



Exploring possibilities of deepening the internal cohesion of the V4: Polish and Slovak perspectives¹

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The Visegrad Group will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2016. Despite the fact that the V4 has had to face many challenges over the past quarter-century, it has proved to be the most successful and viable model of regional cooperation within the broader region of Central Europe.

This paper examines three basic dimensions of this cooperation – political, sectoral and external – while pointing out its deficiencies and future opportunities. It also places emphasis on the institutional background of the Visegrad cooperation and the existing mechanisms being used to intensify cooperation within the V4. Though the paper focuses on the perspective of only two V4 countries – Poland and Slovakia – it may also have validity more broadly for the V4 as such.

The paper also looks to the future and tries to identify the most important challenges and opportunities for the joint cooperation of Poland and Slovakia within the V4. It stresses three leading principles that should enable the V4 to sustain itself successfully in the years to come. While the first of these is continuity, especially in terms of following the existing institutional model and program priorities, the second is innovation – especially in terms of openness to new opportunities. The third principle – “returning to origins” – stresses the need to return to those basic principles on which the Visegrad cooperation was built.

V4: dimensions of cooperation

Political cooperation. The Visegrad Group originated in 1991 as a political project, and political cooperation remains crucial for maintaining the internal cohesion of the V4. This is not an easy task, given that the V4 countries hold different positions on several issues – the role of sanctions against Russia, just to mention one – and also because of the rather weak formal institutional structure of the Group. Until very recently, its only standing institution was the International Visegrad Fund (IVF)² – nevertheless, the V4 functions as much more

¹ The research for this text was partly conducted during a fellowship at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw in April-May 2015 as part of the ‘V4 Flying Experts Initiative’ financed by the International Visegrad Fund.

² Another current institution is the Visegrad Patent Institute, which was established in February 2015. See “The Visegrad Group (V4) Countries Establish a Joint Patent Institute,” Bratislava, February 26, 2015. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/the-visegrad-group-v4> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

than a political branch of the IVF, being driven by the joint interests of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia to cooperate and coordinate positions in every area in which the countries have a common interest. An important pillar of Visegrad cooperation is the existence of informal institutions, which include Visegrad Group presidencies, summits of political representatives, working groups, and advisory bodies. The concept of Visegrad cooperation has spread widely, reaching various levels of V4 country societies, as well as individual citizens. In the course of nearly the past 25 years, apart from political cooperation there have been significant achievements made in the field of sectoral cooperation, as well as in terms of relations with non-V4 countries and regional groupings.

Political cooperation as such has two dimensions: internal and external. The former includes bilateral and multilateral cooperation within the V4, the latter cooperation at the EU level. A prerequisite for any Visegrad initiative is the participation of all four countries, as decisions at the V4 level are taken only if the representatives of all countries reach a consensus. In practice, the Visegrad "modus operandi" includes three possibility outcomes:

1. all V4 countries agree on the same position from the outset,
2. their positions differ slightly and they reach a compromise, and
3. they differ and maintain their original positions without reaching a compromise.

Bilateral cooperation is to be underlined as well – in the 1990s, for instance, the Visegrad cooperation suffered from worsening bilateral relations between Slovakia and Hungary. This is no longer the case, however good neighborly relations and intensive bilateral cooperation between particular V4 countries remain prerequisites for the successful performance of the Visegrad Group. Also, regional issues to a large extent generate the content of bilateral meetings. Naturally, the aim of discussing regional issues at the bilateral level is not to divide the V4, but to develop ideas that may be adopted by all V4 countries.

After their accession to the EU, the V4 countries developed a mechanism for cooperation and coordination at the EU level. V4 meetings prior to EU summits have already become a tradition. The successful coordination of positions on EU-related issues has also enhanced the reputation of V4 countries among the other EU members. The EU itself is perceived by V4 countries not only as a modernization project or source of funds, but as an opportunity to shape various policies and pursue regional interests. In general, the V4 has become a well-recognized trademark and part of the overall "European architecture." The significance of the V4 was demonstrated during the debate over the EU budget 2014-2020 and cohesion policy, and in the case of the climate and energy package. A coordinated position towards illegal migration also shows the ability of the V4 to respond jointly to common challenges.³

Sectoral cooperation. V4 cooperation has also gained a significant sectoral dimension. Certain progress has been achieved in the fields of energy, infrastructure, and security and defense, though in all these areas there is still a long way to go to achieve tangible results. Another important field of cooperation is the EU neighborhood policy, with its specific focus on the Eastern neighbors, and enlargement policy.

As regards energy, the creation of a regional gas market is still in preparation and the north/south energy corridor is not yet completed. The V4 countries, however, remain strong supporters of the Energy Union.

³ "Joint Statement of the Heads of Government of the Visegrad Group Countries," Bratislava, June 19, 2015. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/joint-statement-of-the> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

The development of infrastructure is considered a strategy priority of all V4 countries. The creation of the High Level Working Group during the 2013/14 Hungarian V4 presidency may be regarded as an important step underlining the importance of the topic. Despite an interest in developing cross-border connections, in practice little has been done so far. The only new highway connection built within the V4 area in the last 25 years is that connecting the Czech Republic and Poland.

Security and defense represents another challenge for the V4, especially when one takes into account the worsening security situation in the Eastern neighborhood. The creation of the V4 EU battlegroup may be considered an important milestone, which would test the ability of the V4 to cooperate in the areas of both soft and hard security.

Neighborhood and enlargement policy represents an area in which the V4 claims to create added value for the EU. The Visegrad Group has been supporting the enlargement policy intensively, especially as regards the Western Balkans. The V4 countries have also become advocates of the EaP countries, and have developed and divided responsibilities in terms of their cooperation with Ukraine.⁴

With regard to economic development, all the V4 countries are in the process of catching up with the "old" EU members. Faster economic growth than the EU average is a prerequisite for faster convergence. The V4 countries are therefore strong supporters of innovation technologies and digital agenda in all sectors of society.

The civic dimension of cooperation, especially in the fields of research, innovation, education, and culture, is supported through the programs of the International Visegrad Fund. The IVF, which turned 15 years old in 2015, has an irreplaceable role among V4 activities and instruments. Though awareness of the V4 has been increasing year by year, and IVF programs attracting more applicants, a systematic strategy that would focus on public awareness in V4 countries is still in preparation.

Cooperation with non-V4 countries. In general, cooperation with third (non-V4) countries and groupings may be regarded as another important pillar of the V4. Cooperation within the framework of the V4+ formula already includes a long list of countries, both European and non-European. In a number of cases the cooperation has become systematic and continuous – for example V4+EaP, V4+Western Balkans ministerial summits, and V4+Japan, just to mention a few. On the other hand, new formats of cooperation are appearing every year – V4+France and V4+Turkey may be cited as recent examples.

Slovakia and Poland: common denominators and differences

Both Poland and Slovakia have a joint interest in continued cooperation within the framework of the Visegrad Four. Nevertheless, in many respects Poland and Slovakia are very different countries, whether in terms of size, population, and economic structure, or in level of European integration. As part of the same regional initiative, however, both countries are motivated to look for joint solutions.

⁴ "Slovakia and V4 to assist Ukraine," December 17, 2014. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/slovakia-and-v4-to> (accessed on August 26, 2015).

In general the political cooperation between the two countries can be graded as satisfactory. Although the current Polish prime minister, Ewa Kopacz, is from a political camp different from that of the Slovak prime minister, Robert Fico, their cooperation may be characterized as unproblematic and quite intensive. To an even greater extent, the same can be said of the cooperation between the presidents of the two countries. There are no signs that the recent change of president in Poland or the possible change of government there would have any negative impact on the development of Slovak-Polish bilateral relations.

As regards the EU level, Poland and Slovakia can be found at different circles of European integration. While Slovakia reached full integration with the adoption of the single European currency in 2009, the date of Poland's accession to the Eurozone is still unknown. Though Poland has tried to follow and join in those actions initiated within the Euro Group – such as the fiscal compact – the prospects for deepening its integration with the EU will depend on the constellation of future governments. Taking into consideration the need for the constitutional change that would have to precede accession to the Eurozone, Slovakia cannot rely on Poland's membership in the Eurozone in the foreseeable future, though Bratislava would wish to have a strong V4 partner there. The rather negative stance towards accession to the Eurozone of a significant portion of the Polish economic elite also plays an important role here.⁵ Thanks to the pro-integration course of the current Czech government, it is more likely that the Czech Republic will become the second V4 country to be a member of the Eurozone.

Another difference is the geopolitical and geoeconomic significance of both countries. While Poland is among the EU's medium-sized countries, Slovakia is one of the smaller member states. Poland and Slovakia to a large extent have different economies, too. While Slovakia is an open and very much export oriented economy, the economy of Poland – largely due to its size – is to a great extent driven by domestic consumption. This difference became obvious during the economic and fiscal crisis: while Slovakia's GDP fell significantly in the course of 2009–2011, Poland was the only EU member that survived the crisis without facing any significant economic difficulties. In fact it was the only EU country that actually experienced economic growth during the crisis. Bilateral trade between the two countries has increased significantly in recent years, although the figures from 2014 show a certain decline. Since the possibilities in this field are far from being exhausted, one can expect bilateral trade to rise again in the years to come. However, the level of Polish investment in Slovakia is relatively low, with most of it targeted at trade and services. Slovakia on the other hand sees the Polish market as an opportunity, which is demonstrated by the penetration of several Slovak companies, especially those that are active in the field of construction and development, as well as IT. Poland perceives very negatively the coordinated action of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in their questioning of the quality of Polish food products, which has been a "hot issue" for several years now.

These differences in the size and geopolitical position of the two countries, together with their differing historical experience, have had an impact on how each country perceives the threats facing the V4/EU neighborhood and neighboring countries. Though both Poland and Slovakia recognize the eastern neighbors of the EU as a priority – in Slovakia's case, Ukraine was declared one of its foreign policy priorities in 2004, just after EU accession – their respective levels of engagement and sensitivity to the ongoing security crisis in Eastern

⁵ "Ekonomiczne wyzwania integracji Polski ze strefą euro," National Bank of Poland, November 2014. Available online: http://www.nbp.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci_2014/20141120_raport_wyzwania_integracji_ze_strefa_euro.pdf (accessed on August 27, 2015).

Ukraine are markedly different. Slovakia and Poland also differ in their attitudes towards a solution to the crisis in Ukraine, though both hold the same position as to the origins of the war. While Slovakia tends to prefer dialogue and a peaceful solution at any cost, Poland is more critical of Russia and stresses the importance of "hard security," in which the development of proper capabilities and their deployment play an important role. Generally, the prevailing perception of Russia within the two countries is different. In Slovakia, Russia is perceived rather as a cooperation partner than as a foe. Though the total Slovak export to Russia is only half of that to Poland,⁶ the fact that the Slovak state budget receives huge revenues from the transiting of Russian gas to the West plays an important role in the rhetoric of Prime Minister Fico and other ministers. The situation in Poland is different – though the country's export to Russia was hit hard by the introduction of sanctions, Russia's investment presence in Poland is almost nonexistent. Also, Poland plays much less of a role as a transit country for Russian gas that does Slovakia. In Slovakia, a significant part of the population does not share anti-Russian attitudes – although, as one recent opinion poll showed,⁷ the respondents did not want Russia interfering in the domestic affairs of Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that despite their differences, Poland and Slovakia, along with the other two V4 countries, did manage to adopt several joint declarations condemning the annexation of Crimea by Russia, and supporting the European orientation of Ukraine.⁸

Sectoral cooperation between the two countries is also increasing, though there is still much improvement to be made in each of the sectors. Infrastructure continues to be one of the weak points in Slovak–Polish cooperation. The highway that would connect Northern Slovakia and Southern Poland remains unbuilt, though there has been some progress in the construction on both sides. Another problem is that a number of bus connections are only seasonal, and as such do not represent a maintainable solution. As regards rail transport, the current situation is much worse than that of 15 years ago. Only one out of three border crossings is used for passenger transport, with the trains operating there having only local significance.

The status quo is also unsatisfactory in the field of interconnection of gas pipelines, though this situation is likely to change in the future. The Polish–Slovak interconnector represents part of the backbone of the North/South energy corridor, and will hopefully be put into operation in 2019/2020. Another window of opportunity seems to be cooperation in the defense sector⁹ – although on the other hand, their differing levels of GDP spending on defense make Slovakia and Poland two rather dissimilar examples.

All in all, there are no serious obstacles that would prevent Slovakia and Poland from developing their multi-layered bilateral ties. Their political cooperation is very important and provides the framework for the intensification of cooperation in other sectors. Though

⁶ "Celkový dovoz a celkový vývoz podľa kontinentov a ekonomických zoskupení krajín v roku 2014-2015." Statistical office of the Slovak Republic. Available online: [http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID%28%22i10B2CB52FFF44B319DA31F65A3FFE155%22%29&ui.name=Celkov%C3%BD%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%C3%BD%20v%C3%BDvoz%20pod%C4%BEa%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%C3%BDch%20zoskupen%C3%AD%20kraj%C3%ADn%20v%20roku%202014%20-%202015%20\[zo0002ms\]&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosext%2fcps4%2fportlets%2fcommon%2fclose.html](http://statdat.statistics.sk/cognosext/cgi-bin/cognos.cgi?b_action=cognosViewer&ui.action=run&ui.object=storeID%28%22i10B2CB52FFF44B319DA31F65A3FFE155%22%29&ui.name=Celkov%C3%BD%20dovoz%20a%20celkov%C3%BD%20v%C3%BDvoz%20pod%C4%BEa%20kontinentov%20a%20ekonomick%C3%BDch%20zoskupen%C3%AD%20kraj%C3%ADn%20v%20roku%202014%20-%202015%20[zo0002ms]&run.outputFormat=&run.prompt=true&cv.header=false&ui.backURL=%2fcognosext%2fcps4%2fportlets%2fcommon%2fclose.html) (accessed on August 26, 2015).

⁷ See A. Duleba, *Kríza na Ukrajine ako imulz pre východnú politiku SR a EÚ*, Bratislava: Research Center of the Slovak Foreign Policy Association, 2014.

⁸ See, for instance, "The Visegrad Group Joint Statement on the Eastern Partnership," Bratislava, May 14–15, 2015. Available online: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/calendar/2015/the-visegrad-group-joint> (accessed on August 31, 2015).

⁹ "PREMIÉR: zbrojárstvo na Považí opäť ožije," July 3, 2015. Available online: <http://www.vlada.gov.sk/premier-zbrojarstvo-na-povazi-opat-ozije/> (accessed on August 26, 2015).

their bilateral trade has witnessed an increase in the post-EU accession period, the lack of modern infrastructure could become a serious problem in the near future, influencing the sectoral cooperation more generally. Poland is Slovakia's biggest EU neighbor, with a growing potential. It would be worth considering what possibilities there are for a further intensification of bilateral Slovak–Polish ties, which would also strengthen V4 cooperation itself.

The importance of the V4: views from Bratislava and Warsaw

Both Slovakia and Poland are committed supporters of the Visegrad cooperation and aware of the benefits it brings. Being the smallest Visegrad country, the V4 provides Slovakia with an opportunity to pursue its national interests at the regional as well as the EU level. Therefore, the V4 is the first choice for Slovakia when it comes to the discussion of regional issues or EU policies. Slovakia strongly emphasizes the point that the V4 is based on the principle of solidarity and equality, a principle demonstrated in the four countries' equal contributions to the budget of the International Visegrad Fund. Recently, the V4 has had an increasingly important economic significance for Slovakia – together, the V4 countries are the most important trade partner for Slovakia, even bigger than Germany (the most important individual partner).¹⁰ Slovakia pays significant attention to the development of cooperation with non-V4 countries within the framework of the V4+, a fact clearly demonstrated during its 2014/2015 Presidency.¹¹ Its membership in the Eurozone naturally pushes Slovakia to look for other partners, since the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland are not “in” at the moment. On the other hand, Slovakia recognizes the importance of the single EU market and is therefore opposed to any dividing lines that would separate Eurozone members from the rest of the EU. Its focus on non-V4 countries is also legitimized by the fact that, in contrast with the recent past, the V4 now has to look for additional partners in the EU in order to pursue its interests.¹² Slovakia seems recently to have preferred extending Visegrad cooperation to other partners (though without the formal enlargement of the V4) to deepening and/or intensifying it. However, an intensive focus on exploiting the V4+ format might draw attention away from cooperation within a closed V4 format.

Poland also regards the V4 as one of its top priorities. Though Poland has also taken part in other such initiatives, such as the Weimar Triangle, most frequently it is the V4 that is its “first option” for consultations. Being the biggest V4 as well as a middle-size EU country, it naturally has slightly different preferences than Slovakia (and other V4 countries) with respect to some issues. Nevertheless, the other V4 countries have helped Poland strengthen its position within the EU, and have helped to show that it is open to cooperation with smaller countries. Compared to Slovakia, Poland puts more emphasis on the deepening of regional cohesion, and is resistant to the spreading of the V4 to the global level. One of its supporting arguments is that persisting differences in the positions of V4 countries towards Russia could result in

¹⁰ “Celkový dovoz a celkový vývoz podľa kontinentov...,” op. cit.

¹¹ Even the motto of the Slovak Presidency implied that cooperation with non-V4 partners was intended to play an important role in the agenda. See “Dynamic Visegrad for Europe and Beyond – Program of the Slovak Presidency in the Visegrad Group (July 2014–June 2015).” Available online: http://www.visegradgroup.eu/documents/presidency-programs/20142015-slovak#_4.%20DEFENCE%20AND%20SECURITY,%20JUSTICE%20AND%20HOME%20AFFAIRS (accessed on August 26, 2015).

¹² The Lisbon Treaty has changed the distribution of votes in the Council. While before the combined votes of the V4 countries was equal to the votes of France and Germany together, the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty pushes the V4 to look for additional partners in the EU.

a lack of trust within the group, if all V4 consultation mechanisms are not exploited properly. As regards the V4+ format, Poland strongly prefers relations with European countries.

Besides the Visegrad Group, both Poland and Slovakia participate actively in a number of other regional initiatives. Some of them – like the Central European Initiative – encompass all V4 countries, while others do not. Membership in EU macro-regional strategies may be mentioned as an example here: while Slovakia (together with the Czech Republic and Hungary) is part of the Danube strategy, Poland takes part in the Baltic strategy. Membership in different initiatives, however, does not automatically go against the interests of the Visegrad Group, or deepen dividing lines. A lot depends upon there being a good communication strategy within the V4 – if this fails, some V4 partners could feel excluded. For instance, the process of establishing the so-called Austrelitz triangle encompassing Austria, Czech Republic and Slovakia triggered feelings of exclusion in Poland and Hungary.

What next? Future challenges and opportunities

Both Poland and Slovakia, together with the other two V4 countries, continue to identify with the “three no’s:” no to further institutionalization, no to the enlargement of the Group, and no to more slowdown in cooperation.¹³ However, in order to face future challenges efficiently, the V4 needs to adapt to new circumstances. There is no interest in transforming the V4 into a block that would always speak with one voice – emphasis is rather placed on the V4’s being a flexible and modern regional initiative, with added value for both the EU and NATO.

Despite the EU’s ongoing institutional reforms, the V4 is not likely to move towards stronger institutionalization. A weak institutionalization also helps the V4 to overcome potential divergences in political positions. The International Visegrad Fund will remain the most robust Visegrad institution, while the creation of other “standing” institutions – as the example of the Visegrad Patent Institute shows – cannot be neglected. However, these will have more technical than political value. What may further develop are informal institutions and instruments of cooperation: presidencies, high level working groups, advisory platforms, etc.

In order to remain viable, the V4 should remain a group of four countries. The acceptance of any new country to the informal “club” would most probably deteriorate the decision making process within the V4. On the other hand, the V4 should remain open to cooperation with any country, or group of countries, via the V4+ formula. The list of interested countries is growing longer year by year, which naturally opens up the issue of differentiating among them. The inner circle of countries could encompass EU members. Non-V4 EU members represent the most natural allies for the V4 and partners for “bigger” coalitions, needed for the successful presentation of regional (V4) interests at the EU level. The second circle would include countries from the nearest EU neighborhood, as well as those aspiring for EU membership. The EaP and Western Balkan countries are the natural candidates. Within the third circle one would find non-European countries that have long collaborated with the V4 and are interested in continuing cooperation. Countries like Japan, South Korea and the United States would fall into this group. The outermost circle would be reserved for countries showing only limited interest in developing cooperation with the V4.

¹³ See also T. Strážay, “Visegrad – arrival, survival, revival,” *Two decades of Visegrad cooperation*, Bratislava: International Visegrad Fund, 2011.

In order to avoid any future slowdown in cooperation, V4 countries are recommended to stick to three main principles: continuity, innovation, and returning to origins.

Continuity applies both to political and sectoral cooperation. It concerns the implementation of long-term priorities and strategic goals. The prerequisites for the successful achieving of declared goals are consistent policy implementation and efficient coordination.

Innovation is connected with the selection of new thematic priorities, as well as instruments of cooperation – with, however, the maintaining of a weak institutionalization. Innovation also assumes the creation of regional initiatives complementary to the V4. V4 countries should not be prevented from taking part in other regional initiatives, unless these are counter-productive to the activities of the V4.

Returning to origins implies that the V4 should hearken back to the values and principles that were established at the very beginning of its existence. Emphasis should be placed especially on the deepening of regional cohesion and trust among the V4 countries.

Slovakia and Poland can make their own contributions to each of the principles mentioned above. Both have invested a significant amount of energy into the V4 brand, and it would be a mistake in the future not to use the potential that the V4 is offering. The same applies to the other two Visegrad countries as well.