THE VISEGRAD GROUP’S REGIONAL COOPERATION AS RESPONSE TO COMPLEX SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The unexpected end of the Cold War triggered Central European countries - Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary for thinking about stronger regional cooperation in order to fulfill the security vacuum in complex surroundings. The established non-formal regional cooperation known as the Visegrad Group strongly contributed to realizing their fortified strategic goals: EU and NATO’s full membership, as well as promoting their regional politics as official politics of the European Union.

Also, the Visegrad Group promoted their regional format as a model of multilateral cooperation outside of the European Continent known as Visegrad + regional format of cooperation on a global level.

The aim of this article is to present that regional, political and security cooperation of the Visegrad Four, significantly increases their security stability, fulfillment of the objectives of the Common foreign and security policy of the European Union and strengthening of the regional security of the European continent.

Methods

The method will be based on qualitative analysis of the reports and documents by official bodies of the involved states in the research. Keywords: the Visegrad Group, Common Foreign and Security Policy, European Union, Regional security

Conclusion:

Establishing the regional non-formal cooperation between Czechia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia has proved that this model of regional cooperation enables realizing the basic strategic goals, Europeanisation of their security cooperation and strengthening of regional security on the level of the EU.

Keywords: the Visegrad Group, EU, NATO, regional security

1. INTRODUCTION

The dissolution of the Cold War and Warsaw Pact and the creation of the new geopolitical security environment have triggered some countries with a marginal role in the block-ideological divide to seek an appropriate solution to resolve this state through regional integration Dangerfield M (2008). At the initiative of then Czechoslovak President Vaclav Havel, Prime Minister of Hungary Jozsef Antall, and President of Poland Lech Walesa, three Central European Countries made a decision to create regional cooperation, known as the Visegrad Group(V3). The inaugural V3 meeting was held in Bratislava in April 1990, when the Presidents of the three countries discussed the coordination of political goals and synchronization of steps on the road to Europe. The central mission was focused on the two
foreign policy goals: fully demarcating security from the times of the Warsaw Pact and the integrative structure from the times of the Warsaw Pact and full focus of the Visegrad Group in achieving the status of full members of the European Union and NATO (Visegrad Declaration, 1991). Despite the well-established goals of the Visegrad Group from 1993-1998, the evolution of activities to achieve projected goals was downward because of internal political developments in Czechoslovakia, and the period when cooperation of the Visegrad Group was revived is related to 1999 when the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary became full members of NATO and Slovakia in 2004 when subsequently all four countries full members of the European Union. The period after obtaining the status of full membership to countries of the European Union and NATO was marked with some level of reflection and all doubts were solved with the signing of the Kromeriz Declaration on 12 May 2004. With the signing of this declaration, the Visegrad Group clearly express to continue with its own political European agenda with different goals to achieve in the forthcoming period, focusing on regional activities and initiatives aimed at strengthening the identity of the Central European region, Declaration of the Prime Ministers of Czech Republic, Republic of Hungary, the Republic of Poland and the Slovak Republic (2004). In that regard, the Visegrad Group will consistently be oriented for implementing regional politics as official politics in the European Union, as well as Europeanization of their security cooperation with participation in European Combat Forces and fully aligned their foreign and security policy with common foreign and security policy of the European Union. Except this, the Visegrad Group has been strongly committed to strengthening regional connectivity with countries from Western Balkan in the format Visegrad+, and many times was said that European Union will not achieve its own mission without full membership with Western Balkan countries.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF SECURITY COOPERATION THROUGH THE VISEGRAD GROUP

2.1. Foreign Policy of the Visegrad Group-member states before obtaining the status of full member states of the European Union

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the creation of a new geopolitical-security environment forced some countries with marginal roles in the block-ideological divide to seek a solution to the security vacuum by creating a subregional integration, which is defined as a process of regular significant security, political and economic linkage among a group of neighboring countries (Dwan, 2000). This kind of connectivity concerns the interaction between national governments, local authorities, the private economic sector and sectoral society across a wide range of issues of common interest. In the complex geopolitical circumstances that faced Central Europe (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary) on the initiative of the then President of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel started the idea of regional cooperation between Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary as a way as many times said returning to Europe as a starting point to higher regional integration for getting full membership to European Union and NATO. From a historical, geopolitical, and cultural point of view, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland as political communities have had historical interests so their regional cooperation was a matter of time. The inaugural meeting of the Visegrad Group, whose original format was known as Visegrad3, took place in Bratislava in April 1990. At the initiative of the President of Czechoslovakia, Vaclav Havel accepted by Prime Minister of Hungary Joszef Antall, and President of Poland Lech Walesa

Visegrad1(1990-1992)-Following an initial period of debate on future integration and security strategies in the context of the undesirable effects of the profound changes in 1989, the Visegrad Group’s agenda was crystallized in the early 1990s and was practically started with the adoption of Visegrad Declaration in 1991. With the signing of this document began the process of creating foundations and new forms of political, economic and cultural cooperation of these countries in altered situations in Central Europe (Visegrad 1991). The similarity of the situation that has evolved over the past decades triggered these three countries to achieve three basic objectives: full restitution of state independence, democracy and freedom; elimination of all existing social, economic aspects of the totalitarian system; construction of parliamentary democracy, a modern State of law, respect for human rights and freedom; creation of free modern market economy, and full involvement in the European political and economic system, as well as the system of security and legislation (Visegrad, 1991).

In the early years, the Visegrad Group’s cooperation was solely focused on foreign policy issues and took the form of intergovernmental cooperation between the Governments of the Visegrad Group’s countries and neighboring countries. According to Rusnak (2001), the Visegrad Group had a remarkable start in 1991 with joint success in clearing the Soviet Union legacy in Central Europe, and initial positive steps for collective access to the European Union were recognized by the European Union with the signing of the European Agreements in December 1991. Initial positive cooperative steps were noted in the field of security which contributed to early elimination within the Visegrad Group that referred to alternative concepts of security frameworks for Europe and decided to choose a security arrangement with NATO. The rationale for developing closer relations with NATO is based on full membership, defense reform cooperation involving regular consultations at all levels in the military sector, exploring opportunities for closer cooperation in military technology, production, and public procurement. The initial success of the Visegrad Group at this early stage was significant and related to their contribution to the abolition of the Warsaw Pact, and the persistence of creating a replacement of Mutual Economic Aid, so that the Visegrad Group, first V3 and then V4 can be regarded as European Project.

Visegrad slow-transit phase (1993-1998) - Contrary to the initial period of cooperation between the Visegrad Group this period can be characterized as a period of slowdown in cooperation established in 1990. The period of stagnation of cooperation between the Visegrad Group coincides with the period in late 1992 and the dissolution of Czechoslovakia into two independent political communities. The change of political leadership in the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic and derailing on the paths of
enhanced regional cooperation and full membership of the European Union and NATO and weak institutionalized cooperation were the main reasons for such developments in that period (Strazay, T. 2011). The 1993-1998 period can at best be characterized as a period of inactive cooperation between the Visegrad Group and as Vachudova (2001) noted the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary very quickly lost the status of avant-garde post-communist countries, largely benefiting Estonia and Slovenia which like the Visegrad Group were invited to start negotiations for membership with European Union in 1997.

The slowdown in cooperation did not, however, lead to total paralysis of collaboration (Strazay, T. 2011). In that regard, two main factors contributed to the revival of the Visegrad Group’s cooperation: the establishment of the Central Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and increasing pressure to become full-fledged NATO members. The factor to be mentioned is the Central Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) which was signed on 21 December 1992 in Krakow, Poland and soon proved to be a successful example of subregional cooperation in the economic field which acted as a useful replacement for latent cooperation of the Visegrad Group.

The second significant factor that contributed to the revival of cooperation among V4, without minimizing the role of CEFTA is increasing pressure to attain the status of full members of NATO. This represented a de facto revival of the V4 cooperation which was based on a trilateral basis due to Slovakia’s exclusion from the process. Except for domestic issues which slowed regional cooperation also can be considered an objection of the Czech Republic not allowing Poland to have a main role in Visegrad Group cooperation. According to Pehe (1997), the key reason why Czech foreign policy has changed since 1995 is the absorption by the Czech leadership of the reality that imposing individual race to Poland on the road to NATO is counterproductive. The Visegrad Group’s trilateral cooperation accelerated as the accession process to NATO progressed immediately after the formal invitation for membership was issued on 8 July 1997. The period was a period of variable success for the Visegrad Group on relations with the European Union correlating with getting Associate Status in 1991 and adopting of EU Summit’s conclusions from Copenhagen in 1993 of implementing economic and political benchmarks for all candidate countries that gave additional impetus for increased regional cooperation between the Visegrad Group.

Visegrad 2 (1998-2004) - The process of reviving Visegrad Four cooperation began in the second half of 1998, a period coinciding with government changes in the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The renewal was also linked to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary’s accession process to full-fledged NATO membership. The first step towards the formal establishment of cooperation was the holding of the CEFTA Summit in September 1998 in Prague. The next significant step was the trilateral summit of the Presidents of the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary held in Budapest on 21 October 1998, expressing support for the revitalization of the Visegrad co-operation, an idea conceived since 1991 and which after promised start has slowed considerably, not only on in the political field but to establish cooperation in other fields (visegradgroup.eu, 1999). In that context, the inaugural meeting of the revised Visegrad Cooperation in V4 format held in Bratislava, Slovak Republic identified key objectives for cooperation in the fields of:

Foreign Affairs- regular meetings and consultations with experts, exchange of information on long-term strategies, concepts of foreign, security and defense policy, exchange views on the stability and security of the Central and Eastern Europe region, transfer of experience in preparation for NATO membership and NATO’s accession process, transfer of experience on NATO and EU communication strategies and methods.
Internal affairs: cooperation on border and immigration matters in the context of EU accession: Schengen agreement-related consultations, harmonization in the fight against illegal immigration, illicit traffic and narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling, organized crime, and terrorism: exchange of views in the process of drafting legislation in this area.

The new structure of the Visegrad Cooperation was established in order to avoid slowed-down cooperation which happened as a result of political change in some of the member-states of the Visegrad Group (such as the case of the coming in power of Vaclav Klaus and Vladimir Meciar) and such established structure was a response to improve the weak institutional structure of Visegrad cooperation. In that regard was established International Visegrad Fund on 9 June 2000 with its seat in Bratislava, Slovak Republic.

The International Visegrad Fund is the only institutional link between V4 member states, whose main purpose is to promote the development and closer cooperation between the Visegrad Group by supporting project grants in the field of joint cultural, scientific, and educational projects, student exchange, cross-border cooperation, scholarships, and artist training. According to Rusnak (2001), the International Visegrad Fund’s strength is in supporting the building and the maintenance of links between V4 citizens and creating a more positive attitude to the whole idea of Visegrad cooperation. A further important development of Visegrad Four was the establishment of the V4+ formula which provided a framework in which V4 a whole would work with third parties that could be individual state, regional or subregional entities and international organizations. In that regard, V4+ can be interpreted as an initiative of one of the V4 member state to cooperate with a third party or respond to requests from third parties. In that direction regional cooperation was strongly oriented to fulfilling the economic and political criteria of the Copenhagen Summit held in 1993. By the end of 2002, the pre-accession negotiations with the European Union had been completed and the fundamental goals of the V4 were fulfilled: full membership in the European Union and NATO.

The period between the completion of accession negotiations with the European Union and NATO in 2002 and May 2004, when V4 member states achieved full membership of the European Union and NATO, was a period of reflection on whether regional cooperation should continue beyond 2004 given the fulfillment of the goals set out in the Visegrad Declaration from 1991. In that period the Visegrad Group demonstrated internal resilience in resolving some domestic issues which put the regional cooperation in an unpleasant situation. In that regard, as Vachudova pointed out (Vachudova, 2001), V4 could become a victim of the division of Central Europe into two distinct groups of states: provincial Central Europe, with an accent on a defensive approach to European politics, and cosmopolitan Central Europe, fully determined to participate in shaping the most important European policies such as common agricultural policy of the European Union and common foreign and security policy of the European Union.

2.2. Foreign Policy of the Visegrad Group member states after obtaining the status of full member states of the European Union

After a period of reflection and doubtful views on the likelihood of continued cooperation among the Visegrad Group, political leaders agreed to continue with regional cooperation after obtaining European Union and NATO’s full membership. As a consequence of that decision, the Visegrad Group’s political leaders held a summit on 12 May 2004 in Kromeriz, the Czech Republic, where the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and the Slovak Republic adopted a new Visegrad Declaration reaffirming their intention to maintain the V4 framework for consultation and coordination.
of common interest (Kromeriz, 2004). The 2004 Declaration can be seen as a political expression that confirms the continuity and adaptation of their cooperation with the European Union’s policies. The signing of Kromeriz’s Declaration undoubtedly confirmed that the Visegrad Group as a regional initiative with all ups and downs is fully committed to the European values and further cooperation will be oriented in the implementation of regional politics on the level of the European Union as an official politics of the European Union. The Visegrad Group countries regard their accession to the European Union and NATO as a significant step towards the reunification of Europe and as a historic milestone on the path of their democratic transformation, integration efforts, and mutual cooperation (Kromeriz, 2004). In that context cooperation of the Visegrad Group countries will continue to focus on regional activities and initiatives aimed at strengthening the identity of the Central European Union (Kromeriz, 2004).

2.3 Defense Cooperation of the Visegrad Group

Since the very beginning, the efforts to develop and strengthen regional cooperation in the military and defense fields, have been an essence of Visegrad cooperation, and it has provided a platform for political consultations on security and defense-related topics with a focus on enhancing cooperation in various areas of common interests such as harmonization of defense policy objectives, defense capability development, interoperability of the V4 armed forces and defense industry. As has been mentioned, defense cooperation was an essential element for the functioning of the Visegrad format since its inception. The accession of the Visegrad Group to NATO and the European Union enabled the implementation of cooperation in a wider way than in range. In that regard, a basic document that formulates defense cooperation named the long-term vision of Visegrad countries on deepening their defense cooperation was signed on 14 March 2014 in Visegrad, Hungary (Urbanski & Dolega, 2015).

The document specifies the following areas of Visegrad cooperation in the field of defense: The development of defense capabilities and acquiring the necessary equipment, forming multinational military units and conducting activities with an international profile and education, training and military exercises (visegradgroup.eu 2014). The development of the defense capabilities of the Visegrad Group countries was necessary for the effective functioning of NATO and the European Union and was carried out in accordance with NATO’s smart defense initiative, involving the coordinated development of military capabilities between NATO member states. The initiative provides for the sharing and exchange of capacity among members in order to minimize financial outlays while raising the level of their quality Smart Defense (2015). Another platform of defense cooperation of the Visegrad Group distinguished in the long-term vision of Visegrad countries on deepening their defense cooperation in the efforts aimed at forming multinational military units and conducting activities with an international profile. In that regard accomplishment of this idea is the appointment of joint module formations, which can then be offered to the European Union and NATO as an instrument to achieve security and defense policy (Sterowaniec&Kacala, 2015).

In order to strengthen the security and defense cooperation on the level of the European Union, at the European Union Summit in Helsinki 1997 was decided for establishing European Union Battle Groups as a rapid response with the intention of helping to crisis management of the European Union. After allocating Helsinki Headline Goal 2003 elements to member states in order to provide rapid response EU countries had a capability to deploy the forces at very high levels of readiness. A battle group is the minimum military
effective, credible and coherent, rapidly deployable force package capable of stand-alone operations or for the initial phase of operations. Battlegroups are based on the principle of multi-nationality and could be formed by a framework nation or by a multinational coalition of member-states, which reached full operational capacity on 1 January 2007, EEAC, 2015. The establishment of the concept of EU Battle Groups contributed to strengthened weak institutional defense cooperation between the Visegrad Group countries and with European Union and in March 2014, in Visegrad, was signed the document - Long term vision of the Visegrad Countries on Deepening their defense cooperation by the defense ministers of Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovak Republic, with emphasizing on practical defense cooperation in three critical areas: 1) capability development, procurement, and defense industry, 2) the establishment of multinational units and running cross-border activities, 3) education, training and exercises (visegradgroup.eu, 2014). In that regard, the second area was considered crucial for practical defense cooperation pointing out that the establishment of multinational units provides the highest visibility and greatest political benefits (visegradgroup.eu, 2014). In that direction from one side forming the V4 EU Battle Group was based to the Visegrad Group’s commitments to NATO and the EU, and establishing the V4 EU Battle Group as a regional, modular force will be offered regularly for the NATO and EU defense needs, and from another side V4 EU Battle Group will be a useful solution for the weak institutional defense cooperation and a driving force for increasing their defense coordination and cooperation (visegradgroup.eu, 2014).

3. THE VISEGRAD GROUP STANDBOITS REGARDING THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE

The unprecedented military aggression of the Russian Federation into Ukraine on 24 February 2022 challenged the unity of the Euro-Atlantic community, and consequently the Visegrad Group unity. The start of the full-scale military incursion into Ukraine occurred during Hungary’s Presidency of the Visegrad Group regional initiative (v4.mfa.gov.hu 2021/22). As three out of the four members share a border with Ukraine, it was a matter of national interest to deliver all types of support to Kyiv against Russia (Hennadiy, 2023). In early March 2022 was adopted the Joint Communique on Providing Joint V4 assistance to refugees from Ukraine. The four Prime Ministers from the Visegrad Group were committed to providing financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine and agreed one million euros to help Ukraine to be delivered via International Visegrad Fund (visegradgroup.eu 2022).

However, despite political declarations, since 24 February, the Hungarian Presidency has put the V4 on the verge of political death, regarding some steps taken by official Budapest that produced a lot of discontent in relations with the other three members of Visegrad Group (Hennadiy, 2023). Conversely to the Hungarian Presidency of the Visegrad Group, the Slovak Presidency of the Visegrad Group which started on 1 July 2022 has had a different approach to the Russian war in Ukraine where the word Ukraine appears 18 times, that points out a description of aggravated geopolitical circumstances that the Visegrad Group must navigate (visegradgroup.eu 2022/203).

Provided differences between V4 members on the Russian war against Ukraine, Bratislava took the deliberate decision to scale down the V4 presence on the regional level, and instead, Bratislava proposed to focus on internal reflection on V4’s role in the changing environment (visegradgroup.eu 2022/2023), (Hennadiy, 2023). In that regard, the Russian war raised tension between partners in the Visegrad Group and the division was particularly between Hungary's strong support of Moscow and Poland, the Czech Republic, and the
Slovak Republic strongly supported Ukraine in its fight to defend its own territorial integrity and sovereignty to final victory.

4. CONCLUSION

The subregional linking of certain political communities regarding mutual disagreements to be resolved through democratic interaction began after finishing Second World War and have got acceleration after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the end of the period of the Cold War. In that regard, recognizing the new security-political momentum the countries of Central Europe (Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary), believed that subregional connectivity through political cooperation can trigger certain spillovers to security and defense fields and more essential economical connectivity. From the very beginning of its collaboration, the Visegrad Group’s efforts were aimed at fulfilling their essential goals: establishing a Western security arrangement, replacing Soviet-era security arrangement, and fulfilling the required benchmarks for getting full membership of the European Union and NATO.

Such defined regional cooperation, mainly an unformal consultative platform with one institutional structure (International Visegrad Fund) has had ups and downs. Although the start of the cooperation of the countries involved in the Visegrad Group initiative had very positive momentum in fulfilling fortified goals, some internal development in both the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic (came to power of Vladimir Meciar and Vaclav Klaus), slowed down their expectations, but as this cooperation has shown many times flexibility of the Visegrad Group has prevailed. In that direction after achieving its fundamental goal - being full members of the European Union and NATO in May 2004 their cooperation has continued with other political agenda - implementing agreed regional politics as official politics of the European Union. Although fulfilled its projected goals, the Visegrad Group fully committed how to facilitate the way to all candidate states for full membership in the European Union primarily for the countries of the Western Balkans and increased military cooperation through the EU BattleGroup considered as a weak point in this regional format. Its regional adaptability and resilience have been proven after starting of unprovoked and unseen military Russian aggression into Ukraine where with the exception of Hungary other three countries have shown strong commitments to defending European values and first of all in defending of principles International Law and the UN Charter relating to the defense of one sovereign and internationally recognized country. Therefore, creating this form of regional cooperation, although mainly informal can fully contribute to fulfilling basic strategic goals and thoroughly responded to the current geostrategic unpredictable international order.
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