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30 YEARS OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP

Achievements of the V4 and expectations from the Hungarian presidency

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Summary

The Visegrad Group is an influential alliance in Central Europe that dates to 1991. Since then, the V4 states have launched several joint projects, international initiatives and played an active role in the European political scheme. After the Polish presidency, Hungary takes over the lead in July 2021. It will have to face the challenges of the post-COVID-19 world.

Key points

- After reaching the initial objective of joining NATO and the EU, the V4 currently aims to strengthen its alliance with several international projects and common representation in the EU.
- While mitigating the COVID-19 crisis remains the main focus, the Hungarian presidency will continue with cross-presidential activities and propose new programs on the agenda.

Introduction

The Visegrad Group, also known as the V4, is one of the most influential initiatives in Central Europe. In 1991, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland formed an alliance representing the Visegrad region's common interests, values, and objectives. The shared history between the members helped unite Central Europe in the 1990s, a time when the fall of communism urged Western integration. V4 states eventually became members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), two achievements that proved crucial in their post-socialist transformations. Numerous political, social, infrastructure and energy projects also contributed to the increase in regional economic activity (K. D. Varju, personal communication, May 19, 2021).

Hungary is going to take over the rotating V4 presidency from Poland in July 2021. Naturally, the COVID-19 pandemic affected Central Europe, causing long-lasting harm to both the economy and diplomatic relations. Although the recovery from the pandemic remains the primary focus of the Hungarian V4 presidency, several social, economic, and infrastructure projects will be launched, or continued, in the second half of the year (Varju, 2021).

This policy brief relies on two primary sources. The first is Krisztina Dóra Varju, Ministerial Commissioner for the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group 2021-2022, who provided insight into the priorities of the upcoming Hungarian presidency during an interview. The second is an online debate with Katalin Cseh and Ondřej Kovařík, Members of the European Parliament, Rastislav Káčer, Ambassador of Slovakia to the Czech Republic, Wojciech Przybylski, Chief Editor of Visegrad Insight, and Jozo Perić, Financial Analyst from CapitalPanda, which provided the basis for analyzing the opportunities and deficiencies of the Visegrad Group.

Common Goals of the Visegrad Group

The Visegrad Group is an exemplary and incomparable cooperative framework in Central Europe full of potential (K. Cseh, *30 Years of the Visegrad Group*, May 20, 2021). One of the V4's essential features is the flexibility that allows the partnership to remain strong and sustainable in the long run. The V4 is a European and regional forum for managing conversations and policies and ensuring the member states' cohesion. Over the 30 years of cooperation, potential conflicts and internal tensions have been mitigated by the V4 (W. Przybylski, *30 Years of the Visegrad Group*, May 20, 2021).

Central Europe has always been inspired by the United States and Western Europe. For that reason, 30 years ago, the region chose to adapt to Western culture. The V4 overcame historical divisions between Western and Eastern Europe and proved that it is a promising institution (R. Káčer, *30 Years of the Visegrad Group*, May 20, 2021). It is worth highlighting that the V4 states began with regional cooperation and later reevaluated European values and are now broadening their connections worldwide (O. Kovařík, *30 Years of the Visegrad Group*, May 20, 2021).

Regarding the V4's awareness and perception, some criticize the V4 for failing to inform the public about its true purpose properly. There is hidden value in the V4, and this should be the primary reason to increase attention to this unique group of countries (Cseh, 2021).

Every V4 presidency aims to keep the Visegrad Group in line with the European Union's agenda. Joint speeches, submissions, and letters are presented together in the EU, making the partnership even more powerful. There is no coalition coercion within the V4, which demonstrates a flexible

approach to shared decision-making. The V4 is not institutionalized cooperation, but it reflects current international policy challenges. The group's existence is appreciated as a unique regional partnership in Europe (Varju, 2021). The Visegrad countries already set good examples on the individual level, which can be brought to the EU level as well. The V4's common policy goals have the potential to lead the way in the EU (Kovařík, 2021).

Achievements of the Visegrad Group

Several projects contribute to the Visegrad Group's operations. Since it is not institutionalized, the collaboration of the V4 is exclusively based on regular consultations between high-level political and diplomatic representatives, non-governmental and research bodies, and a large number of individuals (Visegrad Group, 2021).

Closer cooperation between the partner countries and V4 member states is maintained by the International Visegrad Fund (IVF). The IVF provides financial support for promoting and developing the Visegrad Group's activities (*Agreement Concerning the Establishment of the International Visegrad Fund*, 1999), with particular attention to the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership regions. The main objectives of the IVF are to promote innovativeness and cooperation and enhance regional development. To achieve this, the IVF provides grants to selected partner countries of the Visegrad Group (IVF, 2021).

Based on the achievements of the International Visegrad Fund, it holds up as an institutional example, and the IVF also provides technical support for the Western Balkans Fund (Juzová, Strážay, Orosz & Sadecki, 2019). The security, stability, and prosperity of the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partners always remain high on the Visegrad Group's agenda. The V4 states are strong advocates of the European Union's enlargement, as well as the economic integration and political association of neighboring regions. The admission of the Western Balkan states and Eastern Partners to the European Union would bring several benefits, and the expertise of the Visegrad region's countries would prove useful. They are determined to prevent crime, maintain stability, and strengthen the rule of law in the area (*V4 Statement on the Western Balkans*, 2019).

Since their admission, the Visegrad countries have remained active members of NATO. The main scope of activities includes developing capabilities and the defense industry, establishing multinational units, and contributing to cross-border and educational activities (*Long Term Vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening Their Defence Cooperation*, 2014). These objectives provide the framework for the action plan of the Visegrad Group's defense cooperation, which consists of further subdivisions of mutual security (IVF, 2021).

Concerning infrastructure developments, the high-speed railway network is the centerpiece among the Visegrad states' joint projects. The cooperation was promoted during the Hungarian presidency in 2018 and would serve as a network connecting Budapest, Bratislava, Brno-Prague, and Warsaw. Upon the realization of the project, the V4 would reach environmental goals and promote economic development and competitiveness in Central Europe (IVF, 2018).

Priorities of the Hungarian Presidency 2021-2022

Following the Polish presidency, Hungary is taking the lead starting July 2021. During the COVID-19 crisis, which resulted in an economic downturn and limited diplomatic activity, Poland had a hard time

during its presidency. Consolidation and rebuilding the economy after the pandemic will remain a priority for Hungary's presidency. Tourism, on which most of the V4 countries' capitals rely, was heavily affected by the pandemic. For this reason, Hungary's goal is to advocate for cooperation on tourism by encouraging common programs with the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. Additionally, the new presidency will seek to reinvigorate diplomatic relations between the members (Varju, 2021).

Hungary aims to continue the cross-presidential initiatives, which were launched by previous presidencies. Among the infrastructure developments, this presidency is determined to proceed with the high-speed railway network project. During the last Hungarian presidency, a V4+Israel innovation training program was set up within the "Digital Visegrad" framework (IVF, 2018). It is intended to continue during the 2021 presidency as well. Societal improvement also remains a recurring focus of the group. Numerous scholarships, educational, and mobility opportunities help attract youth interest in Central Europe (Varju, 2021).

Regarding the political side of Hungarian priorities, supporting the Western Balkans' ambitions of EU integration will remain a central focus. From July 2021, Slovenia will chair the Council of the EU, which would allow collaboration between the Hungarian V4 presidency and the EU on assisting the Western Balkans (Varju, 2021). As the government of Slovenia clearly stated, the country promotes the interests of the EU's enlargement policies. Therefore, it plans to initiate dialogue with North Macedonia and Albania (Republic of Slovenia, 2020).

Conclusion

The 30 years of cooperation between V4 countries has proved to be a great success in Central Europe. Initiatives and joint projects, as well as international cooperation, have all contributed to the V4's recognition on the continent. At the same time, member states need to address dividing issues within this cooperative framework to help act more effectively and sustainably in the long run. Following the turbulent year of the pandemic under Polish leadership, the expectations are high for the approaching Hungarian presidency. Alongside the already familiar cross-presidential projects, it is assumed that Hungary will attempt to revive collaboration between the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia.

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