

The V4 and European Integration

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DE GRUYTER
OPEN

Politics in Central Europe (ISSN: 1801-3422)

Vol. 14, No. 2

DOI: 10.2478/pce-2018-0012

Abstract: *The activities of the Visegrad Group countries in the EU have clearly demonstrated a range of themes that Member States are willing to address on a common platform. The chapter analyzes the extent to which the V4 countries are able to seek common interest, which is subsequently presented as a common position representing V4 interest at EU level. The analysis is based on the presidency of the Visegrad Group countries in the EU. The Presidency will be analyzed in view of the merging of the interests between the Visegrad Group and EU policies. In particular, energy policy, enlargement policy and neighborhood policy were chosen plus the partial policies influenced by the integration process at the time, such as migration policy or quota system issues.*

Keywords: *Visegrad Group; Central Europe; EU energy policy; neighborhood policy; EU presidency*

In the 1990s, the Visegrad Group became a symbol of the attempts to relinquish a communist past and return to Europe. The effort to integrate into the EU and NATO was defined as the main goal of the four countries of the region. Entry into the EU did not spell the end of cooperation on the V4 platform. On the contrary, cooperation was extended into additional areas that were logically linked to entrance into the EU. The goal of the following chapter is to analyze the significance of the Visegrad Group in the context of its operation (i.e. the operation of its individual states) in the European Union. The text's initial assumption is the hypothesis that the V4 makes it considerably easier for its members to implement mutual policy on an EU level; the Visegrad Group functions as a tool to formulate a shared interest outside European structures and thus gives the states greater space for discussion and finding shared interests, which they then promote at an EU level.

In light of the fact that the agenda linked to V4 activity in European integration is very broad and could not be encompassed in full in this chapter, the following text will focus on clearly defined areas. The selection of areas was influenced by the desire to 1) point out the shared interests that are characteristic for the region of Central Europe; 2) point out the individual policies of V4 members in order to demonstrate the degree to which the V4 can be an actor that joins together differing interests.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first reflects briefly on the pre-entry period and predominantly the period after 2004 and analyzes the primary directions of shared interests of V4 countries and their activities in terms of European integration. The second chapter focuses on the field in which the states of the Visegrad Group formulated Central European interests and were able to realistically implement them. This deals with the period of the European Union presidency in which all V4 countries have taken part. V4 countries held the EU presidency from 2009 to 2016 for a period of six months each. This half-year period of the presidency will be analyzed with regard to the overlap of interests between the Visegrad Group and European Union policies. Selected topics include energy policy, enlargement policy, neighborhood policy, and other individual policies that influenced the integration process in the given period, e.g. migration policy or the issue of the quota system. The selected policies mutually complement one another, as the issue of energy policy is linked to the policy of a foreign character, primarily in terms of neighborhood policy (i.e. relations with Russia and Ukraine).¹ In the context of the unification of states in the region, a question arises concerning whether the cooperation in the Visegrad Group supports mutual promotion of regional interests on an EU level and to what degree regional cooperation is coherent.

Entry into the EU as a challenge for the Visegrad Group

In the pre-entry period, the relationship between V4 countries was dominantly influenced by the desire to enter into the EU. The operation of the Visegrad Group itself was never coherent; member states searched for their own interests stemming from separate problems, which they dealt with in their domestic and foreign policy. The actual operation of the V4 was not strong, especially in the second half of the 1990s. On one hand, Poland was convinced of its leading role in the group. On the other hand, the Visegrad Group actually worked in a V3 format, as Slovakia was a hybrid regime after 1993 and the country, represented by Mečiar, was not invited to V4 negotiations (Dangerfield 2008: 640). The role of political elites that were skeptical of the Visegrad cooperation project

1 In light of the focus of this text, the domestic policy of the Visegrad Group countries primarily will not be reflected in the following chapter.

and European integration (primarily in the Czech Republic's case) should also not be ignored (Vachudová 2001). Beginning only in 1999 after the change in government in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, we can see a clear profiling of topics that the Visegrad Group was negotiating and which dealt with pre-entry talks. Coming closer to the EU unified the operation of the Visegrad Group, which found mutual and shared topics of negotiation, e.g. issues linked with migration policy, organized crime, or cooperation in the field of science, education, and the environment. At the same time, the operation of the V4 became more institutionalized (regular meetings were held among ministers, presidents, and representatives of legislative bodies). In terms of the following operation of member states within the EU, the creation of a V4 presidency was also important, as it has since had an impact on the relationships between the states in the region and also formulated the foreign policy of the group and policy within the EU.

By entering into the EU, the primary goal of the group was fulfilled and it was necessary to define new goals and directions of the V4 within the European integration process. Discussion on the relevance of the V4 also arose, as its activities were exhausted via its achievement of this primary goal (see e.g. Pehe 2004). Dialogues and documents adopted primarily at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 21st century clearly show that the Visegrad Group has accepted new topics that stem from EU activities. The reality of European integration, however, has given rise to new stimuli and issues that supported (and still support) V4 integrity by creating a space for the creation of shared interest among V4 states. Therefore, after 2004 the Visegrad Group began to act as an opinion platform upon which member states deal with "European" issues on a regional level. Subsequently, a shared stance or request is shifted to the level of European institutions.

The first document containing this aforementioned information is the *Contents of Visegrad Cooperation*², which was adopted in Bratislava in 1999 and deals with cooperation in economic areas. In 2002, a second document was adopted – *Annex to Contents of Visegrad Cooperation*.³ Both documents show the desire to cooperate in new, additional areas that are closely linked to potential integration into the EU. This, for instance, dealt with activities in the area of border protection in the context of entering the Schengen system, the fight against illegal migration, the creation of shared projects within the EU's 5th Research and Technological Development Framework Programme, etc.; the Visegrad Group, for example, supported a mutual strategy in submitting a request for support from structural funds (Král 2003). The need to ensure greater

2 Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 1999, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/contents-of-visegrad-110412>.

3 Annex to Contents of Visegrad Cooperation 2002, available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/annex-to-the-content-of>.

continuity of cooperation also arose, and therefore the rule of publishing the program of each presiding state was instated. The documents show that cooperation on a V4 basis abandons the idea of EU entry as the only goal and expands into additional spheres.

Entry into the EU led to the revitalization of cooperation and the creation of a new agenda stemming from the Kroměříž declaration, which was dubbed the Visegrad Declaration 2004⁴ (2004), and the directives that are to expand the V4's aims. The heads of governments clearly declared the need to continue on in successful cooperation linked to the region of Central Europe and referred to future activities in the EU and outside it (primarily in relation to countries attempting to enter the EU). V4 activities have been divided into four groups – cooperation – cooperation within the V4, cooperation with the EU, cooperation with other partners (countries in the region, countries attempting to enter the EU), and cooperation with NATO and other international organizations. Cooperation with the EU was defined separately and, in terms of content, it is clear that the V4 had an interest in developing the foreign-policy dimension of European policies, specifically the Mutual Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the Common Security and Defense Policy, and the European Neighborhood Policy.⁵ These directives deal primarily with the framework, agenda, and goal of the V4 after entering the EU. These directives, however, are very general and do not establish mechanisms of consultation or rules for exchanging information among V4 member states. The general character of the adopted documents in the context of EU entry was reflected in the actual policies and the programs of presiding V4 countries, where discontinuity can be observed (see below). Despite the declaratory nature of the documents, the V4 after 2004 can be viewed as a viable group that shared interests linked to the region of Central Europe. This can be observed in the EU presidency of the individual countries (see below).

Before and intensively after entry to the EU, the V4's specific goal of cooperation was to integrate into the Schengen system. The shared interest in entering the Schengen system was accompanied in a number of cases by dialogue on a V4+ level. The V4 states established cooperation with Benelux countries⁶ (2003), drawing inspiration and sharing experience with them before entering the Schengen system⁷ (Fields of Cooperation, 2005). Already in July of 2003,

4 Visegrad declaration 2004, available at <http://www.visegrad-group.eu/documents/visegrad-declarations/visegrad-declaration-110412-1>.

5 Guidelines on the Future Areas of Visegrad Cooperation, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/cooperation/guidelines-on-the-future-110412>.

6 The first negotiations with Benelux states took place in 2002, during which the first areas of cooperation were established. Thematically speaking, this dealt with areas linked to the risks stemming from the Schengen system and terrorism (Summit Meeting Luxembourg, 2002).

7 Working Group for Schengen Cooperation, February 2005, available at: <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2005/fields-of-cooperation>.

the *Visegrad Group National Schengen Action Plans* was published. The document encompasses close cooperation in the field of implementing Schengen law and the resulting cooperation of the police and customs authorities. On April 16, 2003, V4 countries signed the Schengen Agreement. Schengen rules were planned to take effect beginning in 2006.⁸ A result of cooperation was a statement in 2004 that V4 countries had fulfilled the EU's conditions for entry into the Schengen system. Acceptance of this system, however, pointed out various problems linked to individual states. The Schengen issue was dealt with primarily in Poland, as it has the second longest external border with relatively problematic states (Belarus and Ukraine), from which a relatively large group of migrants have entered into EU space. Hungary also dealt with similar problems, as migrants from the Western Balkans were entering the country across its external border. Slovakia, on the contrary, has only a relatively small external border, with which it had no significant problems. The Czech Republic has no external border (Gačiarz 2012). Each of the V4 states had to deal with specific problems linked to the easing of border regimes. A unifying element among the group was the interest in entering the system as soon as possible. Disunion was evident in the relationship with Ukraine and the issue of renewing the visa obligation for its citizens. The Czech Republic and Slovakia renewed the visa obligation while referring to security aspects and rules linked to European law. On the contrary, Hungary and Poland interpreted visa liberalization as a tool of their own foreign policy and both states reinstated a visa-waiver; Hungary also instated a waiver for Montenegro and Serbia (Kaźmierkiewicz 2005).

V4 countries adhered to the timetable for entering the EU, which was meant to be completed in October 2007 with full-fledged integration into the Schengen system (Euractive 2006). Entry into the Schengen system, however, was delayed by the EU with reference to technical problems in launching the SIS2 electronic database, which was meant to be capable of holding data of new EU member states as well.⁹ An alternative plan presented by Portugal (SISone4ALL) was accepted by V4 countries but was perceived only as a temporary alternative that should not obstruct entry on the set date. Entry was completed on December 21, 2007, when checks were cancelled on land borders; on March 31, 2008, checks were cancelled at international airports (Nejedlo 2007: 2). By removing border controls at land and air borders, V4 countries achieved another defined goal. In the period following, the interest of Visegrad cooperation focused on other areas – neighborhood policy and enlargement policy.

8 Statement of the Ministers of the Interior of the Visegrad Group (11 September 2003), available at <http://www.visegradgroup.eu/2003/statement-of-the>.

9 The European Commission reacted to the expansion of the EU and therefore built the Second-generation Schengen Information System. In 2006, the EU stated that the system would be put into operation later (in the summer of 2008) and the entry of new members would be possible at the beginning of 2009 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic 2007: 44).

Already in the pre-entry period, the foreign interests of the V4 countries became clearly evident. For example, in the period of the Polish EU presidency at the end of 2000 and beginning of 2001, preferred interests in relations with Romania, Ukraine, and Croatia were expressed (Polish Visegrad Group Presidency Report 2001). Similarly, Hungary supported dialogue with Ukraine in 2001/2002¹⁰; in the case of Slovakia's presidency, relations with Ukraine were established in the context of integration into the Schengen system (Slovak Visegrad Group Presidency Report 2003).

Upon entering the EU and subsequently the Schengen system, V4 countries launched an active policy toward neighboring countries beyond their eastern border and defined their interests of priority. One of these was participation in the newly established EU neighborhood policy. The first steps were taken by the V4 in dealing with the Ukrainian crisis (Dangerfield 2009: 1734). In doing so, the group launched active policy toward neighboring countries beyond its eastern border. For comparison, the EU from a long-term perspective negotiated with the Russian Federation and focused on the states of Central Europe. On the contrary, the group of states including Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldavia were not given great attention by the EU. The EU's interest only strengthened when it expanded and broadened its eastern border in 2004 and came under pressure from new member states. V4 states had special relationships with neighboring states, e.g. a visa-waiver with Ukraine, which had to be cancelled in 2004 after entrance into the EU; Ukraine and Belarus have also been key partners in energy policy, as strategic raw materials cross over their territory into Central Europe. With the outbreak of the "Orange Revolution" and the attempt to build neighborhood policy, the EU's interest in Ukraine increased (Wolczuk 2005). In terms of the issue of eastern neighbors, interests of the V4 and EU overlapped. In 2007, countries in the Visegrad Group issued the *Visegrad Group Contribution to the Discussion on the Strengthening of the European Neighbourhood Policy* (according to Dangerfield 2009: 1741), in which they pointed out the need to develop partnership with countries beyond their eastern border. The primary initiator was Poland, whose activities were supported by Sweden and Germany. In 2008, the EU began to react to new states on its eastern border and also to pressure from the Visegrad Group, which pointed out the need for special partnership with these states. In 2008,¹¹ Eastern Partnership (EaP) negotiations began, which culminated at the time of the Czech Republic's EU presidency in May 2009. The Council of the European Union accepted the decision to create the Eastern Partnership (Council of the EU 2009), which would lead to establishing special political relations and economic cooperation between the

10 Several meetings with Ukrainian representatives took place in Budapest (Hungarian VG Presidency Program 2001/2002).

11 The creation of the Eastern Partnership was sped up on the part of the EU by the Russian-Georgian crisis that took place in 2008.

EU and countries beyond the external eastern border. For states in the region, the creation of the Eastern Partnership meant the prospect for deeper future cooperation in the economic sphere with the opportunity of integration into the internal EU market and visa liberalization; the issue of energy security also became a subject of discussion. We can view the creation of the Eastern Partnership as a manifestation of the influence of V4 states, which via the EaP achieved much closer cooperation with their eastern neighbors (Dangerfield 2009: 1742).

After the creation of the EaP, a series of negotiations were launched between the V4 and Eastern Partnership countries. The Visegrad Group used the International Visegrad Fund as a financial tool to strengthen relations with neighboring states. This dealt primarily with scholarship programs aimed at Ukraine and Russia in the form of the *Visegrad scholarship* for master and doctorate students. After 2009, the V4's priorities in relation to the EaP were defined in the document *Sharing V4 Know-how with Neighbouring Regions*. An example of the development of good ties with eastern neighbors was the creation of the *Local Border Traffic Agreements* between Ukraine and Poland in 2009. Citizens of Ukraine living in the border region with Poland were allowed to enter a thirty-kilometer zone on the border with Poland as a part of a loosened visa regime, leading to an intensification of cross-border cooperation of both countries with the support of the EU (for more see Frontex 2012).

In terms of the development of the Eastern Partnership, the EU accepted the creation of the first shared center for submitting visa applications (representing 14 EU member states) in Moldavia, the opening and operation of which was provided by Hungary. The reality in Visegrad Group countries served as the motive for creating the center, as the largest number of migrants applying for visas in V4 countries came across the eastern border.¹²

After 2004, V4 countries reformed and specified preferences and goals within the integration process and indicated issues that would be of interest to them in the future. This predominantly dealt with foreign policy, enlargement policy, entry into the Schengen system, and full-fledged participation in the internal market. After 2008, we can observe the formulation of separate interests of V4 members in the context of their EU presidency and also in the context of individual challenges that European integration and the individual member states had to face.

12 For example, in 2012, more than 700,000 applicants in Ukraine submitted a visa application for V4 countries. The overloaded capacity of the eastern border was also acknowledged by the European Commission, which stated in 2014 that the eastern border, which is subject to the Eastern Partnership, is one of the most overburdened in the world (according to Merheim-Eyre 2016: 112).

The presidency of the EU as a tool for implementing the interests of the Visegrad Group?

In the following period, the preferences of V4 countries were presented primarily in the period of the EU presidency. The following text works off the assumption that the EU presidency is a tool for implementing national interests (see e.g. Tallberg 2003). At the same time, the presidency can become the framework for presenting regional interests protected by the Visegrad Group. The following part of this text will therefore deal with the presidency of Visegrad Group countries (the Czech Republic held the presidency in the first half of 2009; Poland and Hungary in 2011, and Slovakia in 2016). The goal is to point out the specific aspects of each state that were manifested in relation to the EU but mainly in relation to the Visegrad Group and its operation from 2009 to 2016.

The first of the Visegrad Group countries to take the EU presidency was the Czech Republic. The Czech Republic's position at the beginning of the presidency was influenced by external events that it had to face as the presiding country. The presidency was taken over from France, which expressed skepticism toward this new, small, and Euro-skeptic state. The influence of the global economic crisis was also evident. This uneasy situation was further complicated by the fact that the Czech Republic had not ratified (at the beginning of the presidency) the Treaty of Lisbon or established a date for the acceptance of the unified Euro currency (Kaniok – Smekal 2010: 45–46). The Czech presidency was based on the motto “Europe without barriers” and established three areas of priority: economy, energy, and the role of the EU in the world.¹³ In the Czech Republic's case, cohesion with V4 interests was strongly evident, as the country at the time of preparations for EU presidency was also the presiding country of the Visegrad Group. One of the priority interests was the establishment of relations with neighboring countries within the neighborhood policy, which was expressed in the Czech and Visegrad stance (see above). The second priority area – energy – was a topic that united all the V4 countries, primarily in regard to their energy dependency on the Russian Federation. The goal of the Czech Republic and the V4 was to strengthen EU energy security. The issue of energy security became a dominant topic after the gas crisis broke out at the end of 2008 and beginning of 2009, when the supply of natural gas from Russia to Europe was halted for 13 days. The Czech Republic was active in leading negotiations with the countries in dispute (Ukraine and Russia) and called for the creation of a unified EU energy policy and energy market. Just as on the V4 level, the Czech Republic supported the construction of the Nabucco pipeline that would ensure an alternative to gas supply from Russian territory (Czech presidency

¹³ The working program and priorities of the Czech Republic during its presidency in the Council of the EU, available at <http://www.eu2009.cz/cz/czech-presidency/programme-and-priorities/program-a-priority-478/index.html>.

2009). The Czech presidency showed the need to unify the interests that are presented on an EU level. Therefore, negotiations at an EU level were for the first time preceded by meetings at a V4 level, giving rise to an opinion platform that was presented at EU-level meetings (Neuman 2017: 62). In the case of the Czech Republic, an overlap of interests could be seen between Czech foreign policy and V4 interests on the platform of the EU presidency. Specifically, this dealt with the relationship toward the countries of the Western Balkans and their desire to enter the EU and the Eastern Partnership. The Czech Republic's Euro-skeptic stance presented by the ODS-led government and president Klaus also became evident, primarily in relation to the Treaty of Lisbon, which had not yet been ratified by the Czech Republic at the time of the presidency (Kaniok 2014: 58–59). Despite the premature end to the mandate of Topolánek's government, the following caretaker government led by Jan Fischer was able to complete the mandate of the Council of the EU's presidency successfully.

In the context of the Visegrad Group during the Czech presidency, pre-negotiations on the agenda on a regional level proved to be favorable. The V4 states were becoming more acutely aware of the necessity to unify their stances, which were subsequently presented as a shared position at the EU summit. In 2010 the Visegrad Group therefore adopted a new format of negotiations, i.e. mini-summits. Mini-summits take place regularly before EU summits and allow the countries of Central Europe to pre-negotiate issues on a shared platform that are then dealt with on the EU level.¹⁴ Implementation of mini-summits is a symbol of the desire of V4 states to use regional platforms for the mutual promotion of their interests, which has carried on until the present (2018).

In the first half of 2011, Hungary presided over the EU. Its program was introduced under the name “Strong Europe” (The programme of the Hungarian presidency of the Council of the EU 2011) and primarily pointed to the economic crisis, which was to be overcome through strong integration stemming from the “Europe 2020” strategic document. Hungary was the first presiding state to react to the new rules established in the Treaty of Lisbon, specifically the “European semester”¹⁵ and the fact that the presiding country no longer represented Europe as a whole, did not manage the European Council, and did not coordinate the external activities of the EU (Szczerki 2011).

Hungary showed great interest in energy policy, primarily in the diversification of energy sources and ensuring energy security. In connection with the V4, Hungary based its assumptions on the conclusions of the mutual strategy adopted in 2010 entitled *Energy Infrastructure Priorities for 2020 and*

14 The first mini-summit took place in 2010 and was also attended by European Commission President J. M. Barroso (Euractive 2010). The effectiveness of the mini-summit is mentioned in the document summarizing the Slovak presidency of the Visegrad Group (Slovak Presidency 2011).

15 The goal of the European semester is to monitor the budget and structural policies of EU countries to prevent an economic crisis as was observed in Greece (Euractive 2011).

beyond. The goal was to construct (or complete the construction of) the Slovak-Hungary, Romania-Hungary, and Croatia-Hungary gas pipeline. Primarily in Hungary's case but also in the whole Central European region in general, differing interests in the field of energy policy became evident in comparison with Western Europe. Dependence on the Russian Federation and the consequent desire to diversify energy sources flowing into Central Europe became evident. EU-built pipelines in the north-south direction were criticized by Hungary (Túry 2011); at the same time, however, they represented an alternative to energy dependence on the Russian Federation (Szilágyi 2014: 300). In 2011, Hungary demonstrated their own independent energy policy, which deviated from EU requirements. In 2011, Hungary signed a separate agreement with Russian company Surgutneftegaz, which acquired a twenty-percent share of Hungary's oil conglomerate MOL (Djankov 2015: 6).¹⁶ The open relationship with the Russian Federation differentiated Hungary from the other V4 countries, primarily after the annexation of Crimea and the declaration of economic sanctions, during which Prime Minister Orbán called EU policy irrational (Soldatkin – Than 2015). Hungary reformulated its mutual interests with the V4 in the period of its V4 presidency in 2013/2014. The Visegrad Group created a travel map of raw materials and also called on each state to have its own mix of energy (Euractive 2013). From an energy policy standpoint, Hungary behaved (and is still behaving) in a different manner than its V4 partners and has pursued its own separate and strongly pro-Russian interests rather than pro-European or Central European interests.

In its program, Hungary's presidency emphasized its geographic position in Central Europe and pointed to the specific interests in the Eastern Partnership and cooperation between states of the so-called "Danube Region". In the period of its presidency, Hungary showed the shared interest of V4 countries in including the states of the Western Balkans into the EU. Croatia's entry into the EU was definitively agreed upon in 2013. V4 states had a specific interest in adopting the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, which was adopted during Hungary's presidency (Euractive 2011a). In all of the aforementioned issues, the influence of mini-summits was apparent. These mini-summits took place regularly and the V4 states had the opportunity to significantly coordinate differing interests. The Hungarian presidency showed separate interests that became clear in the open support of Bulgaria and Romania's entry into the Schengen system despite the disagreement of Germany and France.

After Hungary's presidency, Poland's presidency followed in the second half of 2011. The platform of Visegrad cooperation or at least regional proximity with Hungary was visible in the mutual communication between both Central European states in terms of the Visegrad Group over the course of 2011. The

¹⁶ In 2012 and 2013 the share was transferred back to German firms E.ON and RWE.

Polish program entitled *European integration as the source of growth* focused on three priority areas dealing with the ongoing economic crisis, which influenced the operation of the internal market and Eurozone. Poland also reacted to the preparation of a financial framework of several years (2014-2020), in which it requested a redistribution of funds for the least developed EU countries in order to fulfill the Europe 2020 strategy. The second field of the program dealt with security in three specified spheres – food, energy, and defense. Predominant attention was paid to energy security and external suppliers. In the context of the ongoing “Arab Spring”, Poland pointed to the necessity of strengthening the protection of external borders and heightening the role of Frontex. The third field focused on European openness and the position of the EU in international relations. Poland primarily emphasized the Eastern Partnership and the enlargement policy (Premier.gov.pl 2011). The actual policy of the Visegrad Group toward countries of the Eastern Partnership was deepened via the launch of a new program entitled *Visegrád 4 Eastern Partnership*, the goal of which was to implement projects supporting the development of democracy, economic transformation, and regional cooperation (Czech Presidency of Visegrad Group 2012). From a practical perspective, this period was not overly successful, as there was failure in signing an association agreement with Ukraine and in implementing Romania and Bulgaria’s entry into the Schengen system.¹⁷ Poland perceived the failure in the area of the Eastern Partnership as a great setback for the whole presidency.

After 2011, the relationship of the Visegrad Group toward European integration was primarily formulated by the Arab Spring, the reverberating economic crisis, Greece’s debt problems, the annexation of the Crimea, and the stance toward the Russian Federation. The V4’s operation was important within the *Climate package at the Paris global climate conference* in 2014. On the basis of a V4+ format, the V4 states reacted to the need to adopt new legislation in the field of climate and energy policy. They requested, however, that the EU always take into consideration regional needs and circumstances. This is why they expressed their dissatisfaction with the decision of the EC to create a unified European program in the field of environmental and energy policy (Slovak Presidency 2014/2015). In all the aforementioned cases, the V4 countries presented a mutual stance on the topic; in addition, it should be taken into account that the V4 countries often found support from Romania and Bulgaria. In the case of the climate package, V4 states eventually managed to achieve better conditions for reducing emissions in the context of industrial policy through negotiations with the European Commission (Nič 2016: 285).

¹⁷ Western European countries are against the entrance of both countries into the Schengen system. In 2011, Holland refused suggestions of compromise presented by Poland (Euractive 2011b).

Slovakia was the last country of the V4 to preside over the European Commission in the second half of 2016. The Slovak presidency was based on three areas of priority: an economically strong Europe, a modern and unified market, and a sustainable migration and asylum policy and globally engaged Europe (Slovak presidency 2016). General interests defined in the program corresponded to the interests of Slovakia and the goals of the Visegrad Group. At the same time, however, Slovakia had to deal with several controversial issues from the beginning of its presidency such as Brexit¹⁸ and the migration crisis that were affecting the operation of the EU and the Visegrad Group. In the period of its presidency, Slovakia represented European interests rather than regional ones, i.e. it did not step out on a European level as radically as in negotiations in the Visegrad Group and domestic policy. An example is Slovakia's dissuasive position on migration quotas, which was a position held by all V4 partners. On the other hand, Slovakia did not want to resist the interests of European integration and therefore we may observe an attempt at a suggestion for compromise in the form of "effective solidarity", which would allow member states to react more flexibly to the migration crisis (Virostkova 2016). The Visegrad Group made only general statements on effective solidarity, as the other states did not feel this tool held a solution to the migration crisis. Therefore, the V4 states that "flexible solidarity raises doubts, but the term is worth further negotiation" (Végh 2017). Another issue dealt with by the Slovak presidency was the creation of the *European Border and Coast Guard*, the foundation of which corresponded to the interests of the EU. Slovakia pursued specific interests in relation to the Eurozone as contrary to other V4 members it had already accepted the unified European currency in 2009 (Ogrodnik 2016).¹⁹ In addition, Slovakia devoted itself to the neighborhood policy and Eastern Partnership in attempts to develop good relations with countries of the Western Balkans and primarily with Serbia. Thanks to the influence of the Slovak presidency, two chapters of accession negotiations were successfully opened for Serbia. In the field of foreign policy, Slovakia's interests corresponded with the long-term trends of Visegrad cooperation. Slovakia actively took part in accepting the Paris Agreement on EU Climate Change, i.e. the Visegrad Group expressed interest in implementing and realizing the climate deal (Presidency Programs 2016).

In the context of EU presidency, we can interpret V4 states as "*policy-shapers*" in a score of areas of European integration (Nič 2016: 285). The V4 states have attempted to deal with the specific European agenda. In the case of issues that influence the Central European region, the activity of the V4 states at the time of their presidency is more pronounced and active, primarily in the area

18 Issues concerning Brexit were not dealt with on a summit level. For Slovakia, Brexit meant that Great Britain would not be taking part in the summit in Bratislava.

19 Slovakia was the first country (2005) of the V4 group to request that the Slovak crown be linked to the ERM II exchange rate mechanism (Euractive 2005).

of foreign policy (Eastern Partnership and enlargement policy in regard to countries of the Western Balkans) and energy policy. Proof of this fact can be found in the strong cohesion between presidencies at a Visegrad Group level and a European Council level. The European presidency is perceived as a tool for promoting specific regional interests. For instance, at the time of the Slovak EU presidency, Poland presided over the Visegrad Group and the cohesion of both groupings stemmed from Poland's program statement (Presidency Programs 2016). Also, for example, Slovakia as the presiding V4 state supported Hungary's presidency in the European Council (Slovak Presidency 2011). The influence of domestic political elites should also not be overlooked, as they have influenced the interests and issues that are preferred (and their relationship to European integration) and also the specific international-political and economic situation that had to be taken into consideration in the presidency. The connection to the Central European region and the interests of the states within it is strongly reflected and this fact is supported by negotiations on the V4 level and their variations in the form of V4+.

Conclusion

The relationship between the EU and the Visegrad Group countries began to form before entry into the EU and predominantly after 1999. Accession negotiations and the effort to fulfill the primary goal of Visegrad cooperation brought the activities of these four Central European countries closer together. The states in this region realized that effective cooperation on an EU level is possible only if Visegrad cooperation is more deeply institutionalized.

This original goal of the group was fulfilled upon entry to the EU, but the areas of cooperation extended into additional spheres that stemmed from the reality of EU cooperation. After 2004, the Visegrad Group presented itself as the representative of regional interests and reacted to new European challenges, e.g. entrance into the Schengen system or full integration into the domestic market. The Kroměříž declaration formed the basis for further activities of the Visegrad Group. The primary spheres of the group's interest were embodied in this declaration, primarily EU foreign and security policy.

The first success of Visegrad cooperation after 2004 was entry into the Schengen system, i.e. holding a shared interest linked to fulfilling the rules of free movement. Subsequently, the V4 countries' activities focused on the field of European foreign policy. This specifically dealt with the newly established neighborhood policy, enlargement policy, and energy policy. In general, the interest of the Visegrad Group matches the fields in which all states have a shared interest. These are often issues these states use to define themselves with reference to the specific aspects of the region or shared preferences (e.g. energy security, good relations with Eastern neighbors, the shared refusal of

accepting the mandatory quota system, etc.). The EU presidency has shown the effort of individual states to represent the shared interests of the region, which are either traditional or of a short-term character.

The shared direction of the Visegrad Group within the EU, however, is not stable or permanent. Separate interests and issues disrupt the coherence of the group and weaken it in terms of unified promotion of these interests in the EU. For instance, this was evident in the period of Hungary's presidency in the European Council. The separate Hungarian policy toward the Russian Federation in the field of energy policy demonstrates individual and incompatible interests within the V4. Similarly to the course of the Slovak presidency, Slovakia pursued the interests of the Visegrad platform; however, at the same time it was possible to observe the implementation of pro-European policy, which was not compatible with the individual interests of Visegrad Group countries. This fact can be interpreted as Slovakia's effort not to mar relations with the EU and to submit proposals that are of a Europe-wide character (e.g. an alternative plan for dealing with the migrant crisis and the effort to become involved in negotiations on changes in the Eurozone). The Visegrad Group was skeptical toward Slovakia's alternative proposal. On the other hand, policy on the domestic Slovak scene was in agreement with Visegrad interests, i.e. primarily the refusal of migrant quotas and pursuit of long-term shared interests within the Visegrad Group.

Visegrad cooperation is not an absolutized manifestation of a unified opinion or stance of the V4 countries, as member states of the group can in reality represent separate and specific policy in which they pursue their own interests and not those of the whole group. This is valid primarily in the cases of policies that are defined as crucial by a specific state while the other members do not want to follow such goals or opinions. On the other hand, this disagreement in opinions among member states has been a typical phenomenon of the V4 since its foundation and cannot be considered an anomaly. At the same time, it is necessary in the context of European integration to take notice of the effort of V4 states in finding mechanisms that would strengthen their shared interests in negotiations on an EU level. Proof of this effort can be found in the creation of mini-summits, which after several years of operation have proven to be functional and make it easier for V4 states to find a shared stance on a negotiated issue before European summits are held (in a positive and negative sense). In connection to the V4+ platform, the institution of mini-summits represents a tool for extending shared interests in European integration to other member states and institutions of the EU.

In regard to the issues defined in the introduction, it can be said that the Visegrad Group helps to formulate a shared opinion among its member states, for example in the period of the migration crisis or upon entry into the Schengen system, and creates a complete unit defined by shared interests (e.g. in

the area of transport, energy policy, environmental policy, and other fields of cooperation such as culture, science, or regional development, which are not always necessarily linked to their relationship with the EU). This fact, however, cannot be interpreted as absolute and always depends on the specific issue and the country's political elite, who influence negotiations on a V4 basis and actual behavior on an EU level.

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