Atlantic integration was regarded as the core idea that linked the *troika* together more strongly than any other principle, the anti-Western oriented prime minister of the newly formed Slovakia, Vladimír Mečiar became quite a difficult fit with the rest of the group, weakening the political integrity of the now Visegrad Four. The different mindset of the newest member was especially regarded as a problem by Václav Klaus, President of the Czech Republic, who deemed further strategic cooperation senseless and instead promoted individualism in pursuit of each member’s national goals. The V4 did not cease to exist, but its intensity decreased (almost no summits were held in this period), and the scope of collaboration was reduced to mostly economic matters.<sup>7</sup>

### The road to NATO (1994-1998)

Already having negotiated possible NATO accession in the initial period of V3 with promising results, the members of the group were set back after President Clinton announced in 1993 that the military organization will create an international forum for non-NATO members called the *Partnership for Peace* (PfP) which will deepen their relationship with the Atlantic alliance. The Visegrad countries, especially Poland, regarded the plan as a ‘threat’ for Central European security, fearing that it would replace the possibility of NATO membership entirely and would create a new, West-imposed ‘Yalta’ instead of actual integration.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, it was the Visegrad Group – especially President Wałęsa – pressuring the Clinton-administration into altering the initial plans of PfP (to include written guarantees for members of possibility of NATO accession), agreed upon at the Prague Summit of 12 January 1994. Shortly after, all the Visegrad countries joined the PfP along most of Central and Eastern Europe, but now reassured, that they would be the first to become full-fledged NATO members.<sup>9</sup>

For the V4, the second half of the 1990s meant strengthening its position in the PfP and negotiating NATO membership above all else (with the exception of Slovakia, which was not considered democratic enough under Mečiar by several members). During this period, the most important meetings of the V4 were the annual summits on defence cooperation, which basically meant finding a common approach to PfP and NATO. Many believe, that Poland, Czechia and Hungary were first to be invited as observers to the Atlantic alliance's Madrid Summit in 1997 - officially beginning their accession talks – because they presented and maintained a common, unified front in their desire.<sup>10</sup>

## **The decade of action (1998-2010)**

### **Revitalisation (1998)**

The trilateral summit of Budapest on 21 October 1998 marked an important turning point in the history of the Visegrad Group. The leaders of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary gathered together to express their support for the revitalisation of their cooperation after years of declining intensity and diverging policies. The leaders agreed to extend the initial scopes of the V4 to include a broader spectrum of collaboration other than purely political and economic fields. The summit ended with the leaders signing a joint declaration containing their commitment to the traditional European democratic values, civil rights and market economy, which essentially set the ideological path the group follows to this day.<sup>11</sup>

### **From NATO to the EU**

From 1999 onward, as a direct result of the above-mentioned summit on revitalisation, we see a dramatic increase in the number of summits and meetings held each year,

and also an expansion in fields of cooperation, with new topics given platforms such as culture, healthcare, education or environment protection.<sup>12</sup>

1999 also marked the year of NATO accession of Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic at the Washington Summit held between April 23-25. Apart from committing to a strong response to the Serbian atrocities in Kosovo, the Washington Summit is known for another decision, even more important for the new Central European member states. The summit adopted the *Membership Action Plan* (MAP), as part of NATO's 'open door policy', which served as a framework for countries aspiring to be included in their ranks, presenting a clear set of criteria accompanied by an application and approval mechanism, making it easier for new states to join.<sup>13</sup> The V4 considered the MAP an essential tool to be used during their joint effort to help the post-Mečiar Slovakia catch up with the rest of the group in terms of Atlantic integration.

Shortly after, at the summit of Stirina in June 2000 the *International Visegrad Fund* (IVF) was established, with the goal of supporting cultural and scientific cooperation by granting cross-border scholarships and funding outstanding projects in Central Europe.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the IVF has extended its field of operation to cover neighbouring countries as well (especially the West Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries), and awards more than €8M through various grants each year, provided by the V4 countries in equal contribution, with about another one million coming every in year from different western countries.<sup>15</sup>

The following years saw the cooperation extended to even more fields. In addition to the ones mentioned above, in 2000-2004 the V4 countries held meetings that connected the scientific academies, youth delegations, border police officials, as well as agricultural, transport and justice ministers of the member states, and initiated countless new programs of cooperation across the borders.<sup>16</sup> Without any doubt, 2000-2004 was the most active period in the history of the V4, both in the number of meetings and the results they achieved, which laid down the foundation of the broad synergy we experience today.

Yet, the most important issue which preoccupied the V4 in this period was the project of European integration, with the group determined to go through the process as one. The Visegrad countries regularly held meetings for the representatives of their parliamentary committees of European integration, which always ended with joint

statements signed by the four chairmen, demonstrating a unified front on the question of EU membership and their progress in achieving it. Along these meetings, the V4 members held meetings for their EU-negotiators once a year, where the diplomats were able to share experiences and work out common strategies to later use in their independent talks.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, in 2004, the primary goal of Euro-Atlantic cooperation has been completed in two steps. Firstly, all four members of the Visegrad Group were admitted into the European Union (along with six other candidates) on the 1st of May, as part of the biggest EU enlargement to date. The enlargement was preceded by signing the *Treaty of Accession* a year before, which put the integration efforts into the final stage. Meeting all the criteria that EU membership required was in a significant way due to the immense cooperation the V4 countries showed during the process, and their strategy was also regarded as an exemplary model for the other candidates as well.<sup>18</sup>

Secondly, Slovakia, along with six other post-communist countries joined the NATO as part of the bloc's biggest enlargement at the Istanbul Summit on June 28-29. The seven states, dubbed as the 'Vilnius group', were first invited to the 2002 Prague Summit to begin their accession talks, and were all aided by the three Visegrad members along the process, much like in the case of the EU enlargement.<sup>19</sup>

With these steps, the Visegrad cooperation fulfilled its primary purpose of Euro-Atlantic integration, having found a common voice to argue for admittance, then going through the processes together. This period also healed the past divisions inside the group and opened up a new chapter for unity and progress.

### **The rise of regional diplomacy (2005-2010)**

The second half of the 2000s, in terms of summits and meetings, was primarily characterized by two changes. Firstly, the cooperation of the V4 countries had become more orderly and systematic. Whereas previously, the various topics (education, science, border control, agriculture, etc.) were discussed at occasionally held meetings of different committees and corps, from 2005 onward we see regular meetings held specifically for certain ministries of the four countries – year after year –, with almost no policy field left untouched.

The second, geopolitically more important change was the greatly increased number of meetings the representatives of Visegrad had with leaders of third-party countries. Realising that it is easier to represent their interests when banded together, members of the V4 chose to engage in diplomatic talks not only bilaterally, but as a group as well, like they used to during the integration processes. Every year the presidents and prime ministers of the Visegrad Group met with the leaders of half a dozen countries, mainly from those belonging to the regional neighbourhood of the V4, but not exclusively. As a bloc, for example, they met with the leaders of Romania and Bulgaria (especially ahead of their EU accession), with Austria, Slovenia or the Baltics, but they also held talks with the Benelux countries, Ukraine, Moldova, Portugal, Sweden or Japan for that matter.<sup>20</sup> The experience of achieving EU and NATO membership together has led the V4 to continue with this practice of collective negotiation, whenever their interests aligned.

In every aspect, the latter half of this decade meant stabilisation and systematisation of the cooperation inside the bloc, while putting the valuable experience they gained in terms of collective negotiation into further practice.

## **The decade of cohesion (2011-2021)**

### **Twentieth anniversary – Quo vadis, Visegrad? (2011)**

Being the 20th anniversary of the constellation (and 10th anniversary of the establishment of the Visegrad Fund), 2011 marked yet another turning point in the history of the V4, albeit not as significant as 1998 or 2004 were. Nevertheless, the occasion (and the increased number of meetings due to it) not only gave way for celebration but for self-reflection as well. The significance of the anniversary was further increased by the fact that in 2011 the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union was given to Hungary (January-June) and Poland (July-December), giving the unofficial title ‘Central Europe’s Year in the EU’ to it.

The anniversary was marked by two important events. The first was an extended summit of leaders of the V4 along with the leaders of Germany, Austria and Ukraine, held in Bratislava on 15th February. The second was a conference (of top officials and policy experts) held in Brussels on 21st March and titled ‘*Quo vadis, Visegrad?*’, which

reflected on the milestones behind the group and the challenges still ahead. The discussion was also accompanied by a variety of cultural events, celebrating Central European art, folklore, music and cinema.<sup>21</sup>

### **Strengthening regional cohesion (2012-2019)**

The third decade of the existence of the V4 can largely be described as the decade of regional cohesion, since the main directives of the cooperation was broadening the scopes and fields of their activity while reaching out and designing common policies and approaches with its neighbouring countries.

One of the aspects of this broader cooperation was the way the V4 began to hold regular meetings in different formats encompassing larger groups of countries. It was not an entirely new approach, as the Visegrad members have previously met with the representatives of the Benelux or the Baltic countries together, but during the first half of the 2010s, wider formats also emerged. Such formats were the 'V4+7' (Baltics, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia and Slovenia), the 'V4+EaP' (non-EU members of the Eastern Partnership) or the 'V4 + Nordic and Baltic' countries.<sup>22</sup> This process also led to the creation of the *Three Seas Initiative* (3SI), the promising regional bloc with the V4 in its center.

The major themes of this period – all centered around the idea of regional cohesion – were defence, energy, high speed transportation and border security policies, as well as cooperation with the EaP countries, the stability of which holds a strategic importance to the V4. Strengthening the prospects of another EU enlargement to the east has become one of the main external policy directives of the V4, catering to the greatest long-term security and economic interests alike. To this day, the V4 countries – during yearly summits, ministerial meetings and international partnership programs – share their valuable experiences with the EaP, helping those countries join the EU sooner.<sup>23</sup>

The increasing cooperation in fields of energy and transportation policies correspond with the emergence of the 3SI, the primary objective of which is making the region less dependent on external (especially eastern) energy providers and building up a system of effective and modern transportation infrastructure to facilitate intra-regional trade.<sup>24</sup>

Another common policy issue that has emerged in the latter part of the decade was border security, as part of the larger policy directives the V4 commonly adopted in response to the European migration crisis. The migratory pressure on Schengen's southern border – and the western countries' inability to properly address it – led the Visegrad Group to take a strong, unified stand on the issue, protecting their borders from illegal crossings and representing their interests in Brussels as a bloc. The fact that the EU has not been able to pass the mandatory migration quotas to this day, is largely due to the common diplomatic steps taken by the V4, who refuse to be pressured into changing their minds on the matter.<sup>25</sup>

### **Global pandemic, regional responses (2020-2021)**

By number of events, 2020 turned out to be among the most active years in the history of the Visegrad cooperation, second only to 2004, the year of EU accession. One of the reasons behind this was, of course, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Amid the raging pandemic, the countries of the Visegrad Group did not settle for only individual and EU-level crisis management, but instead opted for strong regional cooperation as well. In the early stage of the pandemic, members of the V4 shared information and resources not only among them, but also dedicated a part of the Visegrad Fund (up to 250 thousand euros) helping out EaP countries under the “V4 East Solidarity” programme.<sup>26</sup> Later, during the second wave of Covid-19, the Visegrad countries created the *V4 Centre for Covid-19*, established at the Lublin summit in September 2021, to further the coordination in combatting the coronavirus and its consequences. Since then, representatives of all four countries' health and foreign ministries' have been meeting weekly via videoconferences to discuss cooperation in fields of healthcare, border traffic, air transport, as well as internal regulations and restrictions.<sup>27</sup>

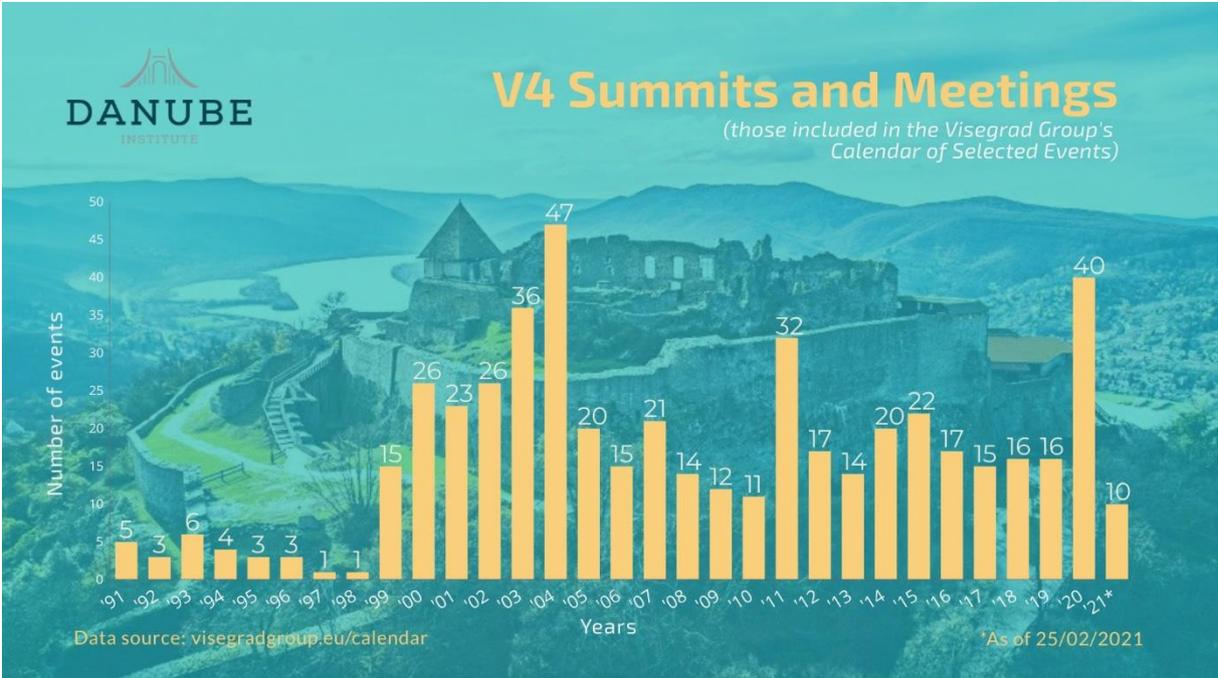
As for 2021, the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the group, the primary objective will likely be a range of policies characterized as a ‘return to normality’. When Poland took over the V4 presidency from July 2020, Warsaw adopted the following motto for the 2020-2021 presidential cycle: “Back on track”, indicating that recovering from the pandemic will be of paramount importance this year. The plan of the objectives details that the two main areas of this cooperation will be economic recovery paired with healthcare and scientific research. Apart from the Covid-related directives, 2021

will be about further strengthening the V4 countries’ influence inside the EU, deepening V4 cooperation in sectoral policies and broadening the cooperation in the various V4+ formats.<sup>28</sup>

### Conclusions

The Visegrad Group emerged from the common need of Central European countries to eradicate the institutional remnants of the Soviet Union in order to effectively transition to democracy and to a free-market economy in the early 1990s, but after meeting this initial goal, the cooperation of the three – then four – Central European states went on to gradually become a lasting partnership of like-minded leaders with common interests, and now covers nearly every field of their internal and external policies.

This gradual evolution of the Visegrad idea can also be observed in the number of meetings and summits its members held each year, which clearly show the more active and intense periods of the history of the constellation.



The period of 1990-1994 can be regarded as the time of the foundation, when the Visegrad leaders established the main goals and directives of their cooperation, cut the remaining links that connected their countries to the East and stepped on the path

that would eventually lead them to the West through Euro-Atlantic integration. In the years following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1994-98), the V4 experienced a temporal setback with their integrity weakened and their policies diverged by internal disputes.

The revitalisation of the project began in 1998, and from then to 2004, the V4 experienced their most active years in terms of both the volume and the intensity of their cooperation. The main directive of this period was achieving the ultimate goal of joining the Euro-Atlantic institutions, the NATO and the EU, which eventually were finalised in 1999 and 2004 respectively. The success of this shared dream opened up a new chapter of unity and progress for the V4, and were widely regarded as an exemplary model for similar countries to follow.

Since then, the Visegrad Group has been steadily growing in scope and relevance, deepening its sectoral cooperation which now covers nearly every aspect of internal and external policies, as well as it has become a regional centre of Central – and Eastern – European cohesion for political and strategic unity.

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