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UNITY AND FUNCTIONING
OF THE VISEGRAD GROUP
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Undoubtedly, such a regional venture as the Visegrad Group (V4), founded in the early 1990s of the twentieth century, had a great chance of success. The decisive factors in this case were primarily the reasons why the group was created, the most important of which were the similarities in the geopolitical situation after the collapse of the Yalta system and the conscious choice of new, democratically elected political elites as well as the future direction and shape of foreign policy. None of the Central European countries wanted – after 40 years of dependence – a further close cooperation with the collapsing Soviet Union, at the same time all three countries were too weak economically and politically to immediately start close cooperation with the countries of Western Europe. It should also be remembered that the specificity of the functioning of the socialist bloc (the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), where the USSR played the dominant role and acted as the only link of the bloc, meant that each of the post-socialist countries found themselves in a strategic void. In this situation, Poland, the Czech-Slovak Federation and Hungary were, in a way, stuck with each other, if they wanted to strengthen their international position and show the will to start regional cooperation.

When analyzing the *Visegrad declaration* signed on February 15, 1991, which formally gave rise to this cooperation, it must be stated that the goals set in it were very ambitious and, although they concerned mainly internal affairs, resulted almost exclusively from common interests in foreign policy. The following priority tasks were listed in the document:

- full restoration of state independence, democracy and freedom,
- elimination of all existing manifestations of the totalitarian system,
- building a parliamentary democracy based on respect for human rights,
- building a modern market economy,
- fully integrating into the European political, legal, economic and security system.

All the tasks planned for the following years were to be carried out, among others by: coordinating cooperation with European institutions, intensifying cooperation in cultural and economic fields, establishing partnerships between local governments and expanding infrastructure. As a result the implementation of the planned goals in the domestic policy (systemic transformation) at the same time brought the Three countries closer to the Euro-Atlantic structures.

It should be emphasized, however, that the entire document was rather a manifesto of will of cooperation and it did not put pressure on geopolitical issues, and, importantly, the Visegrad Summit did not create any unified organization or structure. The entire project, however, was left with the imprint of the legacy of socialism and the continued existence of the Soviet Union. One can risk a statement that the signatories of the Declaration, presidents V. Havel and L. Wałęsa and Prime Minister J. Antall, did not want to annoy the failing eastern neighbor and the former hegemon, whose troops were still stationed in Central European countries. It does not change the fact that the summit held in Hungary on February 12-15, 1991 gave rise to cooperation of states of this region, which – with varying intensity and effects – continues to this day.

This paper will be an attempt to critically evaluate the achievements of thirty years of this cooperation, especially after the accession of the Group's states to the European Union.

It should be remembered that the beginning of the 1990s was characterized by incredible dynamics of events, and the political situation in the Central and Eastern Europe was uncertain and very labile. Thus, at the very beginning of its existence, the Visegrad Triangle had to face emerging organizational problems. This is best evidenced by the fact that just a few months after the formation of the Triangle, there was a need to organize another summit. The meeting of heads of state and government this time was held in Cracow on October 5-6 and ended with the signing of the so-called *Cracow Declaration*. It should be emphasized that this document was created in a diametrically different geopolitical situation of each country. The participants of the meeting in Cracow faced a huge dilemma and the necessity to answer the following question: Is the Visegrad Triangle in the current formula still needed at all, since most of the goals in relation to which the group was established have already been achieved, and many problems have been solved? During these eight months, extremely important facts occurred that had a fundamental impact on the functioning of the formation:

- **Firstly**, in the period between February and October 1991, the Soviet empire fell (August coup, August 1991), and Boris Yeltsin took the actual power in the country.
- **Secondly**, regular line units of the Soviet troops had already left the territory of the Czech and Slovak Federation and Hungary, and their relocation from Poland was also in progress.
- **Thirdly**, Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact officially disbanded at that time.
- **Fourthly**, all three countries have successfully completed the procedure of joining the Council of Europe.

All the above-mentioned, positive events, paradoxically, led to the loosening of ties between the three countries.

The summit finally decided to continue cooperation, and the *Cracow Declaration* itself focused in its stipulations mainly on European security issues, especially in the context of the bloody conflict that already gripped the Balkans. The continued operation of the Visegrad Triangle was intended not only to show Western partners that Central Europe would not become the Balkans, but also to strengthen the bargaining position in the already clearly outlined plans of approaching NATO, the Western European Union and the EEC / EU. Importantly, this time the document included declaration of a joint application to the EEC for financial support for the restructuring of economies and announced mutual liberalization of trade.

In practice, however, beginning in mid 1992 (May 6, Prague), when the next summit of leaders was held, disintegrative tendencies began to emerge within the Visegrad Triangle, resulting from the following reasons:

1. DIFFERENT VISIONS OF REGIONAL COOPERATION;

- First of all, Hungary, and personally Prime Minister J. Antall, opposed Polish proposals for any institutionalization of cooperation and the creation of joint bodies, which they explained with bad experiences from socialist times.
- This attitude of Hungary began to overlap with the Eurosceptic concepts advocated by the Prime Minister of the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, Václav Klaus. He believed that the Triangle is a completely artificial creation and was dictated by Western countries, and that the political goals of individual countries should be pursued independently, focusing on the economic cooperation announced in the Cracow Declaration. The process of dividing the federation into two states being in progress at the same time, which formally happened on January 1, 1993 was also of significance.

2. DISPUTES AND CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE MEMBERS OF THE VISEGRAD TRIANGLE, which at that time influenced the unity of the entire group, and which each time became an international issue, in turn, for obvious reasons, had a negative impact on the unity of Central Europe.

- **The Slovak-Hungarian dispute** over the continuation of the construction of the Gabčíkovo-Nagyymaros hydropower complex on the Danube.

This joint investment was decided by the Treaty of Budapest of 1977, but for economic reasons Hungary decided to withdraw from it in 1989. The continuation and completion of part of the investment by Slovakia resulted in the flooding of the Hungarian border territory by the Danube waters and environmental damage, and most importantly – the shift of the border between the two countries by changing the flow of the main riverbed. Due to the failure of attempts to resolve the dispute through diplomatic means, Hungary took the Slovak authorities to the International Court of Justice, which issued a verdict only in 1997.

- **Slovak-Hungarian dispute** over the rights of the Hungarian minority. As a result of the decisions made in the Treaty of Trianon (1920), the territory of Hungary was reduced by two-thirds. As a result, at the time of the establishment of the independent Slovak Republic in 1993, about 600,000 native Hungarians lived in this country and constituted over 10% of the country's population, inhabiting dense areas along the southern border of the country.

The flashpoint was an act passed in 1995 by the Slovak parliament by Prime Minister V. Mečiar initiative known as *Act on the protection of the language*, which required all public institutions to use the Slovak language as the only state language. Knowledge of the language was a condition for the possibility of taking up any job in public administration. What's important, the law also forbade communication in dialects and other languages and the use of textbooks written in languages other than Slovak. The oppressiveness of this law was complemented by high financial penalties for breaking it (for citizens it was SK 50,000 ca. EUR 1650) and the creation of Language

Police for this purpose. The administrative reform of the country under Mečiar's rule also had an anti-Hungarian dimension, as a result of which also the size of constituencies was changed in such a way that in the regions in the south of the country, where Hungarians constituted the majority of the population, they became a minority. By this, the Hungarians de facto not only lost the opportunity to elect their own deputies to the parliament, but most of all lost their influence over the local state authorities. In response to these events, Budapest attempted to block the admission of the Slovak Republic to the Council of Europe.

■ Hungarian card.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, this issue has been one of the pillars of Hungarian foreign policy. In 1996-98, the discussion on the idea of establishing elements of autonomy for the Hungarian population in neighboring countries and the introduction of the so-called external citizenship, conditioned mainly by knowledge of the mother tongue became particularly popular. These ideas obviously encountered the diplomatic contractions of the states in question, accusing Hungary of interfering in their internal affairs. The apogee of this dispute was at the beginning of the 21st century, when the first government of V. Orban, pushed through the law commonly known as the *Hungarian card* in the Hungarian parliament. The act passed in 2001 bestowed some of the rights of Hungarian citizens on Hungarian nationals who lived in other countries. It was, among others: possibility to take on free studies at Hungarian universities, possibility to perform legal work and to take advantage of free healthcare.

After all the events described here, in 2002 the prime ministers of Slovakia (M. Dzierinda) and Czech Republic (M. Zeman) canceled their participation in the next meeting of the Heads of State and Government of the Visegrad Group.

In the context of all these activities, the signing of the agreement establishing the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) on 21 December 1992 in

Cracow should be considered a huge success. Contrary to the Visegrad Group, CEFTA has become an institutionalized organization open to other countries of the region. Its activity was indeed (and still is under the so-called CEFTA II or the New CEFTA) an example of a huge success in trade liberalization, and thus in preparing Central European countries for the subsequent access to the European Union.

Therefore, when assessing the cooperation of the Four in the 1990s in retrospect, it should be noted that despite the declaration and many contacts at the intergovernmental level, the achievements of the V4 as a regional formation were rather poor and can be reduced to two positive events. Undoubtedly, the aforementioned establishment of CEFTA and efficient – despite many conflicting interests – liberalization of customs duties should be considered a success. An equally important event was the establishment of the International Visegrad Fund (IVF) in 2000, which to this day is the only institutionalized form of cooperation of Visegrad Group countries, and its task is to intensify contacts between societies and support cultural, scientific, educational, artistic and tourist cooperation as well as youth exchange.

Over time, all the disputes described above were eased under pressure from the international community, the more so that both Hungary and Slovakia realized that without regulating their mutual relations (also – in the case of Hungary – with other countries) they would not be able to enter European Union. Nevertheless, in a situation of permanent political conflict, the existence of the V4 should be considered problematic, and the only significant common issue at the time, which actually helped maintain intergovernmental contacts, was the negotiations on the accession of the four countries to the EU, which had been taking place since 1998. However, an assessment can be made that despite the evident competition in the negotiation process, the vision of membership in the Community appeared as an opportunity to accelerate economic development as well as a civilization leap, and this goal pushed bilateral

disputes to the background. Indeed, in the years 1999-2001, summits of the main negotiators of the V4 countries on EU membership were held three times, but they were only consultative in nature, did not result in any agreement of negotiating positions, and each country negotiated separately. The accession of all Visegrad countries to the EU in 2004 was the culmination of a fifteen-year long period of political and economic transformation, and at the same time an opportunity to renew cooperation and develop common positions within the European institutions.

The year 2004 undoubtedly brought hope for such cooperation. On May 12, 2004 the prime ministers of the Four signed the so-called *Kroměříž Declaration* – a programming document on cooperation of Visegrad countries after their accession to the EU – in which they maintained their readiness to cooperate closely, despite achieving the strategic goals such as membership in NATO and the EU. The main goal of this cooperation was to convey to other countries aspiring to the EU its experiences and ways of implementing EU policies on their territory, already from the position of the Member States that have gone through a long and difficult path to accession. It was then that the Western Balkans region and Eastern European countries were mentioned once again, which was to be understood as a commitment to a certain kind of mentoring and lobbying for these regions of Europe.

The Kroměříž document also mentioned the fields and scopes of intergovernmental consultations on the EU forum, which were to include:

- common foreign and security policy,
- exchange of experiences in the field of justice and home affairs, especially on the matter of joining the Schengen area,
- border protection and visa policy,
- consultations on joining the European Monetary Union.

When analyzing the documents from the V4 summits and various types of joint declarations and

proclamations, it should be confirmed that all the above-mentioned problems were the subject of intense meetings and consultations at various inter-governmental levels, but it is difficult to defend the thesis that they contributed to strengthening the position of the V4 in the EU as a unified regional formation that can work out a common position on most issues.

On the bright side, the V4 countries shared a common approach to the political crises in Ukraine, although paradoxically, this issue best illustrates the problems related to the unity of the actions of the individual states of the Four and, in the end, the realization of their individual interests. During the Orange Revolution (2004-2005), the Visegrad Group jointly and severally supported Ukrainian opposition protesting against the fraudulent activities during the presidential elections. Almost the entire V4 political class, regardless of their party affiliation, emphasized the importance of the events that were considered a turning point for Ukrainian democracy and Ukraine's European aspirations. Most importantly, at the time these declarations did not differ from the actions of the governments of individual states. If, on the other hand, we analyze the V4's attitude towards the events of 2013-2014, we can already notice the first cracks in the of Central European solidarity and unity of actions. It is true that the Visegrad Four declaratively agreed in their views and positions on the Euromaidan events or the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and repeatedly expressed their support for Ukrainian government in this regard. However, it is difficult to state the unity of views and actions on the proposal to impose economic sanctions on the Russian Federation and to maintain them. In other words, on the level of political declarations Russia's actions were considered (and still are) threatening and aggressive, but this did not (and still does not) prevent the Hungarian Prime Minister V. Orban from considering these sanctions unfair and signing further economic contracts with Russia (modernization of the nuclear power plant in Paks and construction of new units, gas contracts). The President of the

Czech Republic, M. Zeman and Slovakia's Prime Minister R. Fico similarly put the solidarity of Visegrad Group to a test by criticizing EU sanctions imposed on Moscow. Only Poland – regardless of the ruling coalition – maintained a fixed view on this matter, even though it was Polish farmers and the Polish economy that were most affected by Russian counter-sanctions. Objectively, however, it must be said that, on the one hand, after 2015, Poland was able to suspend the so-called small border traffic with the Kaliningrad Oblast, but on the other hand, it has been importing huge amounts of coal from Russia in recent years. As you can see, it is really difficult to talk about a consistent policy of individual states, let alone the whole formation.

These few examples already show how difficult it was and still is for the Central European countries to maintain common position in the international arena. When trying to analyze these years of V4 countries membership in the EU, we can indicate only two fields of that restore the Group's solidarity. The first is, of course, the EU budgets adopted every seven years. Both in 2006 and 2013, when the EU's budget prospects were negotiated, the Four was able not only to be a monolith, but also to build a coalition of states around them. Although it was maliciously called the "coalition of the poor" who wanted to maintain EU spending on agriculture and structural funds, it was an effective action, and most importantly – it took advantage of the EU negotiating procedures and the particular interests of the so-called old Member States of the EU. What's more – on the matter of the coronavirus pandemic – also the last budget negotiations in 2020 showed the durability of this coalition.

A unique field of V4 activity is, of course, the migration crisis in Europe, which could become an opportunity to reactivate the political significance of the Visegrad Group as a serious regional formation. Since the spring of 2015, it is possible to notice the extraordinary activity of the Four's diplomacy, which manifested itself mainly in support for Hungary – at that time the most exposed to migratory

pressure. Despite the enormous criticism that fell across Europe on the government of V. Orban for building blockades along the southern borders of Hungary, the Group as a whole tried to contribute substantive elements to the discourse on refugees, emphasizing the need to seal the borders and the need to solve the crisis where it arose. It can therefore be concluded that after the elections in Poland in autumn 2015, a rather compact bloc of states was formed, a kind of "coalition of fear", i.e. an alliance of states dissatisfied with the actions of Western European governments and the EU institutions in regard to resolving the migration crisis. With the latest events on the eastern Polish border, illegal migration has once again become a hot topic that can cement the V4. Already at the beginning of the crisis, words of support came from all the partners, however at the moment, it is difficult to assess the importance of these voices until the problem is internationalized.

In the context of the contemplated examples of quite problematic unity and severe unsteadiness of the partners in the field of foreign policy of the Visegrad Group, it is worth paying attention to a certain permanent element that is reflected in common declarations, and then actions. The analysis of the recent years of the V4's activity shows clearly that the common denominator for all of them is the policy towards the Western Balkan countries and the positive attitude towards their aspirations in terms of integration with EU and NATO. It has already been indicated that this region has long been in the area of interest of the V4, example of which is the transfer of experiences from the functioning of CEFTA to the so-called New CEFTA, which includes Balkan countries and Moldova, as well as the IVF's support for projects in the entire region.

In the sphere of political activity, it was not until 2010 that this topic was officially raised at the ministerial level, and since the meeting of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Bratislava (October 22, 2010) such meetings devoted to the Western Balkans have been organized periodically. The areas of interest of the

Four are both the issues of the future membership of Balkan states in NATO and in the EU. The interest in the last issue comes down to discussing both the current state of preparation and readiness of the six Balkan states for integration with the EU every time, and above all, the global situation in the whole region. V4's area of interest constantly includes:

- maintenance and further participation in military and police missions in the region;
- easing the visa regime for the Balkan states;
- transfer of *know-how* on: bi- and multilateral regional cooperation enhancement and good practices enabling the use of EU pre-accession assistance instruments;
- territorial extension of the IVF grants offered through the Visegrad+ program, which began in 2008;
- cooperation in developing a financial mechanism similar to IVF for the Western Balkans.

It should be remembered that it was in 2011 that two Visegrad countries – Hungary and Poland – chaired the EU Council, which ended with the conclusion of accession negotiations and the signing of the accession treaty by Croatia in 2011.

Another helpful endeavor was the expert assistance concerning the creation of the Western Balkan Fund – WBF, which eventually resulted in the decision of the Balkan Six (WB6) governments to establish such a financial mechanism. It is worth emphasizing that the foreign ministers of Western Balkan countries signed the appropriate document during the Visegrad Group summit in Bratislava in 2014, and eventually the WBF was established in 2016 under the undoubted patronage of the V4 and with the substantive assistance of IVF employees.

Regardless of the above, in the period of EU membership, the Visegrad Group countries failed to build a permanent cooperation formula in the EU, be it something along the lines of the Benelux Union or even the Nordic countries, whose governments always consult with each other and try to

work out a common position before each meeting of EU decision-making bodies. All the above-mentioned examples (even the positive ones) prove the thesis that close cooperation of the V4 countries within the EU is highly incidental, and the heads of governments of V4 states are able to show common interests only in rare and exceptional cases.

In the author's opinion, there are many reasons for this situation. Apart from the disputes mentioned above, which can be considered sedated but not resolved, geographically divergent foreign policy interests are undoubtedly of great importance and are a serious obstacle for cooperation. While in the case of Poland they are located north of the Carpathian range and a horizontal vector can be determined here (East: Russia and Ukraine; West: Germany), the remaining countries gravitate towards the south. It is obvious that Slovakia or Hungary – even for historical reasons – are much more interested in contacts with the countries from south-eastern Europe, for example under Danube Region Initiative, using EU aid instruments, such as Danube Region Strategy.

The potential differences between individual countries are also significant, and thus the ideas about the place of one's country in the international arena. Poland is a dominating state in the group, both territorially and demographically – 5th in terms of size in the EU – which means that the partners do not look for institutionalization of cooperation under V4, preferring intergovernmental contacts of consultative nature and cooperation in a wider forum, such as, for example, the Central European Initiative, in which the strength of Poland is balanced by such countries as Italy or Austria. A similar disproportion also applies to the size of the economies of individual countries. The advantage and competitiveness of the Polish industry (especially the food industry) is causing protests of industry and consumer organizations as well as prominent politicians of its Visegrad partners.

It is difficult to argue with the fact that the political situation in all V4 countries, where right-wing parties are currently ruling, is actually conducive to the

approximation of positions and consolidation of the whole formation. This does not mean, however, overcoming the existing differences. It should be noted that despite very frequent working contacts between heads of state, heads of government, ministers and public officials, Central European cooperation under the V4 banner is the better, the further away from politics, the best example of which is the success of IVF.

The Three Seas Initiative established at the initiative of Poland and Croatia in 2015 should also be considered a failure. In the author's opinion, the discrepancies between the twelve member states of this formation are directly proportional to its size and number of members, and the problems with building unity within this formation are not different at all from those that can be observed in the activities of the V4. They are even enhanced by their territorial scope and the location of the countries on the map of Europe. Here again, concerns reappear in regard to Poland's domination and the willingness to involve the partner countries in disputes

with Russia, as well as to completely divergent vectors of foreign policy and finally, economic interests. There are also concerns about the willingness to weaken the entire project of European integration, which in fact seems more and more probable with the ongoing disputes between the Polish government and the European Commission and the non-execution of the CJEU judgments. Because of the existence of other cooperation organizations in the region (V4, Central European Initiative, Danube Region) there is a well-founded fear that the Three Seas Initiative will become another – insignificant – discussion forum.

This does not mean that such attempts should not be made, but for Polish foreign policy it is the Visegrad Group that should remain the main area of cooperation, regardless of all of its disadvantages. While only the political projects that are possible to execute should be considered the cooperation platforms (apart from connecting of the societies) i.e. support for Western Balkans in the process of integration with Euro Atlantic structures.

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