

Visegrad plus: expanding alliance or a tool of advocacy?

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Foreign relations and seeking partnerships with external partners have always had a significant role in the operation of the Visegrad Group, however it certainly shifted and evolved after the integration of the V4 countries into the Euro-Atlantic structure. But how Visegrad+, the foreign policy framework of the Visegrad Group can contribute to the V4's international perception and influence and how it fosters EU integration of other countries may be its main priority

Visegrad+ definition

V4+, Visegrad plus or Visegrad+ will be used in the following as a term of the foreign policy framework of the Visegrad Group, the platform and structure of cooperation with internal partners be it EU or NATO member countries or non-members of these organizations. These V4+ partners also could be international or regional organizations (such as UN or OSCE) or other regional cooperation (Baltic Cooperation), but meetings and coordination at any level (governmental or parliamentary; prime ministers, foreign ministers, ministers and other diplomats or experts) are also considered to be under the flag of Visegrad+. In this sense Visegrad+ is used in a wider interpretation in this paper and not limited to regional or Euro-Atlantic level horizontally nor limited to just country level vertically. Although, this analysis is focused more on the cooperation between the V4 and non-EU members emphasizing the global relations and advocacy ability of the Visegrad Group.

Brief history of the V4

Visegrad Group (Visegrad Four or V4) is a Central-European regional cooperation between Poland, Czechia, Hungary and Slovakia founded in 1991. After the fall of the Iron Curtain countries from the region had a shared view that regional cooperation could bring more benefits and efficiency by pursuing a common goal: the integration into the Euro-Atlantic structure, namely the NATO and EU. The first decade of the cooperation was spent with preparations aiding the return to Europe. Through peaceful negotiations, all four countries went through a democratic political transition shifting to a free market economy in the same phase, having agreed on abandoning the Warsaw Pact and COMECON immediately calling on Soviet troops to leave their countries territory. However, Visegrad countries did well, having built a civil society, a democratic, independent statehood based on the rule of law, respecting human rights with a western type economy. Meeting the convergence criteria of these organizations took time and because of other reasons integration was delayed. But in 1999 V4 countries could join the NATO (Slovakia in 2004) while in 2004 all four countries gained full membership in the EU which meant the “return to Europe” and full involvement to the Euro-Atlantic political, economy and security structure and circulation.

Developing foreign policy mechanisms

Foreign policy always played a main role in the V4's operation evolving step by step over time. A new mechanism of the cooperation was formed at the end of the century which had effect on the foreign relations of the V4. The rotating presidency system was created in 1991 with new mechanisms. The president 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 of the four Visegrad countries and with others as well. 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. Rotating presidency has an impact on the foreign policy of the V4 as it's the president country that is accredited to negotiate with external partners after a joint standpoint has been established within the V4 and as it also the president country which usually serves as host for meetings between V4 and other country's leaders at any level.¹

Meanwhile, the Visegrad Group firmly remained an informally institutionalized open and flexible cooperation where interaction between the members based on a pragmatic approach focusing on common values and interests. The first and only institution of the V4 international Visegrad Fund (IVF) has been established in 2000 as a donor organization with an annual budget from contributions of the V4 and other countries. It runs different programs and projects 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 organizations and other public institutions.

New shift in foreign policy

Foreign policy and cooperation with countries outside the Visegrad Group was not as emphasized until the ultimate goal of the V4 – NATO and EU membership - has not been achieved. Of course, meetings were held between V4 and other countries on different levels, e.g., meeting of the National Visegrad Coordinators with the Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers in October, 2003; Conference of the Ministers of Health of the V4, Slovenia, Austria and Ukraine in Prague in February, 2002 or V4 + Benelux on the future of Europe in the same year in November.² But most of the V4's meetings were between EU and NATO members also with a more regional focus on neighboring countries like Slovenia or Ukraine. These meetings, consultations and partial cooperation with other countries and their leaders also materialized within the framework of Visegrad+.

But after 2004 as Visegrad countries gained full membership in the NATO and EU and having run many successful joint projects the group decided to continue its work together among different policies and in different areas like culture, environment, infrastructure, NATO and EU issues with a wider scope of external collaboration. In Kroměříž on 12 May, 2004 prime ministers of the Visegrad countries agreed on guidelines of the future areas of the Visegrad Cooperation.³ The declaration in addition to defining area of cooperation within the V4 and Euro-Atlantic countries also expresses intention to cooperate with other external partners giving the group's foreign policy and internal partnership program and the Visegrad+ a new shift and dimension.

Visegrad Group countries – as newly joined members – also committed themselves to participate in the enlargement process of the European Union giving a helping hand to

countries who also strive to access to the EU. Visegrad countries *“are ready to assist countries aspiring for EU membership by sharing and transmitting their knowledge and experience. The Visegrad Group countries are also ready to use their unique regional and historical experience and to contribute to shaping and implementing the European Union's policies towards the countries of Eastern and Southeastern Europe.”* – declared the four countries of Visegrad.⁴

Fostering EU enlargement gave the V4 a new, wider foreign policy scope as regards the Western-Balkans and the Eastern Partnership region. For this reason, the only institution of the Group, the International Visegrad Foundation has also opened itself to countries of these regions initiating participation through the V4+ cooperation framework on different projects, also contributing to their democratization and transformation processes. Visegrad+ Grants are available especially for countries from the Western Balkans and EaP regions who address a program chosen from the seven focus areas of the Fund including culture, democratic values, education and capacity building.⁵

Besides supporting EU and NATO candidate and aspiring countries cooperation with others within these international organizations or with other regional formats, organizations or others fully external countries remained. Furthermore, meetings with other prime ministers, ministers and experts from outside the Euro-Atlantic structure became more frequent within the Visegrad+ framework (see examples later) such as joint conferences and workshops.

Significance of the Visegrad+

Visegrad+ framework has significance in many different ways. On one hand it gives to the Visegrad Group a wider perspective as a matter of external cooperation and foreign policy. Hungary, as the Visegrad Four president country between 2017 July and 2018 August in its annual presidency program specified which areas of cooperation and mechanism should be more emphasized. ‘Global Visegrad’ was one of the country’s initiative urging the regional cooperation to think more globally giving joint answers to other regional and international problems.⁶ And the mechanism for this is the Visegrad+ structure. Visegrad+ contributes to increasing the international visibility and weight of the region making it a more global focused cooperation as members of the V4 harmonize their approach and develop a joint V4 foreign policy and partnership

towards countries and regions which has an impact on Europe and on their region. For example, in July 4, 2017 V4+ Egypt meetings were held in Budapest on presidential and prime ministerial level where leaders of the countries made a joint statement.⁷ In the statement the Visegrad countries expressed their support for the government of Egypt in the fight against terrorism and emphasized their common interest is the stability of the region and the halt of illegal migration from the region to Europe. In July 17 Visegrad+ Israel meeting took place where Prime ministers discussed inter alia the challenges of terrorism and illegal migration. In April 25, 2019 V4+ Japan summit was held in Bratislava, Slovakia discussing cooperation in fields of economy, science and technology.⁸ Just these three from plenty of Visegrad+ meetings⁹ show how the Group outgrew itself initiating consultations with countries even outside Europe giving the V4 a more serious and global voice in sense of foreign relations.

Another advantage of the V4+ structure is connected to the consensual concept of the Visegrad Group countries on refusing the institutionalization and enlargement of the cooperation. With a more widened cooperation V4 could lose from its tight regional nature – its main virtue being that diverse composition governments are able to work together in different sectors, focusing on what connects them rather than the political differences or bilateral disagreements.¹⁰ But with the Visegrad+ framework countries of the Group could work together with other countries from their neighborhood, from Europe or even from other regions in a slightly institutionalized form, focused on specific issues and policies without any enlargement which could jeopardize the harmony and cooperation between the Visegrad countries. However, Visegrad+ is open to every country to whom the Visegrad “brand” is attractive and would like to cooperate at any level without a tightly binding force.

Visegrad+ neighbor countries

V4+ Austria

Austria is an adjacent country to three of the four Visegrad countries and has multiple connections to the V4 countries through the EU and other regional formats (Central European Initiative, Slavkov Triangle) as well. These other multilateral connections indicate what an important partner Austria is to the region and therefore the Visegrad Group could be seen as a bridge between the EU’s east and west, a role which Austria

easily could take on. Transport, infrastructure, trade, energy, security, and military projects are the main areas of the coordination and cooperation between V4+ Austria, which also means an ally to the V4 in such crucial EU issues like migration (e.g., V4+ Austria's declaration on 'Setting Up a Mechanism for Assistance in Protecting the Borders of the Western Balkan Countries' in June, 2018) and enlargement.¹¹ Among experts Austria is one of the most obvious countries when it comes to expanding the V4 due to their solid and deep connections. It is not just experts, but politicians who made remarkable gestures towards Austria, like Miloš Zeman President of the Czech Republic who proposed Austria to join the V4 in 2019.¹² Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán also called Austria a 'Natural Partner' of V4.¹³ But besides many areas of cooperation, disagreements between the Visegrad Four and Austria is also worth mentioning, most notable is the question of nuclear energy or EU budget which leaves Austria one of the strongest partners rather than a future member of the V4.

V4+ Ukraine

Ukraine has the same geographical proximity as Austria, neighboring three Visegrad countries but its situation is merely different as a non-EU and NATO member. Not to mention bilateral disagreements with countries of Visegrad (e.g. Hungary) which breaks the consensus on the depth of the cooperation between V4+ Ukraine. From the perspective of energy and as a transit country Ukraine's geopolitical importance is unquestionable to Europe and energy policy is also the key element of the country's interaction with the V4 as well. Cooperation becomes more intense between them after the Russian-Ukraine conflict in 2014. Visegrad countries were among the first to make joint statements¹⁴ supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty and offered financial and humanitarian aid to the country when it became victim of Russian aggression. Besides supporting its integration in the EU's Eastern Partnership Program Ukraine is also one of the main applicants for the International Visegrad Fund's grant from the Eastern Partnership Region receiving a €1.3 million annual support in 2014.¹⁵ Regular meeting on different levels, joint thematic conferences and workshops on energy efficiency, decentralization, education also contributed to the deepened collaboration. Ukraine was also invited to participate in V4 EU Battle Group in 2016 and security remained a significant area of cooperation.¹⁶ However dynamics

of interaction lost its pace in recent years V4+ Ukraine has been a platform of sectoral cooperation, support and advocacy of Ukraine's European integration.

Visegrad+ : ante-room of the EU?

One explicit objective of the Visegrad+ framework is to be a tool for one of the V4's main priority: fostering EU enlargement and to present the V4 as an advocate of EU candidates and aspirants. The two main regions in terms of advocacy are the Eastern Partnership countries and the Western Balkans. The latter is the region where four of the five EU candidate countries are (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Albania and Serbia). These countries also have the opportunity for cooperation with the V4 through the Visegrad+ framework and apply for grants from the International Visegrad Foundation as well as the Balkan Fund, highly supported by the V4. Cooperation with the counties of these regions is more regional than global ones and based on sharing same values, standpoints and interests on EU issues – such as migration or EU budget - which the Visegrad Group shares. Therefore, as these aspirant countries could become members of the EU it would strengthen the Visegrad region's weight and their joint advocacy within the EU, forming it into a more balanced Union between East (Central) and West. However, some warn it would undermine the integrity of the EU rather than strengthen it.¹⁷

Advocacy for Western-Balkans

According to the Kroměříž declaration, the Visegrad Group is committed to fostering EU and NATO aspirants and candidates to gain full EU membership channeling the Visegrad group's accession experience and knowledge into these regions. In light of this in 2011 the Visegrad Four countries plus Bulgaria and Romania (whose accession to the V4 was on the agenda by the way) advocated Serbia - which applied in 2009 for access - to become recognized candidate of the EU urging the speed up of the integration negotiations in a letter addressed to EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Catherine Ashton. They supported Serbia to gain recognized candidate status under the Polish Presidency which it did in 2012, indicating the V4's ability in advocacy.¹⁸

After 2015 the themes of security and migration came in the forefront of the V4 with Western Balkans. In June 2018, in the V4+ Austria summits a declaration has been

made on giving assistance (personnel and technical support as well as sharing experiences and joint trainings) to Western Balkan countries in protecting their – and by this Europe's – border. V4+ Austria also committed themselves to *“building a bridge between the Member States of the European Union and the third countries on the Western Balkans”*¹⁹ This declaration is just another example for the sectoral cooperation with the countries of the region which surely can facilitate integration, presenting how these countries can add values to the EU.²⁰ In 2020 February in Prague foreign ministers of the V4 countries and the Western Balkans held a meeting, inviting Croatia Slovenia Austria European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement. Visegrad countries reaffirmed their support to continue the integration of the Western Balkans with the EU, considering it a long-term priority for the Visegrad Group and a geostrategic interest of the EU.²¹

Conclusion

Tools and mechanisms of foreign policy of the Visegrad Four could evolve in the pre-accession period of the Group, but gaining full membership in the NATO and EU gave a new dimension to the Visegrad+, the V4's cooperation framework with external countries. Meetings, coordination and joint programs at any level under the flag of Visegrad+ - especially with non-EU partners - gave the regional formation a more emphatic and international character, presenting V4 as an influential cooperation, which makes connections and partnerships with countries from other regions as well. With its sectoral approach Visegrad+ gives the V4 the opportunity to work together partially with countries focusing on specific issues and policies without expanding the well proven Group itself.

After being on board of the European Union as well, Visegrad+ started to operate as an advocate, fostering countries who strive for accession to the EU, especially from the Western Balkans. Lobbying skills, channeling the knowledge and experience of the V4 countries to the region while making sectoral cooperation certainly benefits the integrational efforts and process of the Western Balkan states.

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